

New Forms to Settle Old Scores: Updating the Worker Centre Story in the United States

Nouvelles formes d'organisation pour régler de vieux comptes : mise à jour sur l'histoire des centres d'aide aux travailleurs aux États-Unis

Nuevas formas de saldar viejas cuentas: Actualización de la historia de los Centros de trabajadores en los Estados Unidos

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Volume 66, Number 4, Fall 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1007636ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1007636ar>

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Publisher(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (print)
1703-8138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fine, J. R. (2011). New Forms to Settle Old Scores: Updating the Worker Centre Story in the United States. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 66(4), 604–630. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1007636ar>

Article abstract

Worker centres are community-based mediating institutions that organize, advocate and provide direct support to low-wage workers. Moving into the void left by the decline of labour unions, local political parties and other groups, these centres are addressing issues that low wage, largely immigrant workers face at the workplace. In 1992, there were five such organizations, but by 2003, there were at least 137 worker centres in the United States rooted in communities where immigrant populations had settled. I estimate there to be more than 200 worker centres in 2011. Worker centres attract labourers who are often the hardest-to-organize and, because the organizations are unencumbered by the Wagner Act and subsequent Taft Hartley amendments which stripped unions of some of their most potent tactics, they can sometimes act as “organizing laboratories” creating and testing new and innovative strategies.

Centres have had some significant organizing and public policy successes and have placed labour standards enforcement on the public policy agenda at the state and national levels. During their formative years, these organizations displayed important strengths but also exhibited weaknesses that appeared to limit their ability to get to scale. Over the last five years, they have moved into a new phase of development. Centres have shown institutional resilience. Not only have new centres emerged, but there has been a growing trend toward federation in which strong individual centres have joined existing national networks or formed new ones which have in turn helped to establish new organizations or affiliate existing ones.

While some early worker centres were rejectionist toward the mainstream labour movement, the over-arching trajectory has been in the opposite direction with worker centres seeking cooperation. In fact, there is a growing trend toward institutional partnerships with unions and government. Finally, centres and their national networks are playing strategic roles in broader movement building around immigrant rights, global justice and the right to organize.

New Forms to Settle Old Scores: Updating the Worker Centre Story in the United States

Janice R. Fine

Worker centres have emerged to address issues that low wage, largely immigrant workers, face at the workplace. They are attempting to fill a void left by the decline of labour unions, local political parties and other groups. Centres have had some significant organizing and public policy successes and have placed labour standards enforcement on the public policy agenda at the state and national levels. During their formative years, these organizations displayed important strengths but also exhibited weaknesses that appeared to limit their ability to get to scale. Over the last five years, they have moved into a new phase of development. Centres have shown institutional resilience. There is also a growing trend both toward federation and formation of institutional partnerships with unions and government. Finally, centres and their national networks are playing strategic roles in broader movement building around immigrant rights, global justice and the right to organize.

KEYWORDS: worker centres, immigrant worker organizing, hybrid forms

The last half-century has witnessed dramatic changes in the nature and organization of work. Globalization, technological advance and shifting markets have profoundly transformed the U.S. economy. The rise of the network supply chain model has resulted in the vertical disaggregation of firms across many sectors and labour-intensive industries in particular. In order to shrink their own payrolls and absolve themselves of responsibility, companies are relying more on sub-contracting arrangements. Demographic changes have also led to a dramatic growth in the service economy and fueled a huge uptick in the demand for caregivers.

Between 1990 and 2000, more immigrants arrived in the United States than during any previous period in American history. The immigrant population in the United States grew by more than one million people per year, rising from 19.8 million to 31.1 million (Schmidley, 2001). The largest percentage of the new arrivals came from Mexico and Central America. By 2009, foreign-born workers accounted for 15.7 percent of the civilian labour force, including eight million undocumented immigrants accounting for over five percent of the labour force (Kochhar, Espinoza and Hinze-Pifer, 2010).

While employers manifested a ferocious hunger for low-wage immigrant workers, national immigration policy has made it exceptionally hard for many unskilled workers to emigrate legally or regularize their status. The liberalization of admissions policies in 1965 ended discriminatory country quotas but placed limits on migration from the western hemisphere for the first time. During this same period, the temporary worker program with Mexico, the *bracero* program, also ended. Later policy changes placed Mexico under a 20,000 per year country quota, abolished the right of minor children to sponsor the immigration of parents, and repealed the “Texas Proviso” that had exempted employers from prosecution for hiring undocumented workers. The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and structural adjustment policies had a devastating impact on Mexican agriculture as well as certain domestic manufacturing sectors, leading to increased levels of migration even while avenues for legal admission and to legalization once in the country were increasingly restricted (Massey, 1995; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Employment-based admission essentially excludes unskilled workers. Yet Mexican workers, along with smaller but significant numbers from Central America, continue to migrate to work in the United States. America’s immigration policy – one that simultaneously made it harder for workers to come legally while casting a blind eye on employer hiring and management practices (Chisti, 2000) – became, until quite recently, one of her central *de facto* labour market policies. For all of these reasons, millions of workers, many of them people of colour and immigrants, are labouring on the very lowest rungs of labour markets with fewer opportunities for upward mobility in jobs characterized by long hours, low wages, high rates of injury, and sweeping violations of workplace laws.

Earlier waves of immigrants faced discrimination, took up some of society’s dirtiest and most dangerous jobs and looked to their families and friends to build economic stability over time. Some fought for workplace rights and established labour unions in some industries. But today, most immigrant workers exist within industries in which unionization rates are very low. The American labour movement declined from representing about one private sector worker in three outside of the South in the 1950s, 60s and 70s to one in 13 by 2011. While vicious employer opposition is a main reason that unions are struggling, it is not the sole culprit. The mismatch between union models and contemporary business and industry structures, as well as the mismatch between union models, firm structures and New Deal labour and employment laws, are major impediments to traditional forms of worker organization.

Into this breach, some new organizational forms are emergent. Worker centres are community-based mediating institutions that organize, advocate and

provide direct support to low-wage workers. Most centres have non-profit tax status, boards of directors, full-time staff, programs, services, classes, and conduct sophisticated foundation fundraising. By 2003, there were at least 137 worker centres in the United States rooted in communities where immigrant populations had settled (Fine, 2006). During the last decade, these groups played an indispensable role in helping low-wage immigrant workers navigate the world of work. Worker centres are attracting labourers who are often the hardest-to-organize and, because the organizations are unencumbered by the Wagner Act and subsequent Taft Hartley amendments which stripped unions of some of their most potent tactics, they are acting as “organizing laboratories,” creating and testing new and innovative strategies. Along with their considerable strengths, I have argued in previous work that centres possessed certain limitations.

