CHAPTER 6

IMMIGRANT RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

As noted in the previous chapter, worker centers' public policy organizing and advocacy takes a variety of forms. In this chapter we look at their public policy campaigns that fight for immigration reform and immigrant rights, against racism and for a broader social justice agenda. The chapter ends with an overall assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of worker centers' public policy campaigns.

FEDERAL AND STATE IMMIGRATION POLICIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON IMMIGRANT WORKERS

Poverty, global economic inequalities, and the development and trade policies that have exacerbated these problems have catalyzed enormous numbers of immigrants to seek higher-paying employment in the United States. Federal immigration policy and enforcement is creating a huge reserve labor pool of workers whose status as undocumented immigrants leads them to work for low wages, make few demands on employers regarding other conditions of work and resist going to government agencies for help. The issuance of "no match" letters by the Social Security Administration (SSA), which alerts employers to the disparity between a workers' reported social security number and the SSA's records, has given employers an additional powerful tool for control over the workforce.

At the state level, other restrictions on immigrants have been imposed. These include requiring social security numbers in order to obtain drivers' licenses, which has a very direct impact on employment prospects, as well as denying in-
state tuition and college loans to the children of undocumented workers not born in the United States. Following the September 11 terrorist attack, there has been a general government crackdown on immigrants and a dramatic increase in xenophobia and local anti-immigrant attacks. Given that local police forces have been encouraged to cooperate with the INS and now with the Department of Homeland Security, undocumented immigrants and their families are often fearful of calling the police for help. In October 2004, for example, there was a string of brutal attacks on immigrant laborers in Plainfield, New Jersey, including one murder. Newspapers reported that these attacks had been taking place for several months and were widely known in the immigrant community, but workers did not go to the police out of fear of being asked for their papers and arrested.

Many worker centers view their work as much through a social justice frame—championing the rights of immigrants and people of color generally—as they do through a workers' rights frame. They view immigrant workers' employment, housing, and health care experiences as having as much to do with their ethnicity and status as new immigrants as it does with their class position. The same is true for centers that came out of the African American community, which views blacks' experiences in the labor and residential housing markets and public school systems as having at least as much to do with race as class. As a result, many centers view struggles against xenophobia, racism, and discrimination, and for immigration reform, as just as central to improving the lives of their members as any of the wage or enforcement issues highlighted in the previous chapter.

At the centers themselves, immigration and employment struggles are almost always intertwined. When local residents, businesses, or municipalities move to restrict day laborers from seeking employment, or police make arrests at形状-up sites, references to them as “illegal aliens” and claims about their immigration status are always a major part of the public conversation. As the debate on immigration reform becomes more contentious, centers are often called on as the local spokespersons of a pro-immigrant point of view, speaking in opposition to anti-immigrant policies and practices and discussing the unfairness of the current immigration system. The dramatic personal stories of their hard-working members help to illustrate the problem and evoke public empathy with their plight. This establishes a foundation on which a local campaign of support for federal immigration reform, and one that draws support beyond the “usual suspects,” can be launched.

Worker center public policy organizing and advocacy campaigns on these issues have taken a number of different forms that are examined in this chapter. They include countering anti-immigrant policies in local communities and
fighting for immigration reform at the national and state levels. They also include struggles against racism and discrimination in housing, education, and the allocation of social services that build bridges between immigrant workers, African Americans and other communities of color, and other poor and marginalized groups in American society.

COUNTERING ANTI-IMMIGRANT ATTACKS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The fight against attacks on immigrant workers in local communities on Long Island is perhaps the best-known example of a worker center public policy campaign, thanks to the movie Farmingville that appeared on many Public Broadcasting Service stations. The focus of these attacks—day laborers and the shape-up sites at which they gathered—enabled the Workplace Project to link economic struggles to defense of immigrant rights and immigration policy reform at the local level.

Shape-up sites have been a feature of the Long Island landscape since the mid 1980s as large numbers of newly arrived Central American immigrants became the area’s chief source of flexible labor in the landscaping and construction industries. Beyond their labor market functions, shape-up sites are also symbolic of something much larger. In their communities, they are the most visible symbols of the new immigration and have been lightning rods for discontent, discomfort, and outright xenophobia. This is, in part, why the Workplace Project and so many other worker centers engage on the issue.

The Workplace Project has been involved with day laborer struggles since its founding in 1992. Since that time, Long Island’s day labor shape-up sites have grown dramatically in number and size, and they have attracted increasing amounts of attention from the media, elected officials, local businesses, police, churches, and other civic organizations. The organization has worked closely with elected officials and civic organizations to develop constructive solutions that balance the right of day laborers to seek employment with the needs of local commercial businesses and residents. Outcomes have varied, as we will see in the following two stories of Farmingville and Freeport.

