DEVELOPING ACTIVISTS AND LEADERS

A major activity of worker centers is identifying and developing activists and organizational leaders from within the ranks of low-wage immigrant workers. This effort has a number of components. It involves developing their capacities in a number of different areas, including public actions and campaigns, planning and organizational development, and internal governance. Centers devote considerable resources to training individuals to represent themselves before the media, public officials, and employers, and hold debriefings afterward to discuss and bring out lessons about power and politics. They also train members to recruit and lead other workers, to choose issues, develop and implement campaigns, and to critically evaluate what works and what does not.

In addition, many worker centers strive to create a culture of democratic governance and decision-making. In place of just making decisions themselves, staff works not only to put deliberative processes in place but to foster expectations on the part of workers that decisions will be made consultatively and collectively. "We create moments, when we organize events or conferences," said Raul Anorve of IDEPSCA, "where we teach people not only how to plan but to understand the logic of planning—the difference between objectives, goals, and activities, how these are tied together and how we take responsibility."

For many worker centers, developing activists and leaders also means transforming the way that workers see themselves. The building of a day laborer movement in Los Angeles is a good example. According to Pablo Alvarado, the Spanish word for day labor, jornalero, had long been used as a pejorative, not only in the United States but in Latin American countries as well. "Being a jornalero is the lowest you can be not even just here, but in your homeland." Alvarado and Victor Narro, a former CHIRLA organizer, and their nascent day labor movement reappropriated the term, transforming its connotation. "I think we shifted the understanding of what a jornalero is. We developed collective profiles of who a day laborer is in the centers . . . and replaced the old negative stereotypes with who they really were."

Printed on T-shirts and posters, sung out by the nation's first Day Laborer Band, "somos jornaleros" ("we are day laborers") was asserted as a positive identity, an expression of pride in one's work and even though perhaps a transitory category, one's occupational community. "There is a parade here in the park every Cinco de Mayo and when we talk to the workers and we ask them if they want to participate in the parade, they say yes," said Alvarado. "When we ask them how they want to do it, they say they want to take their helmets and tools and march along with the floats. They march on the streets with their tools and people applaud."
Developing activists and leaders is a continuous process, and centers recognize that structures need to be created to enable individuals to actively participate in their work. While most centers provide a variety of venues for participation and offer different levels of participation—from coming out once in a while to an event, to taking a course, to serving on a core committee or on the board—they all have strong cores of active participants.

- "There's a collective of about twenty-five people who are at the heart of the organization," said Tom Holler, lead organizer of OTOC. "There's a functioning strategy team of another twenty-five people. Then there's a steering committee of about sixty people. There's also a clergy caucus of about twenty. Then you have the initiatives. There are probably about thirty people in and around this work strategy [the meatpacking organizing drive with the UFCW]. Then there [are] twenty-five people who've done a lot of work on youth strategies." The largest turnout OTOC has ever had at a single event has been 1,100.

- The Workplace Project is run by a seven-member board of directors elected entirely from the ranks of the membership. In addition to the board, the organization has four standing committees related to worker organizing. These are the UNITY co-op of housekeepers (which has eighty-one members and requires all of them to serve on one of four possible committees); LOVEL, a committee of janitors that has between twenty and forty members; MILI, a committee of factory workers with ten to fifteen active members; and the United Day Laborers of Long Island, which has chapters in Freeport, Brentwood, Farmingdale, and Farmingville with a leadership base in each that ranges from five to twelve. In 2003, the organization graduated its thirty-first and thirty-second workers' rights classes, which average twenty-five pupils per class. The largest turnout the Workplace Project has ever had at an action or event has been three hundred.

- TWSC has a thirteen-person board and three low-wage worker organizing committees: Pa'Adelante for northern Virginia hotel workers, UNITY for Alexandria childcare workers, and AUTO for Alexandria taxi drivers, which each have about ten to fifteen leaders. It also has three geographically based local chapters, two in Fairfax County and one in Arlington County, which average about twelve to fifteen core leaders. Finally, it has four community organizing chapters: the Campaign for Uninsured Access to Health Care, Education Project/School Reform, Alexandria United Teens/Youth Organizing, and the Arlandria-Chirilagua Housing Cooper-
tive, each of which involves an average of seven to fifteen core leaders. In addition, the organization staffs the Northern Virginia Jobs with Justice chapter and helped start a local business organization in the Arlandria-Chirilaguna neighborhood. The largest turnout TWSC has ever had at an action or rally (besides the annual cultural festival it sponsors) has been six hundred.