In this article, I explore some of the ways that worker centres since 2006 have matured and built upon their strengths, particularly in light of changes and challenges facing the conventional labour movement. In the first part, relying on the empirical work of my 2006 book, I will provide a snapshot of the strengths and weaknesses of worker centres from mid-decade. In the second part of the article, I take up the continuing decline of private sector unionism and the implications of this decline for how we should assess worker centres. In the third part, I look at how worker centres are playing an agenda-setting role for low-wage and immigrant worker issues as well as how they have built organizational capacity since 2006.

Worker Centres: The View from 2006

Worker Centres Defined

In the past what one did at work, although supplemented by other communities of interest and forms of identity, was a sufficient constitutive category for organization such that it was able to sustain craft and industrial unionism. Past assumptions about stable ties to an occupation or to an industry coupled with institutional adherence by labour unions to certain organizational forms gave predominance to a workplace-based model of organization premised on job-related identities. Today low-wage workers, especially immigrants, are as strongly influenced by networks inside ethnic communities as they are by previous job experiences or skill sets. In worker centres, that is why we find ethnic, racial, gender, geographic and even religious ties of low-wage workers marching hand in hand with craft and industrial identities.

Although some of the first centres grew out of the civil rights movement, the vast majority emerged in the 1990s and are comprised of immigrant workers.

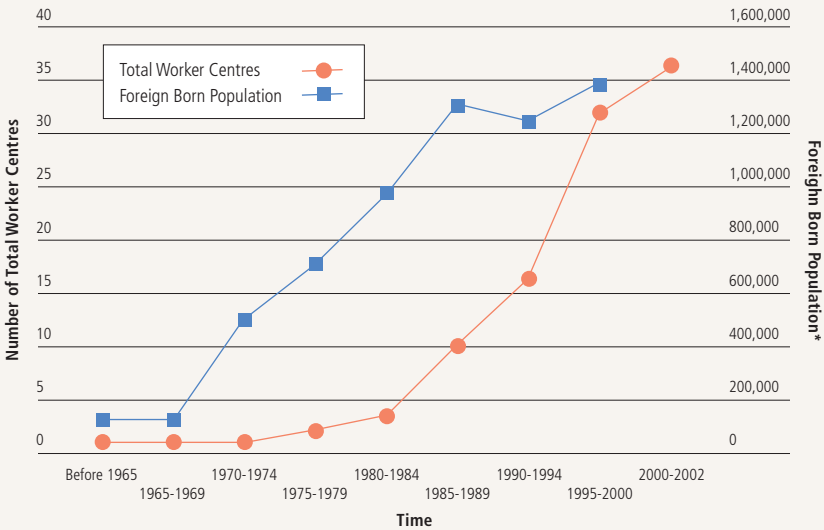
Many workers are embedded within specific ethnic communities and there are strong social networks for communication and mobilization which bridge residential communities and work. Often key worker leaders and organizers in worker centres have had experiences with collective action and working class parties and movements in their home countries, continue to be inspired and informed by them and operate within a transnational conceptual framework (Fox and Bada, 2009; Chun, 2005; Fitzgerald, 2000; Levitt, 2001). In worker centre leaders one can recognize a strategic capacity for organizing that comes of their own movement histories, but also from being simultaneously strongly rooted in their own organizations and embedded in a variety of social change networks that are important sources of new ideas (Ganz, 2009).

Centres are far from homogeneous and pursue their missions through a combination of approaches. All of them are hybrids (Minkoff, 2002): a bricolage of organizational archetypes ranging from fraternal and mutual aid associations and settlement houses to unions, producer cooperatives, ethnic associations, community organizing and social movement organizations. They engage in service delivery, especially recovering unpaid wages and offering English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. "Know your rights" classes often teach language skills along with legal rights and centres often tailor their ESL classes to the development of particular industry vocabularies and collective action tropes. Most engage in advocacy: lobbying for or against new laws, and working with government agencies to improve labour standards enforcement. In doing so, centres place great emphasis on identifying and developing grassroots leaders. Organizational culture and structure emphasize participatory processes that provide opportunities for leaders to hone their critical and strategic thinking and to be part of the decision-making about organizational direction.

The cornerstone of centres is developing a base of workers to take action on their own behalves. Much of the action centres around immediate issues like recovery of unpaid wages and passage of strengthened employment rights for excluded workers or harsher penalties for recalcitrant employers, but centres have also been key players in the immigrant rights movement. Through popular education approaches grounded in migrant workers' experiences in their home and host countries (Theodore, 2010), organizers encourage discussion and action based on the ways in which low-wage labour is connected to dynamics of the global economy. Centres demonstrate a deep sense of solidarity with workers in other countries and an ongoing programmatic focus on the global impact of labour and trade policies. Some centres maintain ongoing ties with popular organizations in the countries from which workers have migrated. In 1992, there were five worker centres nationwide, by 2003 there were 137.

FIGURE 1

Worker Centres Growth Mapped to Rates of Immigration



* Foreign Born Population includes Mexican, Central American, Chinese and Korean immigrants in three major metropolitan areas (Chicago, L.A., N.Y.).

Source: U.S. Census 2000.

Strategies

Immigrant worker centres deployed a broad range of approaches to compel employers to treat workers better and to improve working conditions. Often workers come into a centre because they live or work in the centre's geographic area of focus, in other cases they seek out the organization because they work in a specific industry or occupation. While they often target particular employers as well as industries within local labour markets, most do not focus on organizing for majority representation in individual work-sites or on negotiating contracts for groups of workers.

Direct economic action organizing strategies target single employers, large corporations, and entire industries. Worker centre strategies that target a single employer or workplace have focused mainly on filing wage claims and coupling this legal action with a variety of forms of direct economic action at work-sites to recover unpaid wages and overtime pay. This activity, calling employers, asking them to pay, and filing wage claims and picketing when they don't, was the daily work of many centres. But they also pursued campaigns to win other changes in the workplace or to alter conditions of employment.

One example of targeting a corporation was the four-year national boycott of Taco Bell, organized by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida to improve the wages and working conditions of tomato pickers. In a precedent-setting

victory, Yum Brands (the largest restaurant company in the world and owner of Taco Bell) agreed to pay a penny-per-pound “pass through” to its tomato suppliers and to undertake joint efforts with CIW to improve working conditions. What was of special significance about CIW’s victory is that it succeeded in getting a corporation to take responsibility for the wages and working conditions of its sub-contractors.

Other worker centres took direct economic action against entire local industrial sectors. By publicizing egregious examples of non-payment of wages and targeting some of the biggest players in Los Angeles’ Koreatown through pickets in front of their restaurants, Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates (KIWA) was able to substantially increase payment of the minimum wage by restaurants. The Restaurant Opportunities Center in New York (ROC) surveyed and documented widespread abuses in New York, targeted some of the best known establishments and won agreements to provide back pay, paid sick and vacation days and prohibit sexual harassment.