During the mid 1990s, Mexican immigrants, chiefly from the state of Hidalgo, began migrating to the small town of Farmingville on the eastern shore of Long Island. As Connie Hornick, of the Church of the Resurrection recalled, “I’ve been the outreach coordinator for the past eleven years. In that time, I’ve watched the immigrant population grow from about twenty-five people on the street corners to hundreds.” Hornick estimates that all together, more than six hundred workers gather each day to seek work at the four day laborer corners.
Beginning in 1999, Farmingville became a national point of convergence for anti-immigrant activists.

After a local woman was tragically killed in an automobile accident in which the driver was a day laborer, a local anti-immigrant organization started gaining steam. The Sachem Quality of Life Committee, working with national anti-immigrant groups, staged direct confrontations with immigrant day laborers and narrowly lost an effort to have the Suffolk County legislature pass a law that would have required county government to become more involved in pursuing and prosecuting undocumented immigrants. The measure proposed that the county sue the Immigration and Naturalization Service on the grounds that it was not doing enough to stem the tide of illegal immigration.

Anti-immigrant forces also succeeded in defeating an effort, initially supported by a majority in the Suffolk County legislature, to establish a day laborer center in Farmingville. After two Mexican workers were horrifically beaten in 2000, Hornick helped found the organization Brookhaven Citizens for Peaceful Solutions (BCPS) in the hope of identifying middle ground. “The major complaints of the community were that, (a) they couldn’t walk in the streets because the men were in huge masses and (b) that there were too many people in the houses. There was between twenty to thirty people in a house. These were their complaints and they were legitimate complaints.” Hornick and other BCPS leaders felt that centralizing the shape-up would help with community tensions. “What would you logically think was the answer to this? Well . . . you think shape-up. It’s the logical way to get them off the street.”

BCPS and the Workplace Project worked very closely with Paul Tona, a Republican and the presiding officer of the Suffolk County legislature, who believed that “these immigrants are working and doing real shit jobs that no one else will do. They’re doing it quietly and professionally. And all they want is to be treated with a little dignity and respect.” Initially, Tona was able to use the considerable power of his office to organize the legislature to vote in favor of the day labor site. “What we did was, we created in the budget an eighty-thousand-dollar fund that would support the creation of a shape-up site. I don’t want to use the phrase hiring hall because it really wasn’t a hiring hall. It was just a shape-up site. . . . The idea was just to get them off the streets and out of the community’s eye and get the contractors to go there so people aren’t getting beaten up.”

In 2003, in the face of increasingly virulent, organized anti-immigrant activity, BCPS and the Workplace Project worried that the day laborers were physically at risk and organized a major legislative campaign in support of the shape-up site. Both Hornick and Tona were repeatedly threatened over the telephone and in person during this time. Sachem Quality of Life activists began to charge
the Church of the Resurrection with having recruited the Mexicans to come to Farmingville: activists slipped notes in the collection plate that read “when you close the borders, I’ll give you money.”

But the Long Island Association, the island’s largest and most powerful business association got behind the measure, lobbying for its passage. After initially passing in the Suffolk County legislature, it was vetoed by the Suffolk County Executive. The other Republican legislators who had initially supported the idea, reversed their positions, which made an override impossible. “When the bill failed to override, it was crushing,” said Hornick.

Tona believes that his efforts were derailed, in part, when another legislator who was sponsoring the bill referred to the site as a hiring hall. “The big problem was that it spelled psychological permanence to the Farmingville community,” said Tona. “They think the INS is going to finally come in there sooner or later, roll in with tanks and helicopters and round all these people up and send them back to their country of origin. I’m not kidding. That’s the only acceptable measure and when you say you’re going to build a hiring hall it spells infrastructure, a building, and permanency.”

Hornick also believed that Farmingville residents were fearful of the shape-up site because “they said ‘if you build it, more will come here.’ They said they’re taking jobs away from Americans, but we know that’s not true because we can’t get other people to do those jobs. That’s the thing that kills me... I don’t see a teenager on earth that would do the jobs they do with the pride that they do it with.”

During the hearing process, Tona worked closely with the Workplace Project. Tona repeatedly touted the organization’s professionalism and commitment to ensuring that the day laborers themselves participated directly in the debate. “They helped make sure that people were articulate and organized and they helped the day laborers feel that they’re part of an organization where there’s a community that’s supportive of them and Americans are supporting them. The other thing that was good was that you had English-speaking Latinos who were citizens, which took a lot of the wind out of their sails.” From Tona’s perspective, the Workplace Project functioned as “an ombudsman for this community that had no voice prior to them” and helped fortify the immigrant community to organize themselves and fight back through constructive means.

