CHAPTER 3

ORGANIZING AT THE INTERSECTION OF ETHNICITY, RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS

To understand immigrant worker centers and their role, it is necessary to understand the immigrant communities in which they work and from which their members and supporters are recruited. This chapter provides a contextual framework for looking at immigrant ethnic identities in the United States today, and how worker centers are rooting themselves in these complex and dynamic communities as they build organizations at the intersection of ethnicity, race, gender, and class. We will also explore worker centers' multi-cultural organizing and their efforts to unite immigrants and African Americans.

HOME COUNTRY CONNECTIONS AND ENDURING ETHNIC IDENTITIES

The gravitational force that grounds worker centers, especially those run by immigrants and the children of immigrants, is ethnic identity and solidarity. These ties bind workers from the same ethnic background to each other not only in the diasporic communities of the United States but also to their home countries. Given that immigration flows are so strongly conditioned by global economic policies, worker centers tend to view local and global issues holistically. For worker centers, “globalization” is not the abstract issue it sometimes appears to be in U.S. policy discussions; rather it is one of the reasons why immigrants come to the United States in the first place. Center staff and leaders stay in close touch with what is happening in the home countries of the immigrant groups with whom they work and strive to forge and maintain ongoing relationships with organizations engaged in similar work in those places.
Aquilina Soriano, executive director of the Filipino Worker Center in Los Angeles is an example of how these connections are developed. A third-generation Filipino American, she grew up in California and attended college at UCLA. She soon became active in immigrant rights and environmental justice issues as well as working with the dynamic and effective Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE), Local #11, in Los Angeles. Through her college activism, Soriano began to explore her own heritage.

“I had always wanted to know what was going on in the Filipino community and I met someone who was an organizer in the Philippines; I left school and went to the Philippines for about a year.” Soriano worked with student and peasant organizations and spent four months in the countryside where she did organizing in different barrios with farmer, worker, and youth organizations. On her return to the United States, she helped found the Filipino Worker Center to work with the newest waves of Filipino immigrants in California—a population that has higher numbers of undocumented and low-wage workers than in earlier waves.

“The situation in the Philippines has a lot to do with their situation here, too,” says Soriano. “Partly it’s the whole history of migration from the Philippines to the United States, the colonization of the country in the 1900s. Ten percent of the country’s population is working abroad, which is a huge number. The economy is mostly surviving off the remittances of overseas workers—about eight billion dollars a year comes from the United States.” Soriano says that what she learned in her year in the Philippines has shaped her approach to organizing in Los Angeles.

“The major influences on our work,” she says, “are organizing in the Philippines and worker centers here.” Soriano’s understanding of the impact of globalization was shaped by her observations in the Philippines. “Working conditions there have caused this outpouring of people because there are no opportunities for jobs. Even the government supports sending people abroad because there are no more gold reserves and they are relying on the remittances.” Just as globalization policies have affected the situation in the Philippines, Soriano believes they can also be seen in California in terms of “how they affect daily life, quality of jobs, and where budgets are spent.” In the belief that understanding globalization is critical to understanding the circumstances of immigrant workers, the Filipino Worker Center sponsors extensive political education that covers the history of immigration to the United States from the Philippines and U.S. immigration and globalization policies.

The Filipino Worker Center in Los Angeles is one of nine Filipino worker centers that have sprung up in the United States and Canada, including San Jose, Seattle, Vancouver, and New York City. The newest efforts are under way in
Washington, D.C., and Chicago. In the spring of 2004, they were in the process of trying to form a national network that would help the groups to support each other with fund-raising, organizational development, organizing, and research.

After immigration reform in 1965, Korean immigrants came to the United States in huge numbers. During the first decade of Korean immigration, immigrants tended to be highly urban, educated, and Christian, and came through occupational preferences in the immigration law. Beginning in the mid-1970s, and coinciding with changes in immigration law that demoted occupational preference in favor of family reunification, Korean immigration came to reflect a much larger cross-section of the Korean community. This period of immigration peaked at thirty-five thousand Koreans entering the United States each year in the mid-1980s and led to the growth and solidification of Koreatown in Los Angeles as an ethnic enclave. The more recent waves of Korean immigrants, especially those who came after the economic collapse in 1997, have been poorer and a much larger percentage has been undocumented.3

Like the Filipino Worker Center, the Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates (KIWA) emerged out of Korean student activism and cultural studies in San Francisco and Los Angeles around reunification and democracy issues in Korea as well as support for more recent Korean immigrant workers in the United States. It was founded in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots in 1992 by two Korean organizers, Danny Park and Roy Hong. The organization's first campaign was to pressure the relief organization that had been created to rebuild Koreatown in the aftermath of the riots to provide financial help to individual workers, not just businesses.

Worker organizing was a natural focus for Korean-American activists who were strongly influenced by the democracy movement in South Korea and observed the strong role played by worker organizations there as well as the large number of low-wage Korean immigrants working in Los Angeles. Disturbed by the schisms between Koreans, Latinos, and African Americans exposed by the riots, KIWA started out with a strong commitment to interethnic organizing, especially between the Korean and Latino immigrants working for Korean businesses in Koreatown. From the beginning, the organization approached its work from an economic and racial justice framework.4

Observing the growing number of Korean companies setting up shop in free trade zones in Asia and Latin America that were notorious for labor rights violations, KIWA started the Asia–Latin America Solidarity Project. The project's main goal is to "to build a bridge between the struggles of workers in Asia and Latin America and to strengthen the workers' struggles against exploitative Asian transnational corporations," through monitoring Korean and other Asian plants in Latin American and supporting worker organizing. The director
of the project, Ae Hwa Kim, a veteran of Korean worker centers and the labor movement, had long been interested in international solidarity work and came from Korea in order to direct the project.

Modernity has greatly facilitated closer ongoing connection and communication between immigrants to the United States and their home communities. For immigrants of the second great migration, the availability of long-distance phone cards, internet services, and check-wiring, and for those in the United States legally, the reduced price of travel, have shortened the distance between home and away. Some Mexican workers interviewed for this study made reference to annual trips home, although others noted greater difficulty in going back and forth since September 11, 2002. Meatpackers, among others, noted that their employers built in time for them to go home once a year to see family, renew visas, and tend to other issues.

Sending countries have very strong economic incentives for their citizens to work in the United States and to nurture ongoing connections between immigrants in the United States and their native countries. It is now well documented that low-wage immigrant workers send very significant amounts of money home, acting as important providers to family and social networks and playing a central role in the economies of their home countries. In 2003, at $38 billion dollars, immigrant remittances were the largest single source of foreign capital flowing to Latin America and the Caribbean. According to sociologist Peggy Levitt, a growing number of countries are offering some form of dual citizenship “because they need the economic remittances and political influence that migrants offer.”

In fact, in 1996, the Dominican House of Deputies passed legislation allowing dual citizenship, and in 1997 the Dominican Senate approved an electoral reform package that allows migrants to vote and run for office, including those who are naturalized American citizens of Dominican descent. Brazilians and Colombians in the United States are encouraged to vote by their consulates, which set up local polling places, and Colombians even have their own elected representatives in the legislature.

Although they are not yet permitted to vote or hold high office, Mexicans also have the right to hold Mexican nationality as well U.S. citizenship. In addition, Mexican consulates in a number of states play an ongoing role in providing support such as distributing identification cards to low-income nationals. In South Carolina, CAFÉ has worked quite closely with the Mexican consulate helping to coordinate day-long events in Charleston, Greenville, and other cities where workers have come to meet with consular officials and receive immigration advice in addition to identification cards.