Worker centres’ public policy successes were widespread and included both administrative and legislative achievements. For example, the Workplace Project in Long Island drafted an Unpaid Wages Law which significantly increased penalties and fines and was passed by a Republican Senate and signed by a Republican Governor. There had also been a number of successful local minimum wage, living wage, and family leave campaigns spearheaded or co-led by worker centres.

Strengths and Weaknesses

I found that worker centres provided a vehicle for collective voice and leadership development among low-wage immigrant workers where very few others existed. Fundamentally, their advocacy work publicizing workplace abuses and introducing communities to the immigrant workers in their midst as hard working family men and women helped reframe the way they were perceived. The language the media and community leaders used to describe them changed as the organizations built relationships with reporters, editorial boards and community allies, especially faith leaders.

In the largely non-union service economy, low-end construction, meatpacking, light manufacturing and what was left of garment shops, worker centres were calling attention to exploitative industry practices and pioneering creative strategies, especially in circumstances of widespread subcontracting. In their monitoring and enforcement of federal and state labour standards regulations, they were attempting to fill the void left by an ineffectual state. Finally, their local experiments were building organizations in industries and among constituencies unions had given up long ago as too difficult to organize.

Along with their considerable strengths, I previously argued that centres possessed certain limitations. Most had either small membership bases or, in many

cases, no formal membership structures. Many resisted charging dues because of affordability issues and did not view dues as an important measure of worker commitment. This was in strong contrast to leadership development, on which most of the organizations placed a very high priority, but which involved a limited number of workers. I argued that low membership numbers had implications for organizational legitimacy and power as well as financial sustainability. Dues are one important way that organizations are accountable to a base and members demonstrate a strong commitment to an organization.

The organizations were also almost entirely reliant upon foundation funding. The unpredictability of foundation support year to year and the lack of funding source diversification made these centres financially vulnerable and unstable. That said, with the exception of organized labour, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the now-defunct community organization, and certain faith-based groups, this same critique applies to the vast majority of non-profit organizations engaged in organizing and advocacy.

At the decade's midpoint, immigrant worker centres were significantly under-networked at every level. Local networks in Los Angeles were the exception: organizations elsewhere had no such local networks of worker centres to aggregate power and support each other's campaigns. At the statewide and regional levels in most parts of the country, the same vacuum existed: organizations might come together on some campaigns, but they were not working together on an ongoing basis. At the national level, day labourer centres through the National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON) were the notable exception.

The lack of national networking was problematic because centres were unable to coordinate action and project a national presence. Coordination also mattered for fundraising purposes; many national funders hesitate to fund at the local level because they don't feel they have the capacity to distinguish between individual local organizations but will consider funding through trusted regional or national intermediaries. Lastly, there was rich learning that could have been taking place through sharing lessons between centres.

Many centres were also isolated, unaware not only of what other worker centres were doing, but also of activities of other organizations beyond their immediate networks. Despite the organizational similarity to unions, most had no relationships with them and knew little about what they were doing. Many did not engage in detailed industrial or labour market research and analysis and this affected, for example, their efforts to create mechanisms for helping day labourers or domestic workers find employment. For their part, unions were looking to mount large-scale industry-based leverage campaigns on big targets and most union strategists, focused on immediate campaigns to increase union density, did not view worker centres as an effective means to that end (Fine, 2007; Sullivan, 2009).

Despite mounting some extremely innovative campaigns to intervene in labour markets through direct economic action, they were not by and large able to have an impact at the labour-market or industry-wide level. They were having their greatest impact on labour markets and industries through catalyzing government action and through local and state public policy initiatives. Most of those victories were about enforcing existing standards rather than raising them.

Today, worker centres and their national organizations are overcoming some of these limitations. Others, such as reliance on foundation funding, may, with the benefit of hindsight, have actually been strengths. From the vantage point of 2011, some of the central strategic shortcomings I identified now seem to have been indicative of a broader challenge faced by all worker organizations as they have confronted the radical laissez faire employment arrangements that have taken hold in many advanced industrial societies. Additionally, I was looking at them during a particular stage in their development. In the past five years, worker centres and their networks have significantly evolved and matured, institutionalizing themselves and substantially expanding their strategic capacities.

The View from 2011

Continuing Decline of Private Sector Unionism

Despite a leadership change at the AFL-CIO in 1995 that presaged a renewed focus on organizing, and a split in the Federation in 2005, a move intended to catalyze membership growth, union density has declined or at best remained stubbornly flat. As shown in Table 1, this is not solely a globalization or decline of manufacturing story, U.S. union density in the non-footloose industries of the private sector has been flat or declining as well.

TABLE 1

Percentage of Employed Workers Covered by a Collective Bargaining Agreement

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
Construction	23.9	20.3	20.4	15.0	15.3
Manufacturing/Non-Durable	20.0	17.0	14.8	13.2	12.6
Manufacturing/Durable	23.8	20.1	16.2	14.1	11.2
Transportation and Warehousing	42.6	39.1	35.3	33.1	30.5
Retail	7.0	6.6	5.2	5.9	5.4
Hospitals	17.8	16.5	15.9	15.4	16.0
Nursing homes	12.4	11.3	11.2	9.1	7.7
Hotels and Motels	11.7	12.0	11.7	9.5	9.0

Source: Union Membership, Coverage, Density and Employment by Industry 1990-2010, Current Population Survey (CPS) Outgoing Rotation Group (ORG) Earnings Files, 1990-2010, data are from Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson.

Direct economic action on the part of unions personified by strikes and work stoppages, once the central weapon in their arsenal and understood to be, as Lambert argues, a “stalwart citizenship right,” was transformed into a “tentative and conditional commercial right” unceasingly undermined by corporations, courts and government officials until they had become almost impossibly risky and rare (Lambert, 2005). The work stoppage series of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, although it only looks at those involving 1,000 workers or more, documents a secular decline decade by decade since the 1970s. From 2001-2010, there were approximately 17 major work stoppages on average per year, compared with 34 during the 1990s, 69 in the 80s, 269 in the 70s and 343 during the 50s.¹ In lieu of economic power, political power has been relied upon more and more. Smart political strategies anchored by large union campaign contributions and political operations are what seem to have enabled much of the organizing of public sector workers or those whose positions are paid through government funding streams, like the homecare, nursing home and childcare workforces who have recently gained collective bargaining rights through union political and policy interventions.² It is also true for construction unions whose most reliable work in public construction is a result of protecting prevailing wage laws, winning project labour agreements, and having the political power to intervene at the local, county and state government levels to win contracts as well as to get more resources directed into enforcement. It is also the case for those unions, like the hotel workers, who have used the political process to intervene in development deals in order to achieve community benefits agreements that have included neutrality and card-check agreements.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of union political versus economic strength is the stark contrast between state public and private union membership rates. Table 2 compares the union density in the public and private sectors in some of the most unionized states. In short, government workers are five times more likely to belong to a union than private sector employees today.