During the past few years, despite the fact that the two day laborers were severely beaten and the house of a Mexican family was burned to the ground in 2002, the Latino immigrant community has never responded in kind. “From a public safety standpoint, I think the Workplace Project has had a lot to do with the fact that you don’t have any major complaints about crimes or anything like that with day laborers,” said Tona.
As things heated up, Farmingville became a national symbol of anti-immigrant fervor and xenophobia in the United States. Hornick feels that the town has been vilified in the media and she believes that while the issue has been tremendously polarizing, the majority of local residents are much more middle-of-the-road in their views. The anti-immigrant activists were always outnumbered by the hundreds and, at certain points, thousands of social justice activists who came out from across Long Island and the New York metropolitan area to show their support for the immigrant community. But they have still managed to block any efforts to create a hiring hall. “As I see it now, when I look at this whole series of events over the past six years,” said Hornick, “the town is frozen literally, because there is no government that will come and help and no government that can. The county tried at one point, and ‘no’ was the answer.”

During the same period that Farmingville became a national battleground over immigration, things unfolded quite differently in the next county over, as the Village of Freeport grappled with similar issues. Freeport, a town of forty-three thousand, has long been a highly diverse community. Currently, blacks, Latinos, and whites each comprise about a third of the population; the local government says that sixty-four different cultures are represented in the local community, including people from many parts of Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Day laborers had been shaping up near one of Freeport’s busiest intersections since the mid 1990s. By 2001, their numbers had grown to between fifty and one hundred workers, traffic issues had worsened, and after September 11, 2001, local police had begun to take a much more aggressive approach to dealing with them.

“What happened in Freeport was that the police just started to push the workers around, the workers came to us, we started to organize them in little meetings, and then Carlos was handing out fliers and the police arrested him,” Nadia Marin-Molina, the Workplace Project executive director recalled. After Carlos Canales, the project’s day laborer organizer was arrested for solicitation, the organization hired an attorney and got the charges dismissed. They also began getting the day laborers to go out and do presentations to local churches and other organizations to garner support and bring groups of day laborers and allies into Village Hall to meet with local officials. The project approached Catholic Charities and William F. Glacken, the mayor of Freeport, to try to negotiate the establishment of a day laborer site.

“It’s one of those things where the bureaucracy says, ‘No, we’ll never set up a site’ but once we sat down with the Mayor, he liked the idea,” said Marin-Molina. “He has control of the village; in fact, we said to him, ‘Are you going to have to have public hearings or something?’ and he said, ‘No, this will pass,’ and
it did.” The mayor and his economic development director worked closely with the Workplace Project to organize the day laborers and with Catholic Charities to administer the site. “I thought that since it was more than just matching contractors with workers, there are a lot of support services that are necessary, literacy problems, health problems, immigration problems—that’s the reason for Catholic Charities existence. They’ve had a 150-year history of doing this. If we brought an organization in like Catholic Charities to work with the Workplace Project, we felt that we wouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

The two government officials hoped that, while Catholic Charities would see to the day-to-day operation of the center, the Workplace Project would take charge of recruiting, organizing, and developing the leadership of day laborers. Carlos Canales works on recruiting day laborers and contractors to use the site. He also works to involve them in decision-making at the center in terms of how the hiring process works and to involve them in the Freeport chapter of the United Day Laborers of Long Island (a Workplace Project–organized, day laborer–led group).

“Some people would stop short or pick up or drop off people right on Sunrise Highway where you’ve got tractor trailer trucks barreling down. We recognized that there was a problem that needed to be dealt with,” said Mayor Glacken. “What was happening was that people were gathering and blocking sidewalks and spilling over into the streets.”

Although anti-immigrant activists tried to stir things up in Freeport, sending a few people to public meetings to speak out, they were not able to establish a local foothold. “We certainly didn’t have the level of outright hostility that we saw in Farmingville. We went in exactly the opposite direction than Farmingville,” said Glacken, a life-long Freeport resident who was elected eight years ago as the candidate of the Home Rule party, a coalition of registered Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. “I think the main difference between the way we’ve handled the problem is that we have dealt with it not as a social problem. We didn’t make more of it than it actually was. We never looked at this problem as if it were an immigration problem. We looked at is as if it were a traffic and public safety problem. If you’re going to have these trucks, they should be loaded and unloaded off of the street.”

Ellen Kelly, director of the Freeport Community Development Agency, who has played a central role in getting the site off the ground, also viewed the issue as one of economic redevelopment. “Part of my daily job is to work on the downtown revitalization and the growth of the commercial core. We’ve got new construction coming in and rehab going on. So it was definitely to the advantage of sprucing up our downtown to find a more appropriate site than the corner.” The Village of Freeport contributed a municipally owned parking lot for
the site, a construction trailer, and ten thousand dollars in federal Community Development Block Grant money to the effort.

Glacken's view was shaped in part by his belief that the laborers were working for local contractors and local residents. "A lot of the trucks represented local contractors, because the laborers worked for local contractors. They weren't working for corporations, and incidentally they were also working for private residents." As a young man, Glacken worked with migrant farmworkers in Suffolk County as an employee of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and believed strongly in their right to unionize. He also sympathized with the plight of the day laborers: "In many ways, I think the day laborers are the migrant workers of the twenty-first century. They have similar problems." Responding to a question about the impact of day laborer employment on the local labor market, Mayor Glacken responded, "I don't believe that these day laborers take jobs away from other citizens... these jobs that they are filling is a need that others do not want to fill."