Writing about Dominican migrants in the Jamaica Plain neighborhood of
Boston, Levitt argues that migrants now have the ability to stay enmeshed in both societies. These “transnational villagers” have profound implications for longstanding ideas about immigrant incorporation and assimilation.

Many Americans expect migrants . . . to sever their ties to their homeland as they become assimilated into the United States. They assume that migrants will eventually transfer their loyalty and community membership from the countries they leave behind to the ones that receive them. But increasing numbers of migrants continue to participate in the political and economic lives of their homelands, even as they are incorporating into their host societies. Instead of loosening their connections and trading one membership for another, some individuals are keeping their feet in both worlds. They use political, religious, and civic arenas to forge social relations, earn their livelihoods, and exercise their rights across borders.7

The “trans” in transnational villager can give a misleading impression—the truth is that accommodation of these workers is often one-way, with home countries but not the United States recognizing them and bestowing rights. Despite being increasingly able to maintain political and civic ties in their home countries, and having informal arrangements with U.S. employers who have an economic interest in a cheap workforce, many of these immigrants are unable to establish a political and civic voice in the United States. Levitt argues that migrants preserve strong home country ties and remain active in political and civic life there in part due to the blocked mobility, racism, and discrimination they experience in the United States and are “not allowed to become ‘American’ even if they want to.”8

While many “transnational villagers” have their feet in two countries, only one gives them full political and economic rights. So how much should they “invest” in the other country, especially in terms of engaging in activities that could lose them their jobs or get them deported? These workers, especially those who are undocumented are constantly dealing with the tension between the desire to organize to improve wages and working conditions and the fear of being fired or deported. This tension poses great challenges to organizing.

From the turn of the century, Omaha has had many waves of immigrants come to work in the meatpacking industry, but the transnational nature of the Mexican workers who have come in the 1980s and 1990s seems different to close observers. “There’s a transnational sense to this immigration pattern. People do come and there’s permanence, but there are people from Mexico, they have families that go back and forth and they go back and forth,” said Tom Holler, the Industrial Areas Foundation lead organizer in Omaha. “That was different
when people came from Germany." This going back and forth presented dif-


culties for organizing in Omaha in the early days of the meatpacking drive be-

cause just when a solid leadership group had been organized, it had to be re-

organized after key members left to return to Mexico. Marcella Cervantes,

former Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) organizer, described the
dilemma: "When we started organizing, one of the tactics Nebraska Beef used
was to tell the workers, 'If the union gets in, you won't be able to leave and then
get your job back.' It's really hard to control that because workers have their in-

terests half in the United States and half in Mexico. All the companies have
different ways of operating with the workers." 9

Cervantes used the example of Nebraska Beef's informal arrangement with
its workers to make her point. "The majority of them, 55 percent out of 750
workers, were undocumented. Those workers are men in their thirties and for-
ties, and they left their families in their countries. They work for nine months
and they visit their families. The company gives them a job back. That was diffi-
cult to organize those people. When I started that was the problem. We started
finding people and in three months you go back looking for them and they're
gone." But the terrorist attack of September 11 seems to have changed that. "I
think since September eleventh they don't move as much. . . . People think if
they left the country they would never get back in and if they went to a new
company, they might get caught with bad papers," said Cervantes. "They
started to stay in one place and this is a good chance for organizers to continue
to reach people and establish more."

Workers from Central America, due to wars, distance, and lack of legal sta-
tus, have been much less able to travel back and forth. Still, fear of deportation
or detention can make them hesitant to organize. Some Salvadoran workers,
for example, have received Temporary Protected Status (TPS). In Cervantes
words, "they work for three years and they have to go back. They may not be
able to renew their permit and instead start working as an illegal person." Other
Salvadorans who never applied for TPS are stuck in a more or less permanent
undocumented position. Many of these workers present false social security
numbers to employers who look the other way: "They know because the major-
ity of the companies here, their Human Resource people are Hispanics," said
Cervantes. But when dealing with a troubleshooter or threatened with an or-
ganizing drive, employers make clear that they could check workers' numbers
with the Social Security Administration. "There is one company where a super-
visor has a lot of family working here illegally. They know they are illegal, and
that's why people get scared even if [they] know [they] work hard and [they] get
low wages. What can [they] do? [They're] here to work and [the company] of-
fered [them] a job."
As we will see in the case of the KIWA grocery workers in chapter 6, without a union, when workers receive no-match letters or are asked by their employers to resubmit their documentation, they have little power to resist. They know that if they do resubmit, they will expose themselves to arrest and deportation. If employers have taken this action in retaliation for organizing, workers can use the National Labor Relations Act, but few who are not engaged in a union organizing drive do so. On the other hand, unionized workers are much more capable of defending themselves in these situations when their stewards and business agents understand immigration law. The presence of a union and a union contract means that employers are less capable of unilateral action and that union staff will fight any unilateral changes that are made in the terms and conditions of employment. Also, unions can negotiate clauses in their contracts to deal with these issues. For example, when Service Employees International Union (SEIU) settled a janitors’ strike in Boston in 2002, one of the conditions of going back to work was that contractors would not “pull workers’ papers” or ask them to resubmit their documentation. However, many union locals know very little about immigration law and are often unaware of the steps they can take to protect and defend the rights of their immigrant members. To better inform unions about representing their immigrant members in 2004, the AFL-CIO has recently established a new national initiative based in the office of the general counsel.

It is in this environment of having a foot in two worlds and living in fear and legal limbo that worker centers endeavor to support immigrant workers and help them fight for their rights.

**OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT**

All of the worker centers interviewed in the case studies and surveys viewed the building of a base of workers as a top priority and central focus of work. Worker centers recruit potential members and leaders through broad-gauge outreach, including getting features placed in the ethnic media, visiting neighborhoods, speaking in churches, and hand-billing workplaces. Here are some examples:

- Workplace Project leaders and staff make hundreds of community presentations every year. During the first seven years they have reached more than 10,000 workers directly through community presentations and 125,000 with information about their labor rights via stories in the Spanish language media. Since 1995, the organization has published and distri-
buted *Voz Laboral*, a newsletter for immigrant workers in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods and commercial areas.

- Many workers are referred to the Chicago Interfaith Workers Rights Center by their churches. In addition, rather than setting up their own ESL classes, organizers and volunteers have created an interactive workshop on workplace rights and regularly offer it at the scores of ESL classes currently taking place in Chicago. This strategy brings them into contact with hundreds of immigrant workers every week. They also mass distribute a workers' rights handbook in English, Spanish, and Polish that has their contact information as well.

- Lupe Hernandez, who eventually became a part-time organizer for the Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles, first became involved with the organization when she heard an announcement on TV and decided to come down to the office to seek help with a problem she was having with an employer. “Sometimes we hand out flyers. When there were busses we'd put flyers on [these] or hand them out. I think . . . the best outreach is to pass the voice from one to another. A member will bring someone along. One time I saw someone who had gotten assistance from the center had stapled posters around downtown saying how we help workers and especially garment workers.”

- Working with federal and state agencies, CAFÉ sponsors and publicizes regular workshops across the state on employment-related issues for low-income workers. Workers come to learn their rights and are asked to join CAFÉ and become involved. With the Mexican consulate, the organization also cosponsors day-long informational events for Mexican workers that attract very large numbers. In Charleston on one day in 2003, twenty-two hundred people waited on line to speak with a consular official and apply for a Mexican passport or *matrícula consular*, the Mexican identification card.