TABLE 2

Union Membership, Coverage, Density and Employment by State, 2010 (%)

State	Private	Public
California	10.0	59.6
Florida	3.1	27.8
Illinois	10.1	52.6
Maryland	6.7	32.4
Michigan	11.6	51.7
New York	15.2	72.9

Source: Current Population Survey (CPS) Outgoing Rotation group (ORG) Earnings Files, 2010, data are from Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson.

Increasing Reliance on Public Policy

The increased inability to exercise significant direct economic power over employers is therefore not just a weakness of worker centres; it is widely shared by labour unions organizing private sector workers. Until the recession and the assault on the public sector workforce, both unions and worker centres have been looking to the state as their most viable options for securing improvements.

In labour market environments in which the rights to strike and to organize have been so severely eroded, most private sector labour markets are so overwhelmingly non-union, and public sector unionism has come under increasing attack, altering the climate would seem to be a prerequisite for either improving labour standards or reviving union organizing today. In order to gain traction, low-wage workers need to be able to expand the scope of conflict (Schattschneider, 1975) to a broader set of societal actors and activate third parties to enter the bargaining arena on the side of the workers (Lipsky, 1968). Workers must be able to generate public empathy for their struggles in order to achieve a shift in the way employers operate their businesses and commonly respond to organizing efforts and in the way that government officials and courts respond to direct action at the workplace. To build public empathy, organizations must be able to bring attention to the exploitation of low-wage workers and they must be able to cast the problems faced by workers and the need for representation in moral terms – exercising “symbolic” or “moral” power (Bourdieu, 1991; Chun, 2005; Fine, 2005; Hall, 1997). While this power is certainly not equivalent to labour market power (Jenkins, 2002), reframing worker issues expands the space through which workers can make their case – winning them allies who possess the economic and political power they do not and also paving the way for acceptance of their need to engage in other more contentious forms of action. This is precisely what worker centres and their close research and policy allies have been able to do regarding labour standards enforcement and basic rights for low-wage immigrant workers.

A 2009 study by Bernhardt *et al.*, in cooperation with worker centres, found that 26 percent of low-wage workers in the nation’s three largest cities suffered minimum wage violations in the week prior to its survey, and over 76 percent of low-wage workers who laboured more than 40 hours in the prior week were not paid according to overtime laws (Bernhardt *et al.*, 2009: 2). In some regions, the Department of Labor itself has recorded Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) noncompliance levels above 50 percent in industries such as nursing homes, poultry processing, daycare and restaurants. By weaving low-wage immigrant workers’ stories into a collective narrative about work in America, and connecting these stories to statistics that demonstrate the shockingly widespread nature

of workplace violations, worker centres have successfully cast workers' struggles in moral terms.

Worker centres and their networks have successfully placed labour standards enforcement on the public policy agenda at the state and national levels. They have established dynamic partnerships with government agencies (Fine and Gordon, 2010). Most recently they have popularized the phrase "wage theft" and played a leading role in getting the Department of Labor in the Obama administration to make labour standards enforcement in low wage, immigrant-heavy industries a top priority (see Bobo, 2009). Worker centres across the country have initiated grassroots campaigns to pass state and local ordinances and worked with Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) to draft the federal Wage Theft Prevention Act.

Labour standards enforcement work has often been dismissed as an inferior alternative to union organizing – in my interviews with labour unions I was often told, "they only enforce existing laws, they don't raise standards." But I seldom hear this now. Over the past few years this work has moved out of the margins – in addition to winning some measure of recompense for workers, it is now a powerful means of casting low-wage worker organizing in a sympathetic light and placing the need for stronger regulation of decent work on the public policy table. By publicizing widespread non-compliance with basic wage and overtime laws and targeting the government to enact reforms, worker centres have mounted a compelling case for a rejuvenated state role in governing the labour market and opened the space for direct action against employers. Increasingly, when worker centre members, leaders and allies show up at businesses with workers who have not been paid, police can no longer be relied upon by employers to take their side.

Worker centres also have won victories for workers long excluded from Wagner Act coverage and therefore assumed to be outside of the union circle. In 2010, after many years of publicizing abuses of nannies and domestic workers, Domestic Workers United (DWU) won passage of the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, the first bill of its kind in the nation which requires a minimum of one day of rest per week, overtime pay, a minimum of three paid days off per year, anti-discrimination and harassment protections, and a study commission to explore collective bargaining for domestic workers. Domestic workers and their organizations played the lead role by documenting the problem, drafting the legislation, meeting with elected officials, telling their stories publically across the state and taking to the streets repeatedly. DWU attracted allies such as the national and state AFL-CIO who lent their political power to the effort and legislative leaders who, in declaring their support, often invoked their own family members' experiences as domestic workers. In the end the bill received broad support across party lines.³

Federation and Capacity Building

Federation: A Growing Trend

I estimate there to be more than 200 worker centres in the United States today. Not only have new centres emerged, but there has been a growing trend toward federation in which strong individual centres have joined existing national networks or formed new ones which have, in turn, helped to establish new organizations or affiliate existing ones. Federation, something Ulman posited as a central developmental milestone for unions, Skocpol argued was a distinguishing feature of American civic organizations historically and Swartz has pointed to as a significant strength of the now defunct national community organizing network ACORN, is enabling worker centres to spread strategies and tactics developed at the local level to labour markets in other cities and states, to launch national policy and corporate campaigns and to access greater foundation support (Skocpol, 2003; Swartz, 2007; Ulman, 1955).

Since 2007, the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY), Domestic Workers United and the NY Taxi Workers Alliance, have all begun to create national structures, develop guidelines for the establishment of new organizations or to affiliate existing organizations and to coordinate activity at the local, state and national levels. In 2007, the flagship New York Taxi Workers Alliance brought taxi workers across eighteen U.S. cities together with organizations from cities from around the world to form the International Taxi Workers Alliance. The opening convention featured statements of solidarity from transportation workers unions across the globe and a keynote address from AFL-CIO President John Sweeney. Likewise, over the course of the past few years, the movement for domestic worker organizing in the United States and globally has expanded. Domestic Workers United helped to bring organizations together to found the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) in 2007 and, by early 2011, it had 33 affiliated organizations in 17 cities and 11 states, and a staff of nine. The organization has entered into a strategic alliance with the AFL-CIO, SEIU, AFSCME, Jewish Funds for Justice, National Council of La Raza, the NAACP, National People's Action, many other prominent national organizations and scores of local community organizing groups to launch a campaign intended to transform the caregiver industry through the establishment of labour standards, career ladders, pathways to legalization, and a new tax credit to support the cost of caring for other's families.