With regard to the issues of tax collection and illegal immigration, Glacken's public position was that local government did not have a role to play in either one. "I look at it basically as who's responsible for what. The IRS and New York State Department of Taxation and Finance are responsible for the collection of taxes. That is not the responsibility of the Village of Freeport. My responsibility is to bring and maintain peace and order. If the IRS wants to pursue these contractors, that's their prerogative." As far as the workers are concerned, "I think they should pay taxes. I don't see any reason why they shouldn't, but at the same time, if they're here and if they pay taxes, they should get benefits."

Ellen Kelly pointed out that the day laborers have also stimulated the local economy. "The contractors are all a bunch of small business people as well. It has created this whole second layer of the economy where entrepreneurial small business people, contractors, roofers, [and] landscapers have taken advantage of the day laborer force." While she believes that these contractors, by and large, are not paying taxes, "They're building businesses and employing workers. When I look at it, it seems that the money being spent is in the U.S. economy."

Glacken believed that the shape-up site would never be able to fulfill its function if workers avoided it out of fear of deportation and instructed the Village of Freeport police not to conduct immigration raids at the site. "I don't work for the INS," he said. But his views on immigration policy went beyond questions of the role of local government. "I think that the immigration policy that this country has is insane because we pretend that we want to do something about illegal immigration, but we really don't do anything serious about it," he said. "If we want to have people come in and do manual labor that citizens are unwilling to do, then it should be something that's organized. They're here, they're
not going to go away, they’re providing a service. At the same time, I don’t see any problem with charging them taxes or with contractors having to report their taxes. Give these people legal status to be here so they don’t have to come here surreptitiously."

While the mayor believes that the village has found a successful solution to the problem of day laborers congregating at busy intersections, he hopes the site continues to grow in terms of the number of day laborers and contractors who use it. "I’d like to see every day laborer at the center. That’s not entirely the case. There are still people who hang out on the street corner because they think they might have an edge. I look at that as something they can do to improve. I think we’ve given the site a chance to succeed, but in order for it to do so, they’ve got to go out and organize. They have to show the day laborers that this is a better way to get steady work."

This victory would not have been possible without the Workplace Project. "What has happened so far, and the way I see things going forward," said Ellen Kelly, "is a very close continued partnership in the effort to make the Freeport site successful because the Workplace Project has been involved since day one... Having a functioning trailer with a paid manager has been critical, but the Workplace Project is the one who can go out and be on the site in the morning trying to move men to the new site and working with them in a labor organizing way."

**FIGHTING FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM**

Most of the worker centers interviewed for this study are active participants in national and state immigration reform coalitions. They have worked with the National Council of La Raza, the National Immigration Forum, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the National Immigration Law Center, the National Farmworker Justice Fund, the American Friends Service Committee, and many other groups. NDLCN has made immigration reform an important component of its advocacy and organizing work, conducting a national discussion among day laborers and within the larger immigrant rights community about the type of reforms that would be the most helpful.

In 2003, many immigrant worker centers participated in the historic Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride sponsored in large part by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE), which helped to organize hundreds of local events across the country and culminated in a very large national rally in New York City. Many of these groups are now involved in the Fair Immigration Re-
form Movement (FAIR), a new national coalition for immigration reform that is being coordinated by the Center for Community Change. FAIR is also working as part of the New American Opportunity Campaign, the immigration reform effort that grew out of the Freedom Ride.

Notwithstanding these efforts at the national level, most of the campaigns of worker centers on immigrant rights are focused on changing policies at the state level. Laws and administrative rules limiting the rights of immigrants to obtain drivers' licenses are one of the most frequent targets.

Until 2004, California was one of approximately sixteen states that require people to show a social security card in order to get a driver's license. MIWON, the coalition of immigrant worker centers in Los Angeles, has been a central organizing hub for immigrants' rights, coordinating an annual march for legalization that has mobilized thousands and playing an active role in the state driver's license campaign. The organizations succeeded in getting Governor Gray Davis to sign SB60 in September 2003, which allowed all California residents, regardless of their immigration status, to apply for a state driver's license or identification card. The bill eliminated the "lawful presence" requirement and modified the Social Security number requirement for California residents who applied for a license, allowing those who did not have one to use an individual taxpayer identification number (ITIN) instead. All California residents, regardless of immigration status, would have been eligible to obtain a license provided that they passed the driving and written tests, submitted proof of identity, and complied with other licensing requirements. The bill was scheduled to take effect on January 1, 2004, but was repealed by the legislature after Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor and threatened to place it on the ballot.

After the events of September 11, in which seven out of nineteen of the terrorists involved were shown to have had Virginia drivers' licenses, sweeping changes were passed by the legislature there, which made it very difficult for immigrants and refugees to obtain licenses. Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee (TWSC) became one of the major organizations fighting to change the law and helped to pull together and staff a statewide coalition.