"The board is nine plus two alternates, so it's eleven," said Kimi Lee of the GWC. "Initially, we had five committees, but only two or three actually functioned. The finance committee has two to three people, it talks about the worker membership dues, where should it go, the worker loan program, and that kind of stuff. There's a recruitment/retention committee of ten to fifteen workers. These people help with membership because we know that a lot of times a problem with worker centers is that workers come in when they have problems and then they leave once it's fixed. Also to help with retention, we have stewards. We have stewards who are members who then are assigned other workers to help outreach to them and bring them in and make sure they're connected. That program just started last year. Our biggest committee is our campaign committee which has about twenty to thirty." The largest turnout the organization has had for an action or event has been sixty members.

Worker centers engage in extensive training with other volunteers as well as board and committee leadership. POWER in San Francisco, which works with a diverse base of "workfare" recipients, has a leadership development and political education curriculum that has various levels based on different levels of participation. There is an initial orientation, which provides information about the history and mission of the group and ongoing political-education sessions that teach about current events. The leadership development course provides a more extensive history, a detailed explanation of the organization's programs, and lays out systematically the ways in which leaders play roles in the organization.

Over the course of conducting the research for this study, dozens of workers said that before they had become involved with the worker center, they had never gone to City Hall, met with government officials, or spoken publicly. Many said that they had never really felt they knew "how things worked," or that they could affect them, until they met up with the worker centers, and that they had been very isolated in their own small communities. Many said that they had never been asked to join an organization or asked their opinion about anything in the "public realm" until they came into contact with the worker center.

Andrea Davis, an African American leader of TWSC said that what she had got-
HOW IMPORTANT WORKER CENTERS PROMOTE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

- Working with board and committees members.
- Developing critical thinking skills in workshops and trainings.
- Teaching members to run meetings and organize events.
- Involving leaders in the development of organizational strategies and strategic planning.
- Overseeing the organization, making decisions in terms of budgeting, hiring, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Taking part in various types of actions, holding elected officials and others accountable.
- Meeting with policymakers and testifying at public forums.
- Public speaking and developing media spokesperson.
- Working with members to learn how to recruit others to the organization ("leaders have followers").
- Negotiating with employers, industry representatives, elected officials, government agencies, and other public actors.
- Participating in formal trainings as learners and presenters.

Most important, the leadership that is developed through worker centers has ripple effects throughout communities via hometown associations: home country politics, civic organizations; social, cultural, and athletic organizations; tenant organizing groups; schools/parent-teacher associations; and civil rights and immigration reform bodies.

ten out of her experience working with UNITY, the childcare organizing project, was "working with different people, getting to know different countries, being able to talk to people, cause I'm shy about talking to people so now being able to, if I have a problem, I could be able to talk." Asked whether she had ever been involved in political action before, Davis said, "No, I never really did it too much."

As a young leader with OTOC, Alejandro Garcia was one of a group of packhouse workers who met with Republican governor Johanns to describe the conditions in the industry. "We were in the basement of Guadalupe Church," he said.

I walked him to the door and told him it was nice he was there... I said, 'I expect to see you some other time.' At that time we were planning on doing a rally three weeks after that day. We were expecting somewhere around five hundred to a thousand people, and we wanted to make sure he would come. He said he's going to do the best he can to be there... Some people were worried about what we were going to give him to drink or they wanted to treat him like a king, but we all said he's going to come..."
with workers and see how we live. We just gave him water in a plastic glass. If you’re going to be with the people, we just treated him like everyone else.

When the Workplace Project mounted a statewide campaign for a new unpaid wage bill that members drafted themselves, the organization believed that passing legislation was an extremely remote possibility and viewed the campaign as a way for members and leaders to gain experience. Maintaining organizational leadership and control over the campaign became key—only in that way could Workplace Project leaders, members, and staff really maximize their learning about the whole political process. Maintaining leadership over the campaign meant having the immigrant workers themselves, and not the English-speaking staff or well-meaning allies, take the lead. The staff designed trainings for the workers that included diagramming the entire legislative process in Spanish, and setting up role plays so that workers could anticipate arguments that would be made against the bill.