The Restaurant workers' federation seems to have established the most stringent affiliation structure. ROC's board contemplated a variety of national structures but, in the end, due to the strength and organization of the National Restaurant Association and prominent restaurants which had taken ROC to court on a number of occasions arguing that it really was a union and had to be

bound by the strictures of the Taft-Hartley Act, the board decided they “could not afford a loose”⁴ structure, and adopted a strategy that included a binding affiliation agreement.

Rather than having campaigns dictated by individual grievances, ROC was always pro-active about choosing its targets. It decided early on to focus on the fine dining sector because these restaurant’s high profiles would bring more attention to campaigns. Many high-end restaurants were part of conglomerates with multiple establishments under one corporate banner but they were not as “corporate” as large family restaurant chains like Olive Garden or Applebee’s. ROC mapped out what ROC co-founder Saru Jayaraman calls the “mini empires” of fine dining and then looked for opportunities, conducting outreach to workers and waiting for a problem at one of the target restaurants to emerge. Over time the organization developed a multi-stage strategy to negotiate settlement agreements that win employment policy changes in the restaurants in addition to back wages. ROC had won nine settlement agreements. The organization was interested in spreading its model to other cities and expanding its ability to impact the mini empires with footholds in multiple locations.⁵

In 2007 ROC-United was formed with a goal of establishing affiliates in the top ten restaurant markets in the United States. ROC-United adopted an approach that called for hiring locally and moving new organizations through three phases. They begin as incubated affiliates or “incubates” that are subsidized by the national organization, then develop into independent affiliates, and eventually evolve into separate 501c(3) organizations with their own independent boards of directors. ROC-United brings new staff to ROC-NY to train them in the three prongs of their organizational model: a worker-led approach to organizing for workplace justice, labour management partnerships to promote a high-road approach which includes training programs, and research and policy work to highlight problems in the industry and to set forth solutions. In 2008 the organization set up the structures of the national organization, including a national board of directors and a national organizing committee, and opened up four affiliates. By 2011 ROC-United had expanded to a total of eight U.S. cities, had a national staff of fifteen with 45 paid staff around the country, and sponsored its first national lobby day in the nation’s capitol on the same day as the National Restaurant Association. While worker centres have matured institutionally in the past five years, they have also deepened their organizational collaborations.

Strategic Alliances and Institutional Partnerships

Just as the civil rights movement had an impact on mainstream black churches, religious associations and government agencies, social movement organizations in general can have a transformational impact on the orientations and attitudes

of institutional leaders, their members, and ultimately upon the institutions themselves (Morris, 1984; Zald, Morrill and Rao, 2005). It is important to note however that the stance movement entrepreneurs adopt toward organizations is an important determining factor. The revolutionary syndicalism of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded on a rejection of the AFL's ideology and strategy and cast itself in opposition to it (Foner, 1965; Dubofsky, 1969). While some early worker centres were explicitly rejectionist toward the mainstream labour movement, the over-arching trajectory has been in the opposite direction with worker centres seeking cooperation. In fact, there is a growing trend toward institutional partnerships with unions and government in the worker centre world that has influenced these institutions to alter some of their beliefs and practices.

The National Day Laborer Organizing Network was founded in 2001 and has 29 day-labourer affiliate organizations. NDLO provides a wide-range of technical assistance to affiliates and helps to set up new organizations. The assistance includes: challenging anti-day labourer solicitation ordinances in Federal Court, assisting in the process of transitioning informal corners to official centres, strengthening the processes of discipline at centres and corners, and educating and building relationships with public officials (NDLO, 2004).

NDLO and the AFL-CIO announced a national partnership agreement in August, 2006. In a formal resolution passed by the AFL-CIO Executive Council, the federation explicitly recognized the role of worker centres: "Many of these centers are important to the immigrant community and play an essential role in helping immigrant workers understand and enforce their workplace rights. In doing so, they also play a critical role for all workers – immigrant and U.S.-born alike – by fighting unscrupulous employers who try to use the immigrant workforce to lower wage and other benefit standards that protect the entire workforce" (AFL-CIO, 2006). Regarding joint policy work, the Federation is committed to working with NDLO to defeat anti-day labourer centre bills in congress and to support immigration reforms that include legalization and a pathway to citizenship. Institutionally, the AFL-CIO President was authorized to issue Certificates of Affiliation to worker centres interested in joining state federations and central labour councils. A short time later, the AFL-CIO announced a similar partnership with Interfaith Worker Justice and its network of 18 interfaith worker centres, with ENLACE, a network of worker centres and unions organizing low wage workers in the United States and Mexico and, in May 2011, with the NDWA and the National Guest Workers' Alliance.

The most extensive union/worker centre partnership has been between NDLO and the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA) to organize day labourer centres and unions in residential construction. In

deciding to work together, each organization has journeyed from wariness to mutual self-interest to something approximating real trust: NDLON and its local affiliates, after years of being ostracized by some of the most powerful local building trades unions, had concluded that unions were a critical way to help day labourers move into permanent employment. For its part, LIUNA concluded that day labourer centres could prove instrumental to its ambition to organize the residential construction market which had become overwhelmingly non-union since the early 1970s.

A landmark February 2008 document drafted by LIUNA enumerated their individual organizational interests and roles in coming together⁶:

The National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON) and the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) share a common interest in organizing the immigrant workforce. NDLON undertakes this task with an emphasis on organizing the immigrant community to build solidarity among immigrants and to provide basic services to them. LIUNA looks to service these needs by organizing employers and collectively bargaining wages and terms and conditions of employment. These differences in approach complement, rather than conflict with each other ...

The document provided powerful recognition by LIUNA of NDLON. It sent NDLON a clear message that LIUNA understood and valued the worker centres' dual mission of establishing a minimum set of wages and other employment conditions and forcefully advocating for comprehensive immigration reform – and the national union clearly aligned itself with this policy agenda. The union also sent an equally clear signal that it understood the implications for its own leaders and members of large-scale immigrant organizing:

LIUNA's interest in organizing construction workers in the immigrant community is not limited to improving the bargaining leverage of its current members. LIUNA understands that successfully organizing immigrant workers will fundamentally change the composition of its membership. That in turn will have far-reaching ramifications for what the union would look like 10, 20, or 30 years down the road. But the union has a long history of undergoing dramatic shifts in the composition of its membership. ... Throughout its history, LIUNA has welcomed and provided a home to successive new groups of workers.

Senior officials at LIUNA held a series of meetings with regional networks of worker centres to discuss various approaches for how the union and the worker centres might work together. Within LIUNA, the Eastern Region had been the trailblazer in supporting immigrant worker organizing. In June 2008, the Laborers Eastern Region reached a historic agreement with a set of worker centres including New Labor, a ten-year-old worker centre based in New Jersey, to work together on organizing efforts, principally in residential construction.