For contacts that are not very personal, a surprisingly high number of workers seem to respond; perhaps this is because so many workers experience problems with employers and are hungry for information about what they can do. Several centers have had to limit the outreach they do because they cannot satisfy the demand for services, especially help with filing unpaid wage claims.

Kim Bobo, executive director of the Interfaith Worker Justice, talked about the Chicago centers' work: "We virtually don't promote or do much outreach
because we don’t have the capacity to handle it. Every time we get a hit on the radio or television, we get seventy-five phone calls that day. We can’t handle that many. We don’t have the volunteer structure set up to handle that quantity of calls. If we did regular PSAs [public service announcements], billboards, flyers, and workplace visits we could have a gazillion more—not only individual workers, but groups of workers. The potential in a city this size is overwhelming.”

Kimi Lee, executive director of Garment Worker Center (GWC) in Los Angeles spoke in similar terms about their initial experience with outreach: “The first six months was really just word of mouth and through the free media. After we got more workers involved, we did create flyers workers would pass out with our toll-free number on it. It wasn’t twenty thousand fliers going out, it was like here’s ten for you to take to your factory. It was very close-knit. We have workbooks and comic books that explain your rights as a worker and talks about the wage claim process, so workers would take handfuls to pass out. That’s pretty much all we’ve done. From that we’ve gotten over seven hundred calls to the hotline and we’ve helped over two hundred and fifty workers. That’s enough for us because there’s still a small handful of us. We can’t, we just don’t have the capacity to advertise more. Every time we do a media event or a press release, we get more calls.”

Centers also recruit in a more targeted fashion, working through existing contacts to gain meetings with their friends and acquaintances in specific workplaces or industries and conducting one on one outreach to targeted groups of workers. Here are some examples:

- When the Tenants’ and Workers’ Support Committee (TWSC) was beginning to build a base around its home-based childcare work, it obtained a list of all home-based providers caring for children of parents in the welfare-to-work program, and organizers tried to visit all two-hundred-plus women on the list. In their outreach to the six hundred taxi drivers in Alexandria, TWSC organizers systematically charted and regularly visited all of the taxi stands in the City. On a day I spent out at the stands with the lead organizer, Kathleen Henry, in the spring of 2003, she knew almost every driver who pulled up, many drivers smiled and held up organizational fliers as they drove by.

- Workplace Project day labor organizer Carlos Canales regularly visits shape-up sites and street corners across Long Island, talking with workers and looking for potential leaders to try to interest in taking leadership at their particular site as well as in deeper involvement in the organization. The Workplace Project’s UNITY co-op, a cooperative of house cleaners,
recruits outside employment agencies and visits bus stations during hours when housekeepers are likely to be going to or from work, and Laundromats where they are likely to be doing laundry on days off.

- Omaha Together One Community worked through Spanish-speaking churches and soccer teams to attract an initial base of workers to participate in organizing. When the union organizing campaign began in earnest, OTOC and the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) conducted home visits to workers employed at targeted companies and OTOC also organized small groups where workers could talk together about plant conditions, share information, and devise strategies for organizing.

- Making contact with the twenty-five thousand Yellow Cab drivers who ply the streets of New York is a daunting task. New York Taxi Workers Alliance organizer Bhairavi Desai, relies on a strong network of contacts embedded in ethnic-specific cab organizations, garages where drivers go to pick up their cars, and key neighborhoods and apartment-buildings. To get the word out on campaigns and events, she is also a regular visitor to the holding pens at La Guardia and Kennedy airports where hundreds of cab drivers wait each day in long queues to pick up passengers arriving at the terminals.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

The first place immigrants often go on arrival to seek community and support, churches have been key points of connection and recruitment for worker centers as well as for garnering support for their issues in the larger community. The initial success of worker center outreach and recruitment often hinges on partnering or at least collaborating with religious institutions and the community networks of which they are a part.

Religious Denominations in Central

Almost all of the centers surveyed, and most of those included in the case studies, cited churches as central to their efforts. Jose Oliva, of the Chicago Interfaith Workers Rights Center, described some of the reasons why: “If you’re Mexican, you think about the government as sort of a corrupt monstrous thing that really isn’t to be trusted and you think of the labor movement being in cahoots with the government. So you don’t trust either of them. [and] when you
come to the United States you go to your faith institution as sort of the first place you do trust."

Central Americans, in Oliva’s view, come to the same conclusion, but for different reasons: “The labor movement is seen sort of as opposition to the government, opposition to the state. The state is corrupt just like it is in Mexico, but if workers get involved with the labor movement, they can get killed by the state. So they want to stay away from that, not because unions are bad, but because it’s too dangerous. And so, they see the church as the one institution that is safe to approach.”

Because they are such central components of immigrant infrastructure, churches are major access points for worker centers in terms of the opportunities they present for membership recruitment as well as for general partnership on immigrant-related issues. Some churches are formally working in partnership with centers, others are informally referring members to centers and offering them opportunities to publicize events and conduct general outreach. Some worker centers receive in-kind support from churches and denominations, including free or reduced cost office and meeting space. In some cases, churches refer workers to worker centers and help support fledgling organizing efforts, and worker centers often refer workers to churches for services.

From the survey data, the churches that are most likely to become involved with worker centers are Catholic, followed by Presbyterians, Unitarians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Quakers. Some Catholic, Protestant, and evangelical churches have large numbers of Latino parishioners and members of the clergy become involved in worker center efforts out of an interest in helping their own members improve their situations. Other churches, including nonimmigrant Catholic parishes as well as many different Protestant denominations, become involved out of empathy with problems new immigrants face, rather than direct experience.

The vast differences between religious denominations in terms of size, structure, and culture have important implications for involving them in support for worker organizing. Nationally, the Catholic church accounts for about 40 percent of religious institutions and is the church with whom millions of Latinos in the United States identify; its interests are also more directly tied in with those of immigrant Latino communities. “In terms of the faith-going community, they’re the most significant numerically,” says Kim Bobo, founder of the National Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice, “and, they have the most capacity because they have more structure than anyone else.”

The Catholic church has a clear hierarchical structure that organizers can approach for support at the archdiocesan level, which can then pave the way for individual parish-based work. It has organization at the neighborhood, city-
wide, state, and federal levels. In addition to size and structure, strong social teachings locate worker organizing at the core of the church's mission and mean that they usually already have a social justice infrastructure in place at the parish level that has resources and access to church leaders, members, and financial resources. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, a foundation that is funded through an annual collection throughout Catholic parishes nationally, is one of the largest and most consistent funders of economic justice community organizing in the country and heavily supports immigrant worker centers.

Of course, the evangelical movement is very powerful and popular among Latinos, but because it is much more decentralized than the Catholic church and also often espouses an "accept your fate" philosophy, most organizers believe it is less available as a resource. There is a big gap between the social and institutional resources the Catholic church offers and most Protestant denominations. The Baptists are the next largest denomination in terms of numbers but are very nonhierarchical structurally. Decisions are made and resources are concentrated at the individual congregational level, and they are much more difficult to engage on the regional, national, or even citywide level. Lutherans and Methodists are the third most significant numerically and both have more structure than the Baptists.

Bobo, who has extensive experience reaching out to religious denominations, believes that contrary to popular belief, evangelical and fundamentalist churches can also be important allies in supporting immigrant workers. "In local struggles it's just as easy to get the storefront Pentecostal church involved as the Episcopalian church because these are class issues," she argues.