Over the course of the winter and spring of 1997, the project conducted fifteen meetings with legislators. They held these meetings in lawmakers’ Albany or district offices, unaccompanied by any allies, in Spanish. “We visited with a Republican Senator,” Jennifer Gordon recalled.

We walked into his district office in Rockville Center with twelve immigrant workers, a box full of translation equipment, more people than they had room for and no one speaks English. And we say “Hello, Senator Skelos, here’s your headset.” And the meeting takes place, and Senator Skelos, because we have translation, is hearing from all these articulate people who he normally sees on street corners. Here they are in their best clothing giving good arguments that show a clear understanding of how the political system works and his place in it and his needs and things like that, and this is a big deal.

The Workplace Project members who went on these visits absolutely loved taking part in them, often taking time off from work or paying someone to work for them, just to be able to participate.

**Popular Education**

To many staff of worker centers, real participation begins with the inculcation of critical thinking skills. A number of the centers utilize a popular education approach that is associated with the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire. Work-
shops, classes, and discussions are designed to get workers talking and thinking not just about the way things are, but how they got that way. As Raul Anorve, whose organization has deep roots in the Salvadoran literacy movement of the 1980s describes it: “People do not look at the structure of this society, they look at the issues. They go by the branches not the roots of the tree. We look at the roots of the tree so we don’t get lost in the branches... we also need to look at the forest not just at the tree.”

The Workplace Project, like most of the centers, offers a worker’s rights course in which workers learn about U.S. labor and employment laws. The classes explain basic information about how U.S. labor and social welfare laws work. For example, immigrant workers learn that minimum wage and overtime laws apply to all workers, regardless of whether they have legal working papers. Workers are also taught that organizing at the workplace is protected under the law, and that it is illegal for workers to be fired for it, whether they are documented or undocumented. But they also learn the difference between what is “on the books” and what is actually enforced.

In each class, speakers are brought in from government agencies such as the state Department of Labor and OSHA, as well as from unions, worker centers, and local universities. All class sessions follow a popular education pedagogy and wherever possible draw insights and opinions from the students themselves. The project always works to point out the discrepancy between theory and practice, between the law on the books and what happens to workers in reality. They always connect these disjunctions back to the need for organizing. The classes are structured so that before the students hear from the “experts,” they identify their own experiences with a topic, such as occupational safety and health. They are asked to draw and discuss hazards at their own workplaces and learn about the laws that are on the books in this context.

By the time the “experts” arrive, students are primed to put the tough ques-
tions to them, and not just to accept their presentations at face value. In this way, the organization consciously follows a “Friereian” pedagogy aimed at developing the students’ critical thinking skills. As Anorve describes it: “This work of popular education is like a mirror where you facilitate a process where people can see themselves and their realities and then they want to do something about their conditions. That is what happened in Pasadena with day laborers who then fought to successfully establish a hiring hall.”

For many centers, political education is another component of developing the critical thinking skills and capacity to act of members. Many of the centers have worked to develop curriculum that provides members the tools to talk about complex issues. The idea is to give them information and help them formulate questions, as opposed to telling them what they should think.

In 2005, the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA), which established quotas on the amount of garments and textiles that countries could import to the United States, is going to be abolished. The GWC expects about fifty thousand workers in the Los Angeles garment industry to lose their jobs as a result. At the GWC, members are learning about the structure of their own industry and how it is affected by global trade rules, and they are encouraged to debate the issues around free trade as well as immigration policy.

“This whole MFA issue is enormously complicated because on the one hand, our members might lose their jobs, but on the other, their own home countries might benefit from the abolition of the MFA when U.S. tariffs are abolished,” said Kimi Lee.

Because it is so complex what we’re doing is just educating people about it and trying to tell people what it means and what’s going on. What we’re doing then is we’re having several globalization workshops with the workers. We’ve talked about the MFA. We’ve talked about all the different free trade agreements. We’ve done workshops on NAFTA, on the [Central America] free trade one [CAFTA]. There’s all these different free trade agreements, so we’ve been doing different sessions with the workers. That’s kind of where we’re at and that’s enough to try to deal with—educating the workers about globalization.

**Membership**

Most worker centers began without a developed idea of membership requirements. While they have grown more sophisticated in recent years, for many centers the issue of membership size and membership requirements remains