The regional leadership of the Laborers worried that bringing newly organized workers in residential construction into existing locals would prove contentious, requiring new workers to wait their turn at the bottom of a long hiring list and forcing them to acclimate themselves to locals' strongly established cultural norms and procedures as well as the very real possibility that some existing members would be hostile toward immigrant Latinos joining in large numbers. To avoid these potential pitfalls, the Laborers Eastern Region established two new, separate, union locals, Local 55 in New Jersey and Local 10 in New York City, and appointed worker centre leaders to the board and staff.

As is always the case, there are potential downsides to the strategies adopted by LIUNA. Although establishing separate locals avoids tension in the near term, it runs the risk of sidestepping the important work of transforming local union culture and breeding resentment on the part of immigrant members if they feel "ghettoized" in a separate organization at a lower pay scale or perceive their mobility to be blocked. On the other hand, starting out separately and building the confidence and power of the new local and its members over time may be the best way to ensure equal treatment by the institution. LIUNA's national residential construction campaign, for example, was carried out through national research and organizing staff intentionally disconnected from regional and local organizations out of very legitimate concern that they could object to the campaign. But this has also meant that locals have not been available as power resources to support the campaign. Finally, LIUNA officials believe that without comprehensive immigration reform, it is difficult to cover undocumented workers in collective bargaining agreements with employers that involve state-funded training and employment or private employers who are required to participate in e-verify.

Other partnerships have emerged between centres and government agencies. Working together, Make the Road by Walking and the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) have launched path-breaking community-based organizing campaigns in New York City, targeting stores and small chains that have been systematically underpaying their workers. They have won significant back-pay awards and, in some cases, collective bargaining agreements. The Attorney General's office under Eliot Spitzer had a strong interest in improving conditions of low-wage work and viewed unionization as key to raising labour market standards. When Spitzer was elected Governor of the state, he appointed veterans of his office to top positions at the state Department of Labor where they expanded their work with worker centres and unions. Some went on to top positions at the federal Department of Labor.

In 2006 California's Division of Labor Standards Enforcement (DLSE) established the Janitorial Enforcement Team (JET). JET has a close working relationship

with the Maintenance Cooperation Trust Fund (MCTF), a janitorial watchdog organization established in 1999 by Local #1877 of the Service Employees International Union and its signatory contractors that functions as a worker centre for non-union workers in the industry.

JET alone represents an important innovation, but it would not have succeeded without the MCTF, whose twelve inspectors more than quadruple JET's investigative capacity. MCTF provides state inspectors with specialized knowledge of industry structures and sub-contracting arrangements and plays a critical role in helping to assemble the documentation necessary for the state to bring cases. While JET's inspectors must still carry out independent investigations, MCTF provides them with much of the raw material they need. State investigators now accept cases from MCTF as opposed to requiring that workers approach DLSE directly. This is a significant departure from tradition – government investigators are typically discouraged from accepting information from organizations or working closely with them (Fine and Gordon, 2010).

At the national level, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) under President Obama has targeted Latino workers for particular attention knowing that they are at very high risk of injury on the job. Working in the state with the highest rate of construction fatalities in the nation, the Workers Defense Project/Proyecto Defensa Laboral (PDL), a worker centre and IWJ affiliate in Austin, Texas, has developed a strong collaboration with OSHA. In July 2010 PDL signed a far-reaching formal agreement with the Wage and Hour Division and OSHA. The agreement allows PDL as an organization to submit "third party" complaints directly to OSHA and Wage and Hour on behalf of workers, ensures that these complaints are given priority, and requires investigation within 48 hours. The agreement commits OSHA and Wage and Hour to engaging in more targeted, proactive investigations in partnership with PDL, rather than simply responding to complaints. OSHA also partners with the Susan Harwood Foundation which distribute grants to support worker centres and other organizations across the country engaged in occupational safety and health work.

Movement Building

Oberschall (1973: 125) argues that "Mobilization does not occur through recruitment of large numbers of isolated and solitary individuals. It occurs as a result of recruiting blocs of people who are already highly organized participants." In the past five years, worker centres and their networks have been playing increasingly important roles in a variety of new national formations around global worker justice, immigrant rights, the right to organize for workers historically excluded from collective bargaining rights and the right to decent work and living conditions in America's cities. Examples include:

- 1) The Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, which includes worker centres and some national worker centre networks, Jobs with Justice, NDLOM, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, the Pushback Network and the Right to the City Alliance. They joined together in 2008 to map a strategy to raise the issues of excluded workers to a higher level of national awareness and action. At that meeting, the Inter-Alliance Dialogue (IAD) was formed. IAD's goals are: to respond to the current economic and environmental crises with a bold agenda founded on a just, equitable, democratic and sustainable recovery; ensure that base constituencies are united at the forefront of efforts for transformative social change; achieve a level of scale and impact beyond the reach of the separate national networks/alliances and develop local, regional, and national capacity (White Paper: Funders Network On Transforming the Global Economy "Civil Society Responses to the Global Financial and Economic Crisis").
- 2) The Excluded Workers Congress (EWC) was established in 2010 by the IAD and others. EWC aims to bring together worker organizations historically excluded from the right to organize across nine sectors: domestic workers, farm workers, taxi drivers, restaurant workers, day labourers, guest workers, workers from states with so-called "right-to-work" laws, workfare workers, and formerly incarcerated workers. The animating idea of the new formation is to assert the right to organize as a human right. In its founding documents, EWC offers several examples of "transformative campaigns that bring a human rights frame to life," including how workers in right to work states have, through the United Electrical, brought the exclusion of public employees from the right to organize to the International Labour Organization. Most recently, the National Guest Workers Alliance, building upon the groundbreaking work of the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice, has worked to defend the rights of foreign students on J-1 visas working under exploitative conditions at the Hershey chocolate factory in Pennsylvania, but also to raise questions about the appropriateness of these types of guest worker programs and to forge links between the foreign students and the local workforce.
- 3) The Food Chain Workers Alliance was created in 2009 with the goal of creating a cross-industry network throughout the food system, including agricultural, meatpacking, poultry, food-processing, warehouse, food service and grocery workers. According to Joann Lo, national coordinator, the vision of the organization is to elevate food worker issues to the national level, through research and policy work and the launching of a national campaign that would cover most – if not all – of the food system's sectors (along with interconnected targets).

4) Worker centres and their networks have been building blocks of the immigrant rights movement at the federal, state and local levels, playing a lead role in Los Angeles and other cities in the enormous marches of 2006 and, more recently, in countering the right-wing anti-immigration movement's efforts at the state and local levels to involve police in the aggressive enforcement of immigration law. NDLON has been particularly engaged in Arizona, working with the local day labourer centre in Phoenix to spearhead opposition to the extreme right-wing anti-immigrant offensive at the county and state legislative levels.