TWSC took the position that all persons regardless of immigration status should be eligible for drivers' licenses and argued that the Department of Motor Vehicles should not be in the business of trying to enforce federal immigration law. TWSC won over some powerful allies in the DMV and law enforcement, who believed that the new requirements were a detriment to public safety but were not able to reverse the restrictions.

In May of 2005, states lost their autonomy in terms of setting standards for drivers' licenses, when Congress passed and President Bush signed, the REAL
ID Act. The act established strict national provisions for states regarding the issuance of drivers' licenses and state identification cards. It requires proof of the person's social security number (SSN) or verification that the person is not eligible for an SSN. In addition to federal immigration and statewide driver license campaigns, some worker centers, such as Wind of the Spirit in New Jersey and the Brazilian Immigrant Center in Boston, have worked on statewide campaigns to allow the children of undocumented workers the chance to pursue higher education with in-state tuition.

At the local level, because immigration status is such a central fact of life for so many of the workers that worker centers organize with, campaigns often have an immigration angle to them. As we saw in the Suffolk County case discussed above, day laborers are often the "canaries in the coal mine" for the local immigration debate. Although the issue of street corner shape-up sites is most often framed in terms of how workers pose a public safety hazard, often for the local groups opposing them, the presence of large numbers of immigrants is the real issue underlying the conflict. In some cities and towns, there has been a dramatic increase in the immigrant population in a relatively short period of time. For example, between 1980 and 1990, the Latino population in Long Island increased by 78.8 percent in Nassau County and 49.7 percent in Suffolk County. The Workplace Project, through its advocacy, organizing, and public relations work, has played a major role in "introducing" Latino immigrant workers and their issues to the larger public and working to engender a positive perception of them on Long Island.

During union drives in heavily immigrant workforces, employers very often threaten to "call the INS" (although it is now called the Department of Homeland Security), and unions and worker centers in the course of soliciting community support for the drives are once again called to engage the issue. In addition, a number of centers, including Centro De Derechos Laborales in Minneapolis, have worked to pass local city council ordinances to ban police from cooperating with the INS or DHS. Sometimes the issues are much more "nuts and bolts"; over the course of building a base among immigrant workers in Omaha, OTOC mounted a campaign to enlarge the waiting area at the immigration office so that during the winter months people didn't have to queue for hours in the cold.

The constituencies with which the centers work put them in the front lines of the local immigration debate in their communities. In their role of representing low-wage immigrant workers and advocating on their behalf, these centers have emerged as important actors as communities struggle to come to terms with changing demographics.
FIGHTING FOR RACIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

As should be clear by now, many worker centers do not focus exclusively on labor and employment issues—or immigration issues. Their broad “social justice” agendas mandate that they also organize around racism and domestic violence, education and youth, housing and development, and health care issues. Taking on these issues enables centers to champion the rights of a broader constituency—not just immigrants but all workers, people of color, and the poor and marginalized in American society. The following are a few examples of this most challenging area of worker center public policy organizing and advocacy.

Tenants and Workers’ Support Committee

TWSC has always been a multi-issue community organization. Its stated mission is “to develop the collective power of Northern Virginia area low-income tenants and workers—particularly immigrant and African American working class women—and to fight institutional racism, develop collective ownership and control of community resources and build multi-racial understanding and collaboration.” This is a broad mandate that results in the organization’s involvement in a range of issues. As Jon Liss, long-time executive director describes it: “In terms of worker organizing, community organizing, there was a vacuum in northern Virginia. So, if someone dies, the collection can comes through here, someone gets beaten up by the police Saturday, on Monday they’re sitting here in our office. . . . Partly because we were the only organization and in many ways still are the only organization that is organizing immigrants.”

As mentioned in chapter 1, TWSC started out in 1986 as a tenant organizing project that worked to stop mass evictions and saved about two thousand units of affordable housing. The campaign was well publicized, involving a number of national celebrities including Martin Sheen, the television and film star, and the late Mitch Snyder, former director of the Center for Creative Nonviolence. During its early years, the organization established a three-hundred-family limited equity cooperative that it has continued to work closely with, sitting on its board of directors and holding an ongoing contract to provide translation and youth services.

Since 1986, the organization has worked with residents of the Arlandria section of Alexandria, a neighborhood that became overwhelmingly Central American during the 1980s and 1990s, on a host of issues. On public education, TWSC has organized African American and Latino parents to create a model
dual-language elementary school program, and prevented the busing of hundreds of low-income Latino schoolchildren. It also pushed the school district to enact a model suspension/expulsion policy and to take action on the minority achievement gap in the Alexandria public school system.