Churches in Ethnic Communities

When OTOC began its organizing work in Omaha, the local Catholic church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, had been the locus of the Mexican community from the early twentieth century and was still the most important religious institution for the city's low-wage Latino workers. Father Damien Zuerlein, who was a young, non-Spanish-speaking priest when first assigned to the parish but went on to become a major leader in the meatpacking campaign, became involved out of an interest in bettering the lives of his parishioners. He explained, "My feelings about getting involved in social justice and those kind of things there just came out of responding to the needs of the people in my church. They were suffering so much and there was no way to fix anything. I could comfort them when they were hurting, but how could we stop the hurt from being there in the first place? It was organizing... OTOC happened to show up at the same time
when we were struggling with some issues. All along there was this question about what were we going to do about the work situation in South Omaha.16

Zuerlain opened the church to OTOC and preached about organizing right from the pulpit, but he believes that the reason the meatpacking work took off was because the Latino community was ripe to hear the message and poised to make it happen. "I think in a sense it was easier to organize in the Latino community than in an Anglo community because of the networks and relationships within families. If you get the key leaders committed, they get to a lot of people." Zuerlain contrasted this with the "Anglo community," which has less of this kind of cultural orientation and community infrastructure.

In the Anglo community, at least on a congregational level, we're all very independent, so you have to get to everyone one by one. There isn't a sense of "who can you bring with you?" That whole sense of bringing someone in the Anglo community isn't there. It is there in the Hispanic community. I said to Luis, "Bring your family," and we got a hundred people because he called all his brothers and sisters. In those early days of the meatpacking organizing, pastors would do turnouts for major events. People would say: "How many can you bring?" I'd say: "We'll bring 500."

This combination of church and vibrant neighborhood and family social networks was the basis of organization for the meatpacking drive. In describing OTOC's approach, former meatpacker and organizer Marcella Cervantes, said,

Workers, especially immigrant workers, they congregate, for example, in churches. They have a lot of relatives that live in the same neighborhoods. The first place we looked in was the church. The second was in neighborhoods or relatives. We have ten meatpacking plants, but workers have relatives in the different plants. For example, there are workers in Nebraska Beef who have relatives at QPI. They're spread out, but they congregate. They talk about what's going on. The biggest place to get people is in the churches.

White Middle-Class Churches

When day laborers in Suffolk County were being attacked, a sympathetic religious institution of nonimmigrants responded, and the main elected official who rallied to their cause linked his actions to his religious beliefs. As we will discuss in greater detail in chapter 5, the town of Farmingville in Suffolk County, Long Island, in the past few years has been in the eye of the anti-
immigrant storm. National anti-immigrant organizations targeted the area for aggressive organizing against day laborers. Local lay leaders in the largely white, middle-class Catholic parish, at one point fearing for the workers' safety, actually housed them at the church rectory for several weeks.

In the face of angry demonstrations at his home and place of work, Suffolk County legislator Paul Tona, a Republican, led the (ultimately unsuccessful) fight to fund a trailer and land on which to locate a day labor shape-up site. A former seminarian and active member of his church, Tona made repeated reference to his religious values and beliefs in explaining the position he took. In their leadership of a quest to establish a community center for Latino immigrants about twenty minutes away in Farmingdale, Peace and Justice Committee members of the local Catholic church talked about their work as a "calling." After being evicted from their first two locations, they have now moved to a third. It is completely staffed by volunteers from the church.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

No discussion of outreach and recruitment would be complete without covering the role that other community institutions play in sustaining the worker center movement. Two of the most important of these for many immigrant workers' centers are soccer leagues and hometown associations.

Soccer Leagues

In addition to churches, soccer leagues were an important recruitment network and organizing tool for the Omaha, Los Angeles, and South Carolina worker centers. A powerful match was made between sports and community organizing when South Carolina's key Latino soccer league organizer joined forces with CAFÉ. "When I came here I could count with my hands how many Hispanics were in the area," said Marcello Lopez, an organizer with CAFÉ. "Then I started organizing the soccer league and I started seeing people coming from everywhere. For the first time we started with only seven against seven. In the next three months we had twelve teams," said Lopez. "South Carolina is not a big place," he continued, "but we get poor people from every city. We've got teams coming from seven different counties. We've got about four hundred to five hundred people every Sunday."

These soccer games, programs, and practices have evolved into a mixture of sports and workers rights. "I kind of take advantage, because even if I'm invited to the soccer meetings, I start talking a bit about my soccer stuff and then I start
talking about CAFÉ and the rights they have,” says Lopez. “About every single thing that I know about workers’ rights [and] the law . . . I kind of translate to them. If I learn something in a workshop, then I come straight to them and say, ‘Look today I learned about this and we cannot do this.’ I update them with stuff I learn.” Lopez has gotten hundreds of soccer players to join CAFÉ. “Not every single one in the soccer league is a member, but I’ve got most of them to be members.”

As a way of building relationships with meatpacking workers in a prelude to union organizing in the tight-knit Omaha Latino community, OTOC organizer Sergio Sosa spent a lot of time on and off the soccer fields talking to players. Sosa, a former Catholic priest in Guatemala, has said that soccer players, their families, and networks, who were dispersed throughout the meatpacking companies, were the nucleus of the subsequent community and union organizing that took place in Omaha. “A lot of people like to play soccer and they have informal teams, so I started talking to them and saying to them we want to organize a Latino soccer league and apply for the fields and build an organization. They got excited and said yes.”

The Latino soccer league organized thirty-six teams with a total of about seven hundred players. “When we built that organization,” Sosa said, “they became OTOC members.” OTOC helped the soccer players to fight for access to the soccer fields. He estimates that about 70 percent of the players were working at meatpacking plants at that time. “So, I asked them if they were ready for organizing the plants. They said, ‘We are ready.’” Through the Latino soccer league, OTOC was able to turn out more than five hundred workers to early actions and hearings with elected officials about the problems in the meatpacking industry.

Pablo Alvarado, the director of the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON), was a literacy circle organizer in El Salvador and worked as a painter, factory worker, and gardener when he first arrived in Los Angeles. Hired by the Coalition for Humane Immigrants Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) as the first day labor organizer, Alvarado believed that for organizing to be possible, it was important to build a community among the workers. In Pasadena, he organized the first day labor soccer team, which quickly grew into a league encompassing many shape-up sites in Los Angeles. Soccer trophies and team photographs adorned the walls of almost every hiring hall I visited in Los Angeles.

Home Country Connections

As growing numbers of immigrants from particular Latin American countries and communities have come to the United States, they have established home-
town associations (HTAs) to provide economic support to their hometowns and regions, sending home money for the construction of schools, infrastructure improvement, and economic development. In Chicago, New York City, and Los Angeles, a highly developed network of these organizations has been quite vibrant and visible in Latino immigrant communities. However, my research did not uncover many formal organizational connections between worker centers and hometown associations. “They are pretty much in their own circles. We have not been able to tap into the networks,” Raul Anorve, executive director and founder of Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California (IDEPSCA) said, “Like the Zacatecas Club [people from the Mexican state of Zacatecas], there are tons of clubs like that. They have wonderful fundraising events and raise lots of money. A couple have approached us and wanted to see if we could help them out. I always say yes, but they are too much into the cultural component, raising funds to send back home and not too much about organizing.”