Nothing has tested – and required – movement building more than the attacks on immigrants in Arizona. In April 2010, Governor Jan Brewer signed into law Senate Bill 1070 the most sweeping and restrictive immigration bill in the nation. The bill gave police the power to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally and made failure to carry immigration documents a crime. Although, three months after its passage, a U.S. District judge issued a temporary injunction that halted key parts of the law – provisions making it a state crime to stop a motor vehicle to pick up day labourers or to knowingly employ illegal foreign residents – remained in effect.

As the climate in Arizona became increasingly polarized, NDLON and the local worker centre Puente worked together to create *AltoArizona.com*, a national campaign to coordinate responses. The campaign calls upon President Obama to reassert the federal government's exclusive authority in immigration matters, to end all police-immigration enforcement partnerships, and to direct the Department of Homeland Security to refuse to take custody of anyone charged with violating provisions of SB 1070. Alto Arizona has worked with local groups, organizing and supporting marches, civil disobedience, vigils and student walkouts, and coordinating an international day of non-compliance in which dozens of actions took place across the United States and Mexico, Spain and Ecuador. They have gotten national organizations to provide legal expertise, to testify in Congress about the extreme situation in Arizona and persuaded prominent musicians to boycott the state.

NDLON strategists concluded that anti-immigration campaigners would use Arizona as a testing ground for strategies that would then be exported to other states. "My organization doesn't have a choice. We have become the public face of this debate because we are highly visible. If that is the case, then our fight has to be the example as well," says NDLON Executive Director Pablo Alvarado. "When cops are given the power to enforce immigration law the first place they go is day labour corners, so this is a matter of life and death for us."⁷ Through the IAD and others, worker centres from Miami to Seattle to Maryland sent their communications staff to Arizona to work with NDLON and Puente. They developed a national list of 50,000 activists and established a rapid response text messaging system with more than 10,000 people living in the Phoenix area. They

also asserted explicit connections to the civil rights movement inviting long-time African-American activists to come to Arizona and advise them on strategy. As Arizona continues to be ground zero for extremist anti-immigrant forces, NDLON and its allies, echoing the pivotal Birmingham chapter in the civil rights struggle, are utilizing that extremism to expand the scope of conflict beyond the state's borders. Summing up what has been accomplished so far, Alvarado argued, "We have made the case against Arpaio nationwide, successfully taken SB 1070 to court and forced the administration to initiate an investigation against police abuse."⁸

Conclusion

That so many worker centres and their networks have survived and scratched out a set of victories in the arid landscape of declining unionization and escalating hostility towards immigrants is a strong testament to their commitment and resourcefulness. They have been able to develop as free spaces of experimentation in part because they have been unencumbered by the strictures of American labour law. It is arguable that their incorporation as tax exempt organizations has provided new avenues for organizational development. By learning to write grants, solicit foundation support and build individual donor programs, centres have established a new financial infrastructure for worker organizing, not only at the community level, but at the national level as well. Nevertheless, it is still worth contemplating what is lost when a low wage worker organization relies upon external sources rather than internal sources (membership dues) for its core support; fundraising that requires constantly talking to workers creates a different type of culture, capacity and accountability than fundraising that focuses on external sources.

Strikingly, most of the network expansion and federation growth has occurred among industry or occupationally specific groups. Although common ethnicity and language are important constitutive elements that have paved the way for recruitment, it seems that sector and occupation have been instrumental to the durability of organizations and the growth of larger federations and networks. The sectorally specific nature of the federations also seems to have facilitated relationships with national unions. Additionally, industry-specific networks – i.e., taxi drivers and domestic workers – are demonstrating a strong interest in acquiring collective bargaining rights.

Labour scholar Michael Goldfield argued that no single culprit has been more responsible for American labour's decline than the unions' collective purge of the left in the wake of the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 which involved them in bloody fratricide and divested them of some of their most talented and committed organizers (Goldfield, 1987). The national labour movement's embrace of these organizations, especially in light of that painful history, is extraordinarily encouraging. At present, the alliance at the national level is the strongest

element of the partnership. While the national AFL-CIO has provided very strong legal, policy and political support, only a small number of worker centres have been granted certificates of affiliation with local central labour councils and – with the exception of the Car Wash Workers Campaign with the Steel Workers, RWDSU's and LIUNA's efforts – there have been few joint *organizing* campaigns on the ground. Hopefully with the inauguration of a joint home care policy and organizing campaign between the NDWA, SEIU and AFSCME, this will change. But to organize enduring forms of representation at the local labour market level, worker centres need new laws and administrative procedures retrofitted to the realities of the new economy – subcontracting, joint employers, contingent and temporary employment arrangements and independent contracting – as well as new organizational structures within the labour movement that ease organizing across multiple small workplaces and among workers who lack long-term attachments to employers. Organizing will require a culture change toward a participatory social movement approach and a longer-term view on the part of national and local unions (Fine, 2007; Fine, Grabelsky and Narro, 2008). Milkman argues that such a shift is taking place in Los Angeles, where unions, worker centres and other advocacy organizations have extensively borrowed from each other's strategic repertoires (Milkman, 2010).

Scholarly treatments of labour history assign pride of place to skilled workers and their organizations. It is axiomatic that it was from the womb of the craft union that the National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor all were conceived, and that even the industrial unions and their Congress of Industrial Organizations began with skilled workers. Episodic uprisings of low-wage, unskilled workers such as the famous Bread and Roses strike of 1917, one of the International Workers of the World's shining moments, have been largely discounted as extraordinary but ephemeral. But during a time when effective new models of private sector unionism suited to contemporary conditions are few and public sector unions have come under vicious political assault, it could be that the long-term organizational revival of the working class resides in today's associations of low-wage workers.

Notes

- 1 Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Work Stoppages Summary," February 8, 2011, Table 1. Work Stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers, 1947-2010.
- 2 Certain unions are major financial contributors and leverage these relationships for policy, administrative and budgetary interventions that support their existing members as well as organizing drives. In an internal analysis the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) estimated that close to half of all its membership growth that came from organizing between 1996 and 2006 was achieved through politics.

- 3 <<http://www.organizingupgrade.com/2011/01/lessons-from-domestic-workers-victory/>> (accessed January 28, 2011).
- 4 Jayaraman interview, January 2011, p. 1.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 6 "Laborers Worker Center Proposal" Eastern Region February 2008, in possession of author.
- 7 Interview with Pablo Alvarado, February 1, 2011.
- 8 *Ibid.*

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SUMMARY

New Forms to Settle Old Scores: Updating the Worker Centre Story in the United States

Worker centres are community-based mediating institutions that organize, advocate and provide direct support to low-wage workers. Moving into the void left by the decline of labour unions, local political parties and other groups, these centres are addressing issues that low wage, largely immigrant workers face at the workplace. In 1992, there were five such organizations, but by 2003, there were at least 137 worker centres in the United States rooted in communities where immigrant populations had settled. I estimate there to be more than 200 worker centres in 2011. Worker centres attract labourers who are often the hardest-to-organize and, because the organizations are unencumbered by the Wagner Act and subsequent Taft Hartley amendments which stripped unions of some of their most potent tactics, they can sometimes act as "organizing laboratories" creating and testing new and innovative strategies.