The TWSC organized a Women's Leadership Group to discuss community concerns and women's issues particularly. Concerned with the lack of recreational facilities and park space, the women mounted and won a campaign for the establishment of a neighborhood playground. TWSC has also worked with youth in the community to develop a number of programs, including after-school tutoring, mural projects, and the establishment of a youth or social center. In fact, TWSC raised the money to buy a building in 2004 that will house the center. Another program, Community Salud/the Healthy Community Project, established in 1996, mobilizes the Latino community to increase access, regardless of income or immigration status, to "culturally competent healthcare." By January 2005, the organization had worked with low-wage families and area hospitals to forgive more than $1 million of medical debt.

In the past few years, the Arlandria neighborhood has been threatened by gentrification and a redevelopment plan put forward by the city that TWSC believed would be detrimental to current residents and businesses. "The proposed buildings are geared to certain types of businesses, which in turn generate certain kinds of jobs and customers, which in turn has profound implications on the affordability of nearby housing, which impacts who will actually live in the surrounding neighborhoods," TWSC's critique of the plan reads. The organization has worked, not only to counter the city's proposal and put forth one of its own but also to organize a local small business association, Arlandria Community Businesses.

Caroline Alliance for Fair Employment

In addition to its focus on expanding the labor and employment rights of nonunion workers in South Carolina, CAFE has pursued a broader agenda of issues in the cities and towns in which it has active chapters. The organization's fourteen grassroots chapters have taken up domestic violence, students' rights, and racial tracking in the public schools.

After becoming aware that the state of South Carolina ranked third in the nation in 2002 in domestic violence and the number of women killed by men, CAFE kicked off a statewide series of "Domestic Violence is Real" workshops in observance of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Awareness Month. The organization partnered with county sheriffs' offices and domestic violence
agencies and featured survivors of domestic violence speaking about their own experiences of abuse.

In 2003 and 2004, CAFE’s Florence chapter in the Pee Dee, a largely working class and black area of the state, took up the issues of school expulsions and suspensions. Many CAFE activists felt that school officials were expelling and suspending students in a discriminatory manner. While disciplinary officers claimed to be following the state’s “zero tolerance” policy and asserted that they were not able to exercise discretion in making decisions about expulsions and suspensions, CAFE leaders demonstrated that they were in fact doing so, often in a racially and ethnically biased manner.

Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur California (IDEPSCA)

IDEPSCA, in Pasadena, California, was founded in 1987 as a grassroots organization that marries popular education to community organizing for social and economic justice. The organization works to consciously link community issues with literacy skills development. IDEPSCA operates a host of programs and projects, including a public education watchdog group, a Latino Neighborhood Association, a women’s federation, a youth organization, several day laborer centers, and a computer technology training program. By teaching participants to engage in critical analysis as they learn to read and write, IDEPSCA explores critical issues with its members, and they often move into action.

“I found out that this work of popular education is like a mirror where you facilitate a process where people can see themselves and their reality and then they want to do something about their conditions,” says executive director Raul Anorve. For ten years, IDEPSCA operated as an all-volunteer group, organizing literacy circles, pushing for improvements in the Pasadena school system, and taking on other community issues until it formally incorporated in 1997. All told, the organization has spent eighteen years organizing literacy circles and developing popular education programs that involve low-income Latino immigrants and their families, teaching literacy in the context of economic, social, and racial oppression, and working with them to organize for change.

In the nineties, IDEPSCA organized a group of Latino parents, and for the past several years, the organization has intensified efforts to improve the Pasadena public schools, electing a Latino school district representative and taking on the district’s approach to school reform. IDEPSCA has focused its efforts on developing the leadership of public school parents so that they are able to play an active role in advocating for their children’s education.

Although IDEPSCA operates day laborer hiring halls, it backed into that
work as a result of the literacy circles it was organizing among low-wage Latino workers, many of whom were day laborers. The organization became involved when some of the students in the literacy circles talked about the difficult experiences they were having in Pasadena when seeking work. “They were harassed by police, employers would hire them and not pay them, residents would throw bottles at them,” said Anorve. The day laborers organizing led the City of Pasadena to agree to open up a day laborer center and contract with IDEPSCA to administer it. The organization now operates eight day-labor centers in southern California and played a central role in the formation of NDLON.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF CENTERS’ PUBLIC POLICY ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY

Based on the research conducted for this study, it seems clear that so far worker centers have made their greatest strides in the “monopoly face” area of improving wages as well as the “collective voice/institutional response face” of representing workers, in the public policy arena. Organizations have been able to win economic improvements for low-wage workers by moving government to act in ways that have required employers to raise wages and improve conditions of work. In addition to these monopoly face achievements, collective voice achievements have also come via public policy. Organizations have so far been most capable of forcing improvements in employers’ treatment of workers via catalyzing government administrative action and public policy change.

The “Monopoly Face” of Workers’ Centers

Unionized workers generally enjoy higher wages and better working conditions than other sectors of the work force. In 1999, union workers earned 32 percent more than nonunion workers, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Unionized women earned 39 percent more than nonunionized women, unionized African Americans 45 percent more, and unionized Latinos 54 percent more.4 As such, while union organizing is arguably the most effective antipoverty strategy for low-wage workers in the United States today, the climate for union organizing has become extremely difficult. Employers routinely fire workers for organizing and engage in other illegal tactics in order to break the back of organizing drives.