Jon Liss, executive director of TWSC in northern Virginia, echoed Anorve’s sentiments, saying, “We have a couple of committees here that are more focused on trying to build their own communities in El Salvador than trying to do something here. There are those kind of state-of-origin clubs but they don’t do anything here, all they do is pretty much fund-raising to send back to their hometown and try to build their towns down there.”

While it appears that HTAs for the most part concentrate their activities on building up their home communities and are not formally involved with worker centers, recent scholarship in this area documents increasing involvement on the part of HTAs in labor unions and public policy issues, especially in California. In his research on one construction union local in California, David Fitzgerald writes “Mexican hometown networks dominate Local 123. About 500 of the Local’s 3500 active members are from Guadalupe in the state of Michoacan. Guadalupanos have the largest and most influential hometown network. As one union captain put it, ‘The strength of the union is in the town [Guadalupe].’” Running for election as business manager in 2000, the winning candidate visited Guadalupe to campaign among the families of union members. She estimated that 90 percent of her votes came from Guadalupanos. The union places its resources at the disposal of the Guadalupano and Zacatecan hometown associations, hosting fundraisers at the union hall, contributing funds and helping the organizations register as non-profit organizations.

In terms of public policy, as Zabin and Rabadan observe, HTAs have so far been only episodically engaged. In Los Angeles, during the campaign to defeat the notorious anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in 1994, hometown federations and the majority of independent clubs came out forcefully against the proposition. They donated funds to the opposition effort, engaged in “get out the vote”
efforts with members, turned members out for public protests, and worked through the ethnic media to advocate a no vote. However, club participation in the 187 fight proved to be the exception and not the rule during the 1990s. In 2004 and 2005, many of the most influential hometown associations in Los Angeles became quite involved in the effort to preserve statewide legislation that would not have required social security numbers for drivers’ licenses. Approved by Governor Gray Davis in 2003, it was repealed in 2005, at the behest of the newly elected governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

There are many examples in labor history and the contemporary period where “informal” networks among low-wage immigrant workers hailing from the same hometown or region have been crucial to worker organizing efforts. In recounting the history of the sweeping 1992 Southern California Drywall Strike, labor scholars Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong argue that “the fact that at least a few hundred men from the tiny Mexican village of El Maguay worked in the drywall trade and were bound together by close kin and friendship ties, was by all accounts an important source of the solidarity that emerged during the organizing campaign.” Historian Leon Fink tells a similar story in his book recounting the struggle waged by Guatemalan poultry workers of Mayan descent to form a union in North Carolina. He points to the central role played by Q’anjob’al speakers, Mayans from the province of Huehuetenango, who settled en masse in Morganton and were working the nightshift at Case Farms. “We didn’t organize anybody,” a representative of the Laborers’ International Union told him. “There was a union there before the union got there.”

For the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, networks of ethnic-specific taxi drivers have been critical to the organizing. While drivers are taking passengers all over the city they may not be able to make contact face to face, but they communicate with each other through cell phones and language-specific citizens’ band radio channels. “In Manhattan if you’re going from home, working, sometimes you can’t see each other for a week. Only the points where you’re on break can you see each other,” said Muhammed Tasleem Khan. “That’s the only means of communication—CB channels—now in these days you have cell phones that you can talk on too. CBs and cell phones help the drivers get together and listen to each other. If a driver’s having problems, you can go and help. Before if someone said something is going on or I’m getting robbed or somebody’s beating me up, five to six drivers would come to help you.”

While some worker center participants have used the skills they have developed through their participation at the centers to help establish hometown associations, until recently worker centers as institutions had not been directly involved in setting them up. An interesting model of a hometown association
that is directly connected to a worker center was taking shape in 2003–2004 among Mexican immigrants from the Mexican state of Hidalgo, in Farmingville, Long Island. Whereas most worker centers and hometown associations have been developed separately, the Workplace Project as an organization had already worked with the workers and established a center in Farmingville before any hometown association had been set up in the area. This offered a rare opportunity for the organization to become involved from the outset and to bring its strategic and political orientation to bear in discussions of what a hometown association might do.

The project had developed a very close relationship with the Mexican immigrants because it had aided them in defending themselves against a highly organized local anti-immigrant campaign and in setting up and administering a local worker center. Its lead organizer in Farmingville, Irma Solis, had personally traveled to Hidalgo, carrying gifts and video letters from workers in Long Island to their family members back home. She also brought a video for government officials that had been made by the Farmingville workers to introduce themselves and their North American community.

As a result, Solis and one of the Farmingville workers were able to negotiate an agreement where, if the Farmingville workers needed anything like a birth certificate or a passport, they could get help from the Mexican consulate. Solis said, “Whenever a worker came here and wanted to get a passport, but didn’t have a birth certificate, we’d contact them and they’d send it directly to us and then on to the Mexico consulate. That was one of the first testing grounds to see if that whole relationship would work, and it did. So far it has.”27

In traveling back to the workers’ hometowns, she was able to augment her knowledge of their lives in the United States with a clear picture of their lives back in Mexico and make connections and build relationships in both places. It made intuitive sense to her when the workers said “one of the purposes they saw for this space was to begin to talk amongst themselves as a community who had left their families behind in Mexico. It would be a way to be able to organize here to address some of the issues back home.”

Solis had already been grappling with the challenge of frequent turnover among her leadership team in Farmingville. Building an organization that had a foot in each place provided the possibility of continuity. The leadership team in Farmingville had developed one way of dealing with the turnover: they established six-month terms of office for board members in their bylaws and timed the leadership changeover to parallel the migration pattern. Board members understood that part of their role was to tell the story of the organization to newly arriving immigrants and be on the lookout for leaders to take over from them a few months prior to when they would be returning home. Solis’s vision
was to work with workers and to build an organization that had a presence at each end of the migrant journey.

The towns in Hidalgo, Mexico, where most of the Farmingville workers came from, were very poor and rural. These towns lack many of the basics, including electricity and telephone service. The Farmingville workers were sending home a great deal of money. They wanted to do something to help their towns to develop but they wanted to ensure that the money was well spent. It was natural that they engaged in these discussions at the local worker center. In their work with the Workplace Project, they had participated in organizer trainings and discussions on the impact of globalization. Through these experiences, they gravitated toward the creation of a hometown association that would not only be in ongoing communication with their home communities in Mexico but would have an explicit political strategy for dealing with government officials informed by a deep knowledge of what was going on back home.

“When government officials from Hidalgo came to visit the community here during the anti-immigrant campaign, the workers realized that they had some level of power while they were here because of the money they were sending back home,” said Solis. “They started to think about what they could do here to influence whatever happens back home. If a community needs a school, how could they make sure that the government official pays attention to that instead of putting down a road where it isn’t necessary? It was interesting because many of them would say, ‘We may not have much power here, but if we organize and get together, we have a little bit of power here and more power back home while we’re here!’”

In May 2004, the Farmingville workers were focusing on the small town of Tenango in Hidalgo, which has a committee in the United States and back home. A worker who had been actively involved and then went back to Tenango from Farmingville got the committee started there and then came back and helped get it going in Farmingville. Working with the Tenango-based committee, they have been working to get phones and electricity in the town. Solis said, “We just got a call from Tenango last week, telling us that they’ve been to government officials and the officials are giving them the runaround. They want all of us here to call and put pressure on them and to send a letter from the center to the officials.”