Centres have had some significant organizing and public policy successes and have placed labour standards enforcement on the public policy agenda at the state and national levels. During their formative years, these organizations displayed important strengths but also exhibited weaknesses that appeared to limit their ability to get to

scale. Over the last five years, they have moved into a new phase of development. Centres have shown institutional resilience. Not only have new centres emerged, but there has been a growing trend toward federation in which strong individual centres have joined existing national networks or formed new ones which have in turn helped to establish new organizations or affiliate existing ones.

While some early worker centres were rejectionist toward the mainstream labour movement, the over-arching trajectory has been in the opposite direction with worker centres seeking cooperation. In fact, there is a growing trend toward institutional partnerships with unions and government. Finally, centres and their national networks are playing strategic roles in broader movement building around immigrant rights, global justice and the right to organize.

KEYWORDS: worker centres, immigrant worker organizing, hybrid forms

RÉSUMÉ

Nouvelles formes d'organisation pour régler de vieux comptes : mise à jour sur l'histoire des centres d'aide aux travailleurs aux États-Unis

Les centres locaux d'aide aux travailleurs (*worker centres*) sont des institutions communautaires qui cherchent à organiser, à conseiller et à aider les travailleurs précaires et à faibles revenus, immigrants pour la plupart. Ces centres comblent ainsi des besoins auxquels les partis politiques, les syndicats traditionnels et d'autres organismes communautaires parviennent difficilement à répondre. En 1992, il n'existait que cinq organismes de la sorte aux États-Unis, mais en 2003, leur nombre s'élevait à pas moins de 137. Présents dans des communautés très diversifiées sur le plan ethnique, l'on estime aujourd'hui qu'environ 200 de ces centres apportent leur soutien aux travailleurs. La clientèle de ces centres occupe souvent des emplois dans des secteurs où il demeure extrêmement difficile, pour les syndicats, de regrouper les travailleurs en raison des contraintes inhérentes au régime législatif mis en place par le *Wagner Act* puis le *Taft Hartley Act*. C'est ainsi que ces centres réussissent parfois à agir comme des « laboratoires de syndicalisation », en créant et éprouvant de nouvelles stratégies innovatrices visant à regrouper les travailleurs.

Ces centres ont connu un certain succès dans l'organisation des travailleurs et en matière de politiques publiques, parvenant à faire inscrire le renforcement des normes minimales de travail parmi les priorités gouvernementales, que ce soit au niveau des États ou à l'échelle nationale. Si ces organismes présentaient des qualités indéniables, ils comportaient aussi certaines faiblesses qui limitaient leur capacité à faire progresser la cause des travailleurs. Au cours des cinq dernières années, ils sont entrés dans une nouvelle phase de leur développement qui atteste de leur résilience institutionnelle. Non seulement de nouveaux centres ont émergé, mais il y a également une tendance croissante à fédérer les centres. Les centres locaux les

plus efficaces ont rejoint les réseaux nationaux existants ou ont créé de nouveaux réseaux qui ont aidé en retour à créer de nouveaux organismes ou à affilier ceux déjà existants.

Si quelques-uns des premiers centres locaux d'aide aux travailleurs ont été créés plutôt en réaction face au modèle du mouvement ouvrier traditionnel, la trajectoire d'ensemble pointe dans la direction opposée avec des centres enclins à la coopération. En fait, il y a une tendance croissante vers des partenariats institutionnels avec les syndicats et le gouvernement. Ainsi, les centres et leurs réseaux nationaux jouent des rôles stratégiques dans l'établissement d'un mouvement associatif plus large axé sur les droits des immigrants, la justice sociale et le droit d'association.

MOTS-CLÉS: centres d'aide aux travailleurs, syndicalisation des travailleurs immigrants, formes hybrides d'organisation

RESUMEN

Nuevas formas de saldar viejas cuentas: Actualización de la historia de los Centros de trabajadores en los Estados Unidos

Los centros de trabajadores son instituciones mediadoras de tipo comunitario que organizan, defienden y ofrecen apoyo directo a los trabajadores con bajo salario. Frente al vacío creado con el declive del sindicalismo, de los partidos políticos y de otros grupos, estos centros se ocupan de los problemas que enfrentan los trabajadores con bajo salario, que son mayoritariamente inmigrantes. En 1992, había cinco organizaciones de ese tipo, pero en 2003, había al menos 137 centros de trabajadores en los Estados Unidos enraizadas en las comunidades donde la población inmigrante se ha establecido. Se estima que hay más de 200 centros de trabajadores en 2011. Los centros de trabajadores atraen trabajadores que a menudo son más difíciles de organizar y, porque las organizaciones están siendo ahogadas por la Ley Wagner y las enmiendas subsiguientes de Taft Hartley que despojó a los sindicatos de algunas de sus más poderosas tácticas, dichos centros pueden a veces actuar como "organizaciones laboratorio" creando y ensayando nuevas estrategias innovadoras.

Los centros han obtenido algunos éxitos significativos en la organización y la política pública y han establecido ciertos niveles de reforzamiento laboral en la agenda política pública a nivel estatal y nacional. Durante sus años de formación, estas organizaciones muestran fuerzas importantes pero también ciertas debilidades que parecen limitar su capacidad para salir adelante. En los últimos cinco años, han pasado a una nueva fase de desarrollo. Los Centros han mostrado una capacidad de recuperación institucional. No solo han surgido nuevos centros pero se constata una tendencia creciente en favor de la federación en la que los distintos centros fuertes se han unido a las redes nacionales existentes o han formado nuevas redes, las que a su vez han contribuido a establecer nuevas organizaciones o a afiliar aquellas ya existentes.

Mientras que algunos centros de trabajadores manifestaron en un inicio su rechazo al movimiento laboral en general, la trayectoria no necesariamente lineal ha tomado una dirección opuesta a la cooperación buscada por los centros laborales. De hecho, existe una tendencia hacia las alianzas institucionales con los sindicatos y el gobierno. Por último, los centros y sus redes nacionales están desempeñando un rol estratégico en la construcción de un movimiento más amplio en torno a los derechos de los inmigrantes, la justicia global y el derecho a organizarse.

PALABRAS CLAVES: centros de trabajadores, organización de trabajadores inmigrantes, formas híbridas