To try to counterbalance the enormous power of employers in recent years, unions have increasingly sought the help of elected officials to send a message to
employers that they will protect workers' right to organize and to take affirmative steps to control the antiunion activities in which employers may engage. These actions are especially important for immigrant workers who have tremendous fear of employer and government retaliation and persecution.

As we have seen in the case of the Omaha meatpacking industry, the actions of the governor and lieutenant governor paved the way for the city's first successful union organizing drives in several generations. Although it was ultimately through collective bargaining campaigns that wages were raised, these organizing drives may never have succeeded without the clear public support of the state's highest elected officials. The Meatpacker's Bill of Rights, although not a wage-related document, stated clearly that workers had a right to organize and many statements by the governor and lieutenant governor communicated the same message.

Similarly, actions taken on behalf of day laborers by local governments in Los Angeles, Long Island, and elsewhere to oppose anti-day laborer ordinances and create and sustain permanent shape-up sites have protected the livelihoods of these workers. These actions have also made it possible for day laborers to begin to engage in collective action to set higher wages. Worker centers and especially unions have even more opportunities to raise wages in cases of those who work for public sector employers (although very few immigrants do) or in highly regulated industries. In fact, in recent years, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has made some of its greatest and most innovative organizing strides in industries, such as homecare and mental health, that have been privatized but are still supported through government funds. For worker centers that work with a primarily immigrant constituency which is not employed in what can be called the public sector, this is harder to do.

However, in highly regulated industries such as the taxi business in New York City, in which immigrants are represented in large numbers in the workforce and where government essentially sets wages, worker centers such as the New York Taxi Workers Alliance have been able to win important victories. They were able to organize cab drivers for collective action and target the government entities that had the power to grant fare increases. As a result, they were able to win a very significant wage increase directly through government for forty thousand workers.

Living wage efforts, where worker centers have been able to raise wages via local ordinance for those working for employers holding contracts with the municipality, do this on a much smaller scale. Depending on the extent of privatization that has taken place in a local city or town, and how expansive the ordinance is in terms of how many businesses are covered, these ordinances cover
fairly modest or larger numbers of workers. But by altering the terms of debate about economic development strategies, the nature of low-wage employment, and the responsibilities of low-wage employers to their workers, they have opened a whole new front in the struggle to improve conditions for low-wage workers.

Some living wage ordinances, such as those pioneered by the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), have specific language that makes it difficult for frequent labor law violators to receive city contracts and rewards union employers and those who agree to card-check neutrality. Pioneers of the living wage movement in Baltimore were also strongly motivated by the desire to halt privatization, which had resulted in the loss of thousands of comparatively decent-paying, overwhelmingly unionized blue-collar, public sector jobs. By taking wages out of competition, some ordinances have taken some of the percentage out of contracting out. Some have even resulted in a return to the public sector, or “re-publicization” of jobs that had been contracted out. But these gains have been limited.

Of course, minimum wage campaigns like the one in San Francisco that covers all private sector workers, not just those with public sector contracts, are much more sweeping. Where worker centers and other advocates have the power to pass them, they are exciting opportunities to raise wages for many thousands of people. However, in many communities and states minimum wage activists don’t have enough power, and the forces of opposition make it very tough to win.

State-based efforts that bring workers excluded from the federal minimum wage under the protection of state minimum wage laws, as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers was able to do for agricultural workers in Florida, are interesting policy ideas and have the potential to impact large numbers of low-wage workers. Again, there is the question of having enough power to win. Efforts that target local government bodies on which a sizeable number of representatives are sympathetic have so far worked best. TWSC was able to pass a strong living wage ordinance and improve wages for home-based childcare workers under contract to the City of Alexandria because, working with allies, it had enough power to win over a majority of the council.

The TWSC’s efforts to get the Alexandria City Council to provide health insurance for childcare workers and hotel housekeepers, while demonstrative of great imagination, are also illustrative of some of the limitations of worker center policy efforts. The fact that, in 2005, fewer than 50 percent of private sector employers now offer health insurance to their employees is indicative of a spectacular national problem. Efforts to attack this problem at the individual state level through government-provided services via the expansion of the federal
Child Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid have definitely helped millions of low-wage families but they have not addressed the underlying reason why so many workers are without coverage: cost.

More and more employers even in non-low-wage industry sectors are asserting that they cannot afford to shoulder the cost of health insurance premiums and are calling for an overhaul of our health care system. Employers in many low-wage industries either do not provide health insurance or offer plans that are so expensive (and usually so inferior) that workers do not opt to take them. In this context, although it is certainly to their credit for trying to do something and for calling attention to the problem, it is difficult to imagine worker centers being able to substantially increase the number of workers with health insurance through local public policy initiatives. But they could be important components of a broader national movement for national health care reform.