While there seemed to be little formal connection between hometown associations and worker centers, new models like the one the Workplace Project is discussing have the potential to create powerful transnational bridges that could operate effectively in both directions to assist workers in building power.
THE CHALLENGE OF MULTICULTURAL ORGANIZING, RACE, AND GENDER

Multicultural organizing

As we have seen, for the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, ethnic networks already in place were a powerful source of connection. Drivers belonging to ethnically specific taxi driver associations worked with the alliance and organized via the citizens band radios in their cabs. But ethnic ties are also enormously complex and can also lead to division and exclusion. In describing some of the complexities of organizing among cab drivers inside of ethnic communities of northern Virginia, Mulgeta Yirer said: "I can organize my community, and talk to all the other communities to organize their communities. We have different communities and within them, different tribes. But the Afghan community is based on one tribe, the ruling tribe. The guy who is managing the Afghan community [in northern Virginia] is from the same tribe as the Afghan regime now, and he cannot cooperate with us because we are not supporting the ruling party. He has told us that if we are not supporting the same party he cannot help us." 28

Organizing that brings together two or more distinct ethnic cultures that have different histories, traditions, cultural styles, and institutions requires tremendous thoughtfulness and patience. The language issues alone are immensely challenging. Staff meetings and membership meetings must be simultaneously translated into three languages, and written materials must also be prepared in each language. Many centers seek to hire immigrant workers who come from specific ethnic communities to work within those communities, but oftentimes they are not English speakers. Thus even staff meetings for small organizations require more than one translator, so that the Chinese organizer knows what the Spanish and English speakers are saying, the Mexican organizer knows what the Chinese and English speakers are saying, and so that the English speakers know what the Chinese and Spanish speakers are saying. This is an extraordinarily time-consuming proposition. Also, given the modest size of most worker centers budgets, the financial implications of translation issues are not inconsequential.

Worker centers have a very strong commitment to multiethnic organizing in the local labor markets and industries in which they work. For most, their motivations are both moral and practical, as Danny Park, executive director of KIWA, made clear about KIWA's decision to be multicultural from its inception.

"Because we knew that Koreatown not only employs Koreans, but that each workplace is comprised of both Latino and Koreans... working only with Korean workers or even organizing them wasn’t possible. We felt that in order to do this kind of work we have to bring together all the forces and working with
other minority communities such as the Latino community was really important. That actually became one of the missions in our mission statement—working with progressive minority groups in LA to raise issues that concern the immigrant communities."

Early on, KIWA shocked mainstream Koreatown when it took the side of three Latino workers against a Korean restaurant owner over an unpaid wages dispute. The organization's aggressive picketing and legal support sent a strong message that the organization was serious about defending the rights of all low-income workers in Koreatown. "We had done other boycotts before, but they were with Korean workers, so the issue of ethnic solidarity wasn't a question until this one," said Paul Lee. "This was, again, kind of a public education tool for KIWA to work on our political message overall, which was KIWA would defend Latino workers against a Korean employer and do it publicly. It was very controversial and a lot of people weren't supportive of this boycott. The sentiment was 'How can you go against one of your own for somebody that's not one of your own?'" After a six-month campaign, the company settled with the workers and paid them their back wages.

Worker centers that are struggling to build a base in industries where more than one ethnic group is working must pursue two goals. On the one hand, they must develop unique recruitment and leadership development approaches that will work best for each ethnic group, while at the same time developing strategies for building a unified organization and encouraging interethnic understanding, cooperation, and joint action. They must do both these things in the context of industries that often pit ethnic groups against each other, as Kimi Lee, of the Garment Worker Center, described: "The garment workers, 75 percent are Latino and maybe 10 or 15 percent are Chinese. But when you look at contractors it flips. So it's more likely that a Latino worker is working for an Asian contractor. . . . There's stereotypes that get started because workers have bad bosses and there's a high probability that they're Asian and so the Latinos' only interaction sometimes with the Asian community is that they're the bosses or the bad bosses."

As far as the Asian workers go, Lee says,

Many times they can't talk to the Latino workers, so the Latino and Asian workers are kind of split in the factory based on language. We've heard from workers what happens is that the workers can speak Chinese or Korean or Spanish, so the owners will set up the situation where they'll say certain things so the workers think that the others are being treated better. The Chinese workers think the Latino workers get treated better because the Latino workers will protest and stand up if they get treated badly. The
Latino workers think the Chinese workers are treated better because they’re the same race as the owners, so of course they’re going to get paid more because they can talk more with the owner. In reality they’re all treated poorly, but they all have these perceptions that the other side’s being treated better.

When Latino workers come to the Garment Worker Center, on the other hand, they encounter a mostly Asian staff. “So the Latino workers for the first time see some Asians that are on their side . . . that initial dynamic is interesting because sometimes workers don’t know what to think. Joann Lo is Taiwanese, but she speaks Spanish fluently, so then that breaks all their stereotypes that she’s able to speak Spanish directly with them and that she is Taiwanese and that we’re all here on the same side.”

In order to effectively combat tensions and bring workers together, the organizations must have a clear sense of each immigrant constituency and the positions they hold within the industry. Although many of the issues faced by Korean and Latino restaurant and grocery workers in Koreatown are similar, KIWA organizing director Paul Lee thinks that there are also important differences that must be taken into account. “The reality in LA is that Latino workers are more trapped from above in low wages and minimum wage jobs, whereas, Koreans and other Asian immigrants are trapped not only from above, but also from the sides by the bounds of their own communities,” Lee says. He believes that Latino immigrants have more mobility and more of a sense of being part of a large-scale pool of low-wage Latino workers in greater Los Angeles because the Spanish-speaking population is so much larger. “You can start at a Korean restaurant and work there for a little while and then you can go to a Santa Monica restaurant or to construction. There’s more mobility although it’s very restrictive because they can’t drive legally, and they’re trapped from above because they’ll never be able to get out of poverty and minimum wages unless they organize into a union.”

On the other hand, in Lee’s view, Korean workers are more confined to ethnic enclaves like Koreatown. “A Korean waitress can’t go to a Filipino restaurant or a Vietnamese restaurant and be a waitress because the food is different, the clientele is different, and the language is different. A Korean cook is only going to know how to make Korean food. So they’re limited to the boundaries of working for a Korean employer. They could move out of a restaurant and go to a grocery store or a liquor store or they could even start up a small business of their own, but they essentially don’t leave the ethnic enclave.”

In separate interviews, Helen Chien and Lupe Hernandez, the two worker organizers at the GWC put forth similar perspectives on the Chinese and Latina
workers. Helen Chien said: "My main duty is to develop Chinese membership because you know Chinese workers aren't courageous and they don't dare to file claims against their employers." Lupe Hernandez articulated the differences in the two groups as she has perceived them. In describing her own work experience, Hernandez believed that a Chinese manager at one of her jobs paid only the Chinese workers minimum wage. On the other hand, she saw the downside for these workers. "The Chinese bosses take the Chinese workers to work or take them home, so the workers have to wait until the factory closes or they have to be there in the morning when it opens. So often they work over twelve hours a day." Because of this close relationship, Hernandez also observed that the Chinese workers were more intimidated about speaking out: "The Chinese workers to us will say, 'Tell the boss,' because they can't defend themselves and they think that they'll lose their job. The little language that they know of ours is 'tu habla'—you speak, they are more afraid."

Lee and Lo believe that the differences in Latino and Chinese workers' attitudes toward speaking up have a lot to do with their previous political experiences in their home countries. Lee says, "For the Latino workers, many of them come from countries—Nicaragua, El Salvador—where there has been some type of political issue and many of them did come here because of that. So there is that reality that there are some workers that were politically active in their countries. Some of them were more involved with unions or involved in some other thing. There is that reality. On the Chinese worker side, it's less. The Chinese workers, from what we've found, don't have any direct experiences politically in China." According to Chien,

Most of them don't speak very good English, so they are afraid to make mistakes and they don't know who they can go to for help. Some people [are] undocumented, so they will just take what they can get. Back home, when you work in the company, you are part of the union in the company. Those companies are mostly welfare companies, so they give you some benefits. The unions have really good positions in the companies. They are about the same as the director of the company. So in China they are not afraid of joining unions, but here they don't understand the legal system and they don't know about the laws, so they're afraid of joining any organizations.

At the Garment Worker Center, an enormous amount of thought and energy goes into conceiving ways of recruiting and then bringing workers from these radically different cultures together for common reflection and action. For example, GWC found that while word of mouth resulted in many Latinas coming
into the center, much more intensive recruitment was required in order to reach Chinese workers. According to Organizing Director Joann Lo, "What we do with Latina workers and what we do with Chinese workers is different. With the Chinese workers, we have gone to factories and bus stops. Helen [the Chinese organizer] has gone to churches and supermarkets—all these different places to do outreach to workers because it's been much harder to attract workers to the center and to gain trust with the Chinese workers. With the Latina workers, we're only done a few leafletings outside factories around the garment district."

Beyond recruitment, Lee and Lo have found that they also have to talk about the organization quite differently to the two groups. "For the Latino workers," Lee says, "we can do case management, while at the same time doing organizing and political education. Whereas with the Chinese workers we need to just break the ice and establish trust, so we emphasize the service side more with them. We don't go out and say, 'Come join the protest and become a member.' That doesn't sit well with Chinese workers. They don't want to walk directly out into a picket line. It takes a while for them to feel comfortable to do it." Instead, when talking with Chinese workers for the first time, GWC organizers ask questions such as "Are you being paid minimum wage?" "Usually that's the one thing that they answer 'no' to," says Lee. "Then you ... explain that in this country there's minimum wage and overtime. It's connecting to them that we're here to help and if you haven't been paid properly, these are what the laws are, helping them with their cases, giving them some sort of direct benefit." From there, Lee believes that some of the Chinese workers will trust them and decide to work with them. "It's just a lot slower process. We do that with the Latino workers, but in a day. With Chinese workers, it takes maybe four months."

The situation with the ethnic media is quite parallel: the Chinese media has covered the center quite favorably, which Lee and Lo believe is because they have portrayed its mission in service and advocacy terms. They have been more explicit about the organizing mission in the Latino media.

GWC believes that it is essential for the organization to involve both Latinas and Chinese women in the organizing. That is why the board of GWC has guaranteed representation to both groups by designating six seats for Latinas and three seats for Chinese women workers (which is a reflection of their percentages in the industry). Monthly membership meetings are held in both languages as are all events. Workshops are generally taught separately, however, so that there is time for more interaction between trainer and participants. Within the larger worker leadership team of the GWC, efforts are made to have women learn about each other's countries and cultures as well as discuss common issues like the impact of globalization. The organization also sponsors parties and cul-
tural celebrations as another way to encourage greater interethnic understanding and interaction. “To expose Latina workers more to Chinese culture, we had a Lunar New Year party last year, and it was a way to introduce Asian culture to them. Not just food but explaining to them about the lunar calendar and the Chinese horoscope. We thought maybe twenty or thirty workers would show up and eighty showed,” said Lee. “Our general meeting last time it was Mexican Independence Day, so we had the workers talk about it, so the Chinese workers could know what it meant. There’s actually this interest of not only the party kind of thing, but learning about each other and the opportunity to do that.”

Immigrants and African Americans

Despite the fact that they share many issues in common, much more unusual among worker centers than multiethnic organizing is a focus on bringing immigrant workers together with African American workers. Most likely, labor market segmentation and racial prejudice together with the complications of language account for why this does not happen. Many centers are organized around a particular ethnic group or groups who are not English-speakers, and focused on particular industries that are often overwhelmingly comprised of immigrants. In answer to a question about who attends Workplace Project meetings, organizer Jaime Vargas replied: “All Latinos. The national origins are Central Americans, South Americans, Mexicans, El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Colombia.” When asked “why no African Americans?” Vargas said, “This center is made to help Latino immigrants. Latinos tend to come from workplaces that are all-Latino, although when I say Latino, I define Haitians and Jamaicans as Latinos, too. So I am really talking about African Americans not being at our meetings.”

But there are also tensions between African Americans and Latinos. Some Latinos who come from cultures where darker-skinned people are treated as second-class citizens also hold racist views about American blacks. Vargas spoke bluntly about the problem of racism on the part of some of the Latinos in Long Island toward African Americans. “The Latino workers are racist. They don’t like blacks. They talk about black people as if they were a completely different race and that’s part of the consciousness that we have to work on.” Vargas believes that some Latinos brought their racism with them from their countries of origin. “In some of the South American countries there aren’t blacks like there are here. In Colombia and Brazil and Venezuela there’s a big community. The discrimination here is the skin color. . . . Here and there. Whoever is slightly darker there they say is black.”
Some in the black community hold immigrants partially responsible for black underemployment, unemployment, and declining wages. In South Carolina, Carol Bishop believes that some of the black middle-aged staff struggled within the organization when it began an aggressive campaign to recruit Latinos into the local chapters. "I think once the people were hired and the organization grew at a very rapid pace with Hispanics I noticed that some of the organizers had a big problem. There was a lot of tension that would build up in the staff meetings. A lot of people think working with Hispanics pretty much means we're planning for Hispanics versus planning together."  

When CAFE adopted a policy of switching off between holding meetings in English with Spanish translation and holding meetings in Spanish with English translation, "the black folks who were middle-aged left and said that they didn't feel comfortable because they thought people were talking about them." Day to day, Bishop says she hears a lot of blacks saying that jobs are being lost to Latinos.

I don't think it's true because in this area here you will find people who just don't want to work. They think that if they can't find a job they want, then they're not going to do it, but if someone else comes along who's a different race, if that person is brown, then that's when the complaints start. It didn't start if someone white took their job. If the person is brown, they are assuming without knowing the person's nationality, that they're Mexicans. There's no problem with the Asians that work in this area. The Pakistanis, the Indians, there's no problem.

Bishop believes that Latinos are in jobs that blacks in South Carolina were no longer willing to do. "I think a lot of the jobs you will find Hispanics in... you'll find that black people aren't willing to work on the farm anymore. They're not willing to mop the floor anymore." Bishop also believes that blacks have exaggerated the numbers of Latinos moving into their neighborhoods. "When Hispanics moved into this neighborhood, there were only two homes that they lived in and there were a lot more houses on the street than that. What I kept hearing was that Hispanics are taking over the neighborhood."

Both the Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee and CAFE organize to bring Latino immigrants and African Americans together. In its tenant organizing work, TWSC brought Latino and African American families together to form a limited equity co-op and to fight to preserve other low-income housing. In its childcare work, TWSC has built a base of African Americans, South Asians, Haitians, and Latinos, and there are very explicit discussions about race and the need to come together as people of color.
In recent years, CAFÉ, a black-led organization, has staked out this territory as a central focus of work. They have defined the struggle of Latinos in the state as a continuation of the black civil rights struggle; at CAFÉ events, black leaders and staff often talk about the need to build “the black/brown coalition.” Citing as examples the issues of racial profiling and housing discrimination, CAFÉ organizers and leaders have looked for ways to emphasize those things that both groups have in common rather than the differences.

Noting the skyrocketing numbers of low-wage Latino workers in the state, the organization decided to move aggressively into organizing Latino and black/Latino chapters and providing support to low-wage Latino workers in their individual and collective employment struggles. In the Pee Dee region of the state, the organization has targeted temporary employment agencies that place Latinos in jobs, pressuring them to translate all materials into Spanish and to hire Spanish-speaking staff. After being contacted by CAFÉ, William Carroll, president of CSI Staffing, a temporary employment agency in Darlington, agreed to have information on health and safety printed and translated into Spanish for temporary employees. “Some of the Latinos work with acid and other hazardous chemicals, and because the instructions and safety precautions are in English they cannot protect themselves ... and some injuries and deaths have resulted,” said Roberta Benjamin, a volunteer and community leader involved with the temp project at CAFÉ. “Mr. Carroll is the only temporary agency in the state who we have approached about the health and safety of people of color that has taken it seriously and agreed to take action, which proves that safety comes first in his company,” Benjamin said.

In Greenville, Charleston, and other cities, CAFÉ has sponsored bilingual workshops on employment law, helped hundreds of workers apply for individual taxpayer identification numbers, and organized to bring in the Mexican consulate to provide passports and ID cards to Mexican nationals.

CAFÉ has also sponsored a series of discussions between blacks and Latinos, including one I attended in Darlington County. At the CAFÉ Youth Center, Latino youths and African American chapter leaders watched the video Presumed Guilty about racial profiling by the police and discussed it together afterward. One of the African American chapter leaders, Reverend Franklin Briggs, spoke passionately about the need for “black and brown” to work together, and about how Latinos were being targeted just as blacks used to be. All the leaders used inclusive civil rights language and were very explicit about blacks and Latinos making common cause together.

When IDEPSCA was working to open its very first day laborer center in Pasadena it was opposed by the African American community on the grounds that black neighborhoods were already disproportionately housing rehabilita-
tion agencies and halfway houses. "They didn't want any type of agency that provides services," remembered Raul Anorve. Rather than blowing up into a conflict that pitted the African American and Latino community against each other, IDEPSCA initiated a dialog and eventually decided to seek alternative space. "They had reasons because historically the African American area of this city had been, as they described it, the dumping place for all the social services. No economic or self-determination projects were established for the African American community. So we respected that. We met with them and we dialoged and we decided to look for a project and a space across the 210 freeway."

Many neoclassical economists assert that immigration hurts low-wage African American workers and white workers. They often reach this conclusion through modeling rather than conducting empirical research in local labor markets. Economists, economic sociologists, and qualitative researchers have all looked at the question of whether blacks and immigrants are in competition for the same jobs. Econometric studies that have examined specific local labor markets have found little to no effect of immigrants on African American employment or wages. Economic sociologists have found that immigrants have an advantage in social capital that connects them to jobs that African Americans are not getting, but often fail to explain why African Americans don't move through similar networks, or whether they are just seeking jobs in other sectors. Nelson Lim's analysis of significant African American labor market niches in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, and Chicago in 1970 and 1990 showed an overall pattern of succession, as opposed to competition between African Americans and immigrants. Roger Waldinger also concludes that there is no direct evidence to show competition between African American and immigrant workers.36

So far the evidence suggesting that blacks and immigrants are competing for the same jobs seems modest but it clearly varies by geography and industry. Perceptions are important, however, and worker centers are engaging in important work in their communities to carry out that conversation constructively and to identify areas of common interest.

Gender Issues

Immigrant women in American society bear the triple burden of poverty, ethnicity, and gender, and they bear these burdens as workers as well, often working in low-wage industries that are segregated by gender as well as ethnicity. Worker centers also sometimes have to contend with the patriarchal traditions and practices men and women have brought with them. "Many Korean women workers," writes Sweatshop Warriors author Miriam Chang Yoon Louie, "have
grown up under a harsh gender regime expressed in the proverb, "The real taste of dried fish and tame women can only be derived from beating them once every three days." Korea’s traditional neo-Confucian ideology dictated women’s subordination—first to father, then husband, then son, under the Sam Jong Ji Do (triple order instruction). Man was the hakkat yangban (outside lord) while woman was the anae (inside person). . . women’s ultimate role was to serve as Hyun Mo Yang Cho (sacrificial mother and submissive wife)." Many worker centers, such as OTOC, had to deal with the fact that women members often deferred to men. “A lot of women are working in meatpacking plants,” said Marcella Cervantes, "but they don’t participate in this kind of movement because in our culture the people who decide these kinds of things are the men.”

In addition, the centers have had to contend with the reluctance of the women themselves to see their housekeeping work, for example, as "real work." As sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, who has studied domestic workers, writes, "Paid domestic work is distinctive not in being the worst job of all but in being regarded as something other than employment . . . many women who do this work remain reluctant to embrace it as work because of the stigma associated with it. This is especially true of women who previously held higher social status." Sotelo writes about one Mexican woman who used to be a secretary in a Mexican embassy who characterized her full-time job as a housekeeper and nanny as her hobby.

Many of the women’s committees and projects have strong consciousness-raising and confidence-building components because the centers understand that these issues have to be dealt with in order for their larger project of organizing women to improve their labor market positions to succeed. If they wanted to develop women's leadership, many centers talked about the need to create separate all-women spaces for discussion, as well as autonomous projects and committees. Some centers, such as Asian Immigrant Women’s Advocates (AIWA) in San Francisco, GWC in Los Angeles, and the Domestic Workers Union, are entirely focused on women in female-dominated industries such as sewing and housekeeping, and they have an explicit language about gender and gender oppression in their work. Several centers, including CAFé and the TWSC, had specific leadership development goals and programs that were explicitly geared toward women of color. A number of the other worker centers have projects that are focused exclusively on women as well.

The Workplace Project created UNITY, a housekeeping cooperative that has grown from a handful of women in 1999 to eighty-one today. The co-op has its roots in the Project's women's committee, Fuerza Laboral Feminina, which was established early on in the organization’s history (1994) after organizers observed that the women tended to keep quiet and defer to men in group meet-
ings. Fuerza was created as a space where women could meet, discuss their lives, particular workplace issues they faced, build community, and plot strategy. Its first campaign targeted employment agencies that were charging usurious fees to women working as housekeepers.

The group decided to consciously stop using the term “trabajadores domésticas” (domestic workers) because the women had a very strong negative reaction to it. It evoked for them a sense of being members of the lowest of the low, going back to the way maids were perceived in their countries of origin. Instead, they decided to use the term “mujeres que trabajan en casa” (women who work in the home). Throughout that campaign and the development of the cooperative, UNITY meetings and activities have always mixed public action with personal support and sharing of stories and struggles, consciousness-raising, and confidence-bolstering. One of its most popular annual events is a Mother’s Day party, in part designed to comfort women who are in the United States without their children.

During the successful ConAgra campaign, OTOC consciously built a worker committee that had a majority of women members. “That was a good experience for me to see how the women started working by themselves and got more involved in this organizing drive,” said Cervantes. “Because women work hard in the company and then continue working in their homes with their kids and families. That was tremendous to see women realize that they can do things by themselves.”

Gender issues have also come up within the staffs of worker centers. Recently the women on KIWA’s staff organized an informal “women’s caucus,” the organization brought in a consultant to work with them on organizational development issues, including some that were gender-related, and this led to the development of a more participatory process for campaign strategy planning and decision-making.