

# Worker Center Strategies

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NORTH AMERICAN ALLIANCE FOR FAIR EMPLOYMENT  
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The North American Alliance for Fair Employment (NAFFE) is a network of grassroots organizations, labor unions, advocates, and academics organized to link those demanding fairness for contingent workers. This report is one of a series of working papers on strategy NAFFE is preparing for its member groups and others challenging the abuse of contingent workers.

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## Introduction to NAFPE's Strategy Series

Nearly three in ten American workers are employed in contingent jobs. Instead of standard, full-time, steady work, they face “nonstandard” conditions like temporary, part-time, contract, leased, and day labor jobs.

Contingent workers face a lack of equity in pay, benefits, security, and basic labor rights. On average they receive lower pay and benefits than regular, full-time workers who do the same work.<sup>1</sup> That discrimination affects not only those in contingent jobs, but also other workers who are forced to compete with them and community members who are affected by the consequences of insecurity and discrimination. Contingent work is an issue for contingent workers, but it is also a social issue for our entire society.

Why a strategy series? Strategy is originally a military term that literally means the choice of ground on which to engage the enemy. More broadly, it is the means for achieving long-range goals in concrete situations. Our long-range goal is to improve the lives of ordinary people, ourselves, our friends, our neighbors, and people facing similar problems around the country and around the world. How we do it is our strategy.

Planning strategy requires deep thought and attention to detail. But too often, force of circumstance and lack of time lead advocates of social change to choose projects and tactics without thinking through clearly enough what we want to do and how we might achieve it. And it is usually easier to follow the course of inertia, treating our organizations and programs as if they were ends in themselves, rather than periodically rethinking whether and how their structure and activities contribute to what we are really trying to accomplish.

The purpose of this series is to raise questions and provide information necessary for effective strategy. The guides present various aspects of social movement building designed to benefit workers in contingent jobs and to address the social issue of contingent work.

If those affected by contingent work were powerful and well organized, they could simply use their influence to secure the conditions they need. But in reality contingent workers are largely excluded from power and face enormous barriers to organization. Promoting the interests of workers in contingent jobs, and addressing the social issue of contingent work, therefore requires effective strategy. We hope these guides will help groups addressing contingent work -- and their networks from local to global -- increase their chance of realizing their goals.

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<sup>1</sup> For a general introduction to the issues of contingent work, see The National Alliance for Fair Employment, *Contingent Workers Fight for Fairness* (2000). Available on the NAFPE website: [www.fairjobs.org](http://www.fairjobs.org)

# Worker Center Strategies

## A NAFFE Working Paper

### Introduction: The Not So New Insecurity

In our post-September 11th world, the concept of ‘insecurity’ has become something of a mantra. Pundits ponder global insecurity as they prepare to select new military targets, while investors and analysts fret about economic insecurity, bemoaning an economy that is stagnant or in recession.

But for millions of working people in the U.S., insecurity is nothing new. Faced with years of downsizing, outsourcing, and cutbacks in wages and benefits, whole sectors of the workforce now understand a lack of certainty as a workplace reality. Against a backdrop of deregulation, a steady weakening of union power and influence, and the relentless pressure of global competition, a full third of the workforce has been made ‘contingent.’ This army of temps, day laborers, consultants, independent contractors, and part-timers can not expect stable jobs, benefits, or rising wages – and that’s exactly how their employers like it.

To many activists and advocates, the solution to this rising tide of contingency is clear: organize workers into unions. But it hasn’t proved as simple as that. There are major obstacles to union organizing and representation in many sectors of the contingent workforce, some of which are described below. Despite these obstacles, however, there have been some impressive union victories. The two key strikes of the 1990’s—the Justice for Janitors strikes in LA in the early 1990s and the UPS strike of 1997—involved contingent work issues. Other successes by janitors, home care workers, and construction workers have shown that unions can organize contingent workers. On balance, though, contingent workers across employment sectors have proved notoriously difficult to organize.

### Challenging Contingency: Learning from History

To understand the reasons why today’s unions have difficulty organizing contingent workers some historical background is necessary.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

Contingent work is not new nor are efforts by workers to regulate it. The modern, full-time job is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most workers were employed in very precarious “contingent” jobs. Few had any real expectation of long-term employment with a single employer. Often, workers lined up at the factory gates every day to be selected for work. Frequent lay-offs meant frequent periods of unemployment.

Workers responded to the harsh conditions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with many forms of resistance, both personal and collective. Some voted with their feet, changing employers frequently whenever a better opportunity arose. Others joined the radical Industrial Workers

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<sup>2</sup> A longer version of this introduction appears as *The Once and Future History of Steady Work*, Tim Costello in *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, Winter 2000-2001.

of the World (IWW) or “new unions” like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which explicitly organized the unskilled “contingent” workforce. They developed ways to pressure employers even without a contract, through the use of slowdowns, quickie strikes, and community-based struggles.

By the 1920’s forward-thinking firms recognized the inefficiency of their employment practices and the high economic cost of worker turnover. Moreover, employers realized that a system in which workers toiled under uniformly harsh conditions for low wages with little opportunity for advancement was potentially a social powder keg. New personnel systems were developed by corporations that included seniority systems, provided benefits, created internal job ladders, and generally reduced contingent work. By the end of the 1920’s the desirability of employing workers on a permanent basis became conventional wisdom in business and industry.

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### *Organizing during the Depression*

The Depression interrupted the trend toward stable, secure work. Once more, millions of workers faced a world of precarious work, high unemployment, and economic insecurity.

In the depths of the Depression of the 1930’s, regular jobs vanished. While tens of millions of American workers were described as unemployed, most of them in fact were “contingent” workers, shifting back and forth between unemployment and temporary, part-time and other insecure work. These “unemployed” workers organized in hundreds of cities and towns, creating Unemployed Workers Councils that addressed their problems from evictions to conditions on local government work projects—the equivalent of today’s subsidized wage paying jobs programs. These organizations shared many of the characteristics of the worker centers that have emerged in the past decade, some of which are described in this report.<sup>3</sup>

As the unemployed poured into the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other large new federal jobs programs created by the New Deal, the Unemployed Workers Councils transformed themselves into the Workers Alliance. The Workers Alliance continued to campaign for labor and welfare rights, while also becoming a proto-union for WPA workers. The Workers Alliance also played a key role in the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935.

Most unions were reeling from the Depression. Besides, most had antiquated craft-based structures that fit poorly with the needs of both contingent workers and industrial workers in large factories. The Unemployed Workers Councils, the Workers Alliance, and similar organizations of contingent workers served as the incubators for the great wave of sit-down

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<sup>3</sup> We thank labor historian Jeremy Brecher for drawing our attention to the similarities between unemployed organizations in the 1930s and worker centers today. For more on the Unemployed Workers Councils, see *Strike!*, (Jeremy Brecher, Revised and Updated Edition, Boston,1997) pp. 159ff

strikes and industrial unionism that swept the country in the late 1930's. Many of the individuals who initiated the new labor movement got their experience and training in local organizations of contingent workers. And many of the networks through which they organized had their roots in the Unemployed Workers Councils and the Workers Alliance.

Government played a key role in encouraging unionization and promoting stable employment. A new framework for labor and employment law was established. Early in the Depression the National Recovery Act (NRA) set voluntary industry codes of conduct that included stabilization of

employment and the right to organize. The Fair Labor Standards Act helped stabilize work by setting a minimum wage and requiring overtime pay after 40 hours per week. The National Labor Relations Act established the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively and the obligation of employers not to

interfere with those rights or refuse to bargain. Unions were seen as a way to stabilize work and increase the purchasing power of workers to pull the country out of depression. During World War II, the federal government extended the personnel policies developed by big corporations during the 1920's such as seniority rights, job descriptions, and bidding procedures throughout the economy.

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### *The rise and fall of the post-war compact*

By 1946, modern work organization and labor market regulation were in place in the core economy, in both union and non-union settings. A "post-war compact" between industry and a strong labor movement, which enrolled 35% of the workforce by 1954, contributed to job stability and prosperity. The enormous growth of productivity and profitability in the post-war period meant rising living standards for more than thirty years.

For most workers, contingent work seemed like a bad memory. Many unions, unfortunately, became comfortable with their new position in the economy. They no longer had to fight management for their existence or fight against a huge number of discharges for union activity. They narrowed their focus to collective bargaining for existing members and they stopped aggressively organizing new members or pursuing broader progressive goals.

The post-war compact began to unravel with the economic crisis of the early 1970's, which ended the extraordinary growth of the post-war period. Corporations turned away from the post-war compact, often becoming virulently anti-union. The past two decades have seen a radical restructuring of corporations worldwide. Corporations abandoned the cumbersome vertical/horizontal integration that sought to keep most functions "in-house" and moved toward a core/ring structure. Their goal is to retain a core of essential functions within the company, while contracting out the rest to suppliers around the world. Workers producing the same product, or part of the product, may be employed by many different sub-

contractors in a “supplier chain.” Meanwhile, the corporation itself cuts across the boundaries of industries and of nations.

Contingent staffing strategies are central to this change. The goal of these strategies is to cut labor costs by employing cheaper labor and by matching the workforce to small swings in the production cycle. Increasingly, corporations divide the workforce into a shrinking number of core workers and an expanding number of workers in lower-paying insecure contingent jobs--part-timers, temps, contract workers, day laborers, and the like.

The revival of contingent work, the decline of internal labor markets that allowed for skill acquisition and advancement, the elimination of company paid benefits, and the exclusion from many labor and employment laws represent a return to contingent work patterns that prevailed until 60 years ago.

### **Barriers to Organizing**

Unions have had a hard time responding to these dramatic changes. The legal and administrative framework within which they must act and the strategy and tactics they conventionally employ are geared to the pre-1970 economy. Conditions in today’s economy present a new set of challenges that make organizing and representing any group of workers difficult, but the problems are especially difficult for contingent workers:

- The practical problems posed for organizers by the contingent workforce are daunting: small groups of workers dispersed throughout a broader workforce; high turnover; little shared “community of interest;” and employers that are often marginal and unable to pay higher wages.
- Legal barriers include: the exclusion from protections offered by the NLRA of whole categories of contingent workers including agricultural workers, independent contractors, freelancers, consultants, and others with similar job arrangements; and a complex and time consuming process required for union recognition, unsuited to a high turnover workforce.
- Collective bargaining is difficult: even when workers successfully organize, employers have less incentive to make concessions in today’s economy than in the past. In the old integrated corporate system unions derived significant bargaining power from their ability to stop or slow production-- preventing strikes and other forms of industrial action gave management an incentive to improve wages and working conditions. In today’s decentralized corporate system much of that bargaining power is lost. Supplier chains allow management to shift work to lower cost providers around the world. And not just in manufacturing. Today a call center may be located in the rural US or in Ireland or in India. While most workers have diminished bargaining power, contingent workers, as the most marginal and easily replaced, have the least bargaining power. Many workers understand this, dampening the enthusiasm for organizing.

There is another lesson to be learned from history—over time workers and their unions have re-invented themselves to meet new challenges. Today many unions are already in the process of doing so. The Communication Workers of America has invested time and resources in its WashTech affiliate in Washington State, which is developing ways to improve conditions for temp workers even without union contracts. The Service Employees International Union spent many years and a great deal of money on a successful legislative campaign in California to change the employment status of low wage contingent home care workers. As a result they have enrolled tens of thousands of new members. Other creative efforts are under way around the country. If the past is any indication, it is only a matter of time before workers and their unions will figure out how to organize, even under new unfavorable conditions.

It is against this historical backdrop that worker centers began to emerge in the past decade or so. Community groups, immigrant organizations, and labor and community alliances faced with a desperate

need to improve conditions in low wage labor markets, began to organize outside of the conventional channels. Like the Unemployed Workers Councils of the Depression, these worker centers bring a broad array of tactics to the task. Time will tell whether they will help revitalize or transform the labor movement. This report explores what they do and how they do it.

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## **One, Two, Many Worker Centers**

The majority of worker centers share a common goal: to help workers help themselves in ways that traditional trade unions have not been able to. Most approach this goal by drawing on broader communities of interest such as ethnicity and/or by linking workplace specific issues such as wages, benefits, working conditions, and respect on the job, with some form of direct service such as legal aid, ESL courses, computer training, worker rights education, or leadership development.

But within this broad framework there are a number of key differences. We have identified ten broad categories of worker centers.

- **Immigrant specific**

*Centers that target a single immigrant group, or groups of immigrants from a specific region. Examples include the Korean Immigrant Workers Association (LA), and Casa de Maryland.*

- **Multi-ethnic**

*Centers that work with multiple ethnic groups, often within a single industry. Examples include the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (FL), and the Tenants’ and Workers’ Support Committee (VA).*

- **Employer or industry specific**

*Centers that target strategic employers in a single industry. Examples include day labor organizing projects in Chicago and Cleveland.*

- **Community focused**

*Centers that address community or political issues beyond specific workplace concerns. Examples include the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), and the Workplace Project (NY).*

- **Policy advocates**

*Centers that advocate on behalf of workforce-wide changes in public policy. Examples include the Campaign on Contingent Work (MA) and Working Partnerships (CA).*

- **Legal advocates**

*Centers that fill a void created by weakened state and federal regulatory mechanisms. Examples include the Dolores Huerta Center for Worker Rights (NV) and the Vermont Workers' Center (VT).*

- **Leadership developers**

*Centers that have as their goal the development of worker/ leaders from specific communities. Examples include the Workplace Project (NY), and Casa de Maryland.*

- **Union-backed**

*Centers that are formed by one or more unions, with the goal of organizing workers into specific unions. Examples include UNITE's Garment Worker Justice Centers.*

- **Unions-to-be**

*Centers that have as their goal the formation of a union, whether independent or affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Examples include the Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates (CA), and the Tenants and Workers Support Committee (VA).*

- **Hiring Halls**

*Centers that play the role of labor dispatcher, providing an alternative to temporary worker and day labor firms. Examples include Prima Vera (AZ), and Working Partnerships (CA).*

# Snapshots

The following section looks at eleven different worker centers, diverse in size, location, and strategy. The case studies document the approaches of each center, paying particular attention to the goals of each group, the partners with whom they work and the tactics that they employ. Whenever possible, the report highlights “best practices,” even while acknowledging the challenges that worker centers confront.

## Fighting for Rights in a ‘Union City’ – The Dolores Huerta Center for Worker Rights

Some forty million people travel to Nevada every year, many hoping to make it big at one of Las Vegas’ many casinos. They’re not the only ones. Workers are flooding the region too, lured by the promise of high-wage jobs in the lucrative hotel and construction industries. They come from Mexico, Central America, and from across the U.S. And too often, they end up stranded, working for employers who routinely violate state and federal employment laws.

“By the time workers come to us for help, they’ve usually endured months of problems, from threats of deportation to non-payment of wages,” says Katherine Limon, a spokeswoman for the Dolores Huerta Center for Worker Rights, which was named for the co-founder of the United Farm

Workers. “When workers first arrive in Las Vegas, they might work as day laborers or under the table,” she says, noting that the center hears most often from workers in the cleaning, landscaping, maintenance, and residential construction sectors.

Center advocates assist the workers in filing grievances with various state and federal agencies, while pressuring those same agencies to take the cases and move them along. Since it opened its doors, the center has closed nearly 100 such cases. The center has also been successful at winning broader legal reforms by working in coalition with church groups and local labor unions. Last year, the center teamed up with Culinary Workers Local 226 and successfully won the repeal of an obscure 1947 law that required job seekers in the gambling business to undergo criminal background checks.

While the lure of Las Vegas as a gambling mecca makes this city unique, it stands out for another reason as well: it is one of the few places in the country in which union membership has steadily climbed. The construction industry is powerful and well organized, while the culinary workers’ local was, until recently, the fastest growing local in the country.

But then came September 11, which triggered a downturn in the hospitality industry that stripped some 15,000 hotel and restaurant workers of their jobs. At least some of these

### **The Dolores Huerta Center for Worker Rights Las Vegas, NV**

**Founded:** 2001

**Partners:** Local unions and the Las Vegas Interfaith Council, a network of 20 area churches and temples

**Population served:** Low-wage and immigrant workers facing workplace abuses

**Strategy:** Assist workers in filing complaints with rights agencies; help workers improve working conditions through group advocacy

**Challenges:** Huge number of workers – particularly new, undocumented immigrants – who fall through the cracks

workers, notes Limon, are now eking out a living as day laborers. “These are people who had construction and casino jobs before and are now on the corners,” she says. “People need work and at this point, it’s their only avenue.”

Even in the midst of a downturn, though, the presence of unions that are both powerful and visible can make a real difference in the fight for worker rights. Workers here are more likely to know someone in a union, and many have witnessed the power of solidarity first hand. “Our goal is to make Las Vegas a more fair and just city for all workers,” says Limon. “But it matters that there are industries that are well organized. They serve as a launching pad for workers in other industries.”

## Justice in the Fields – The Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Immokalee bears little relation to the Florida that tourists come to see. The town, if it can be called that, has four traffic lights and a single supermarket. But what it does have is easy access to tens of thousands of agricultural acres, and thousand of impoverished farm workers who are hungry for work.

“This is the first place that a lot of new immigrants come,” says Greg Asbed, a staff member at the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. “They come from Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti, and within a few days or weeks they’re in Immokalee. They have no understanding of their rights, and many of them are still in debt to the ‘coyotes’ they paid to get them here.”

By any standard the obstacles to building a stable organization – let alone mounting a successful organizing campaign – would seem immense. Few of the workers speak any English – “this is one of the most cosmopolitan places in South Florida,” notes Asbed – and turnover among the workforce is staggeringly high.

Today, though, CIW claims some 2000 individual members, and has made unprecedented progress for Florida farm workers. A campaign launched in 1997, culminating in a 250 mile farm-worker march from Fort Myers to Orlando, succeeded in raising wages across the state’s

tomato industry for the first time in 20 years. The wage increase has even been implemented in other East Coast states where the Florida-based growers operate. But the most significant development, says Asbed, has been the emergence of a political movement led by workers themselves.

CIW bases its organizing on a three part process: popular education that enables workers to analyze the problems confronting farm workers; leadership development intended to guarantee a broad base of worker leadership; and a powerful political action component. All three parts draw on the organizing experiences in the immigrants’ home countries, and meetings are held in multiple languages. “The key is to have a grass-roots, participatory

### The Coalition of Immokalee Workers Immokalee, FL

**Founded:** Organizing began in 1995-96

**Partners:** Labor, religious and community groups

**Population served:** Recent immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti; workforce is predominately male (85-90%) and young (average age 24)

**Strategy:** Combines popular education and leadership development with political action

**Challenges:** High turnover among farm workers; exclusion of farm labor from National Labor Relations Act

process that leads to change,” says Asbed. “And when people see that change is possible, that inspires even more change.”

But in seeking to transform the state’s tomato industry, the group faces a major impediment: labor law that does not protect farm workers while organizing and joining unions. While CIW won the backing of lawmakers – and even Governor Jeb Bush - in its campaign to raise wages for tomato pickers, there is little state support for amending Florida’s labor law.

Now the group is attempting another strategy: a nationwide boycott of Taco Bell, a major purchaser of Florida-grown tomatoes. By organizing protests and marches, and touring farm workers around the country, the Coalition hopes to draw on the power of consumer consciousness. “The anti-sweatshop movement has shown that consumers can have a real impact on production conditions,” says Asbed. “Our goal is to call attention to the sweatshop conditions that farm workers endure.”

## Risky Business – The Chicago Day Labor Organizing Project

If the Chicago Day Labor Organizing Project has its way, day labor, along with the agencies that dispatch workers to job sites throughout the region, will cease to exist. “We don’t want these agencies to exist except as vehicles to permanent work,” says DLOP organizer Dan Giloth. The Project, which works through the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, has its work cut out for it; the city’s day labor industry is a major part of the local economy, and has flourished largely oblivious to state and federal regulation for the past thirty years.

Still, in the two years since it went public, DLOP has been able to shine a light on a largely hidden part of the Chicago economy. Using a combination of legal advocacy – the group pressures state and local lawmakers to enforce all existing civil and labor rights, in addition to urging improvements – and direct action, DLOP has made day labor a dirty word in Chicago. “We take existing laws, agitate directly, then keep the pressure on government agencies to enforce compliance,” explains Giloth. After the State of Illinois passed a law regulating fees charged to laborers for transportation, DLOP kept the pressure on through high-profile protests, until the department

agreed to audit agencies that had committed multiple abuses. “The law gave us a hook to organize around,” he says. DLOP worked with other Chicago day labor groups to successfully pressure the City Council to enact an ordinance regulating day labor hiring halls. In May, the City Council finalized work on a landmark ordinance that requires agencies to obtain licenses, bans agencies from charging transportation fees if they provide it, regulates third party transportation firms, and bans deductions for returnable equipment.

DLOP prides itself on maintaining a culture of risk, not an easy thing when day laborers – who often have a great deal to lose – are running the show. The group divides its leadership

### **The Chicago Day Labor Organizing Project** Chicago, IL

**Founded:** 2000

**Partners:** Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, Jobs with Justice

**Population served:** Day laborers in the Chicago area  
**Strategy:** Pressures abusive employers through direct action; advocates for legal reform; targets client companies of temporary employment agencies

**Challenges:** Practical pressure on day laborers; integral place of day labor industry in local economy

into two committees: an organizing entity governed by a dozen day laborers, and a contact committee twice that size made up of people who can't take public leadership positions. "People are hired and fired everyday," explains Giloth. "Dispatchers can easily black list. When we do an action at a particular agency, the goal is to have others besides the people who work there involved."

While turnover is a constant problem, Giloth stresses that some of the worker activist labor organizers have stayed with the Project since its inception. Worker center benefits, including free check cashing, public transit passes and discount health care, serve as incentives.

As for the larger goal, a union for Chicago's day laborers may be part of the solution; the group already works closely with UNITE, the Teamsters, and the Laborers to target agencies who utilize day laborers to break strikes. But ultimately, the Project seeks to restructure day labor itself. "The agencies think that the goal is unionization. It's definitely part of the goal," says Giloth. "But what we want is regular, structured work."

## Serving Up Justice – Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates / Restaurant Workers' Association

Los Angeles in the early 1990's seemed on the verge of erupting into a full-blown race war. In the wake of the Rodney King verdict and the riots that followed, the media told repeated stories of African-Americans battling Korean shopkeepers and vice versa. The founders of KIWA, which opened its doors in 1992, watched with dismay at the representation of their community. Nowhere in the press coverage of broken windows and raised voices was there mention of the fact that 75% of the Koreans in the area were workers – not entrepreneurs.

KIWA stepped into this void with a clear goal in mind: to build a sense of working-class consciousness among Korean immigrants. Not only would such an identity enable immigrants to better advocate on their own behalf in the workplace, but it would also create the possibility of solidarity between low-wage workers, regardless of their race and ethnicity.

### **Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates / Restaurant Workers Association Los Angeles, CA**

**Founded:** KIWA 1992, Restaurant Workers' Association 1997

**Partners:** Progressive organizations in the African American and Latino communities

**Population served:** Workers in Koreatown (65% Korean, 35% Latino)

**Strategy:** Challenge racial tension fostered by elites; build working class consciousness among Korean Americans; improve conditions in the Koreatown restaurant industry

**Challenges:** Deep cultural and linguistic divisions within the multi-ethnic workforce

When it came to identifying bad employers in LA's Koreatown neighborhood, the group didn't have to look far. Immigrant restaurant workers in Koreatown labored up to 72 hours per week, and earned as little as \$2.20 per hour. Workers who spoke up were fired, even physically abused. And while they labored in dangerous conditions, the workers received neither health care benefits nor workers compensation.

In 1996, KIWA initiated the Koreatown Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign, seeking industry-wide reform among the neighborhood's nearly 300 eateries, employing around

2,000 workers. The targets were obvious: restaurants like Cho Sun Galbi, famous for Korean-style barbecue beef and infamous among activists for firing a Korean cook after he enlisted KIWA's help on an employment contract. More complicated were relations between the workers themselves. While the restaurants – and the owners – were Korean, the makeup of the workforce was 30% Korean and 70% Latino. As it sought to build an organization of restaurant workers, KIWA first had to build ties between Korean cooks