The "Collective Voice" of Worker Centers

Immigrant worker centers are mediating institutions for low-wage workers that provide opportunities for collective voice as well as collective action. Today day laborers, domestic workers, taxi drivers, garment workers, and so many other low-wage immigrant workers exist within industries in which there are no unions or other organizational vehicles through which they can speak and act. The Domestic Workers Union in New York City has created a collective voice for the 600,000 housekeepers and nannies who, despite their numbers, have had no ongoing mechanism for advocacy and organizing. The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights has given them a means of intervening in their industry and forcing some changes in the way that employment agencies operate. Their work on development of a standard contract gives domestic workers a means of improving conditions at the level of the individual employment relationship.

Worker centers provide mechanisms through which low-wage workers can speak and act on their own behalf to employers, industries, and government about issues of concern. They are doing their work in industries where non-compliance with the Fair Labor Standards Act, OSHA, and many other laws has become the norm and where strategies for effective enforcement are few and far between. By giving workers an opportunity to file claims and take direct action against employers, worker centers offer one of the few mechanisms for collective voice that low-wage workers have to pressure their employers.

Endeavoring to fill the monitoring vacuum is another way to understand the
work of the legal clinics—the individual and group cases they file and use to analyze overarching industry trends are an important way in which ongoing monitoring and regulatory intervention goes on in these industries. When KIWA saw the large numbers of restaurant workers seeking help at its legal clinic, it was able to pinpoint an industry in which noncompliance was commonplace, tell this story to government and the media, and through its advocacy and organizing activities, take steps to improve the situation.

As we saw in the case of CIWA in California, immigrant worker centers in Los Angeles have created the institutional mechanisms through which reform of government enforcement procedures in low-wage industries has been aggressively pursued. Worker centers, because they see workers every day and hear about their experiences, have built up enormous knowledge about what works and what doesn’t work in terms of inspection and enforcement.

In addition, as is the case both with CIWA and CAWRI in Illinois, through their work helping thousands of workers file claims, they have been able to see clearly the strengths and weaknesses of administrative processes and to imagine alternative systems that will work better. They have example after example and the data to identify overall industry patterns that spotlight the problems. They can bring out real workers as opposed to advocates, who can tell their own stories, and they have the institutional resources to develop ongoing relationships with government inspectors.

At the Workplace Project, the staff and workers leading the Unpaid Wages campaign came to the conclusion that the key to lessening the problem of employers not paying wages and flouting settlements lay in making penalties stiff enough to act as deterrents to illegal behavior in the first place. The organization deliberated carefully over development of a law that would accomplish this deterrence and then, because it was an organization that represented the workers being harmed, was able to have these workers go out and sell the law to elected officials and other key constituencies. Although the organization could not intervene in the relationship between these workers and their employers, through the legislative initiative it was able to represent the voices and interests of these workers to larger industry and business groups who supported cracking down on businesses that were competing on an unlawful basis.

In all of these cases, the organizations were able to provide a means of collective representation in the public policy arena for low-wage workers. As we can see in the New York and Nebraska cases in which Republican officials became key allies, the presence of the workers themselves in the storytelling and advocacy lent important moral legitimacy and standing to these efforts. On issues from public education to day labor to living wages to immigration reform, these organizations, by showing the impact of current policies on flesh-and-
Grant workers that their problems stem from a larger, systemic issue that can no be solved at the local level alone.

Engagement with immigration policy also makes clear for low-wage workers the need for a more sensible immigration policy, the "dirty little secret" of American business and family dependence on undocumented immigrants must be told. As the debate on immigration reform continues to unfold, worker centers have a unique role in ensuring that the reality of the country's deep dependence on low-wage immigrant workers and the conditions under which they work is forcefully presented. The presence of these groups in the discussions helps to hold up a mirror to an American society that's still in denial about just who is cleaning and constructing their homes and offices.

At the present moment, limited economic power, keeps worker centers from being able to win significant wage increases or establish permanent institutions like the ones that are successful in the garment or the food industries. Limited political power has an impact on the prospects as worker centers put forward in the first place and their ability to win the campaigns they do initiate. But there are few other organized constituencies such as the workers of the lowest-paid workers. Even in cases where unions have been successful, mobilizing a majority of legislators, and because of this, that is.

The Workplace Project, because of its strong moral claim, was able to win organized labor who had more political power than the organization had been. The law has not proven to be an effective deterrent to employers. In part, this was key to winning passage of the Unpaid Wages Act. On the other hand, the law's failure to curb wage theft for its purposes. Their power comes from their ability to affect issues in terms of voter control.
In addition to labor market and immigration policies, the immigrant rights and broader social justice agendas the centers pursue provide their constituencies with unique opportunities to engage other issues of major importance to them and their families, such as public education, housing and health care. Engagement with a broader agenda also provides a means to transcend local struggles and become part of larger movements for social change in the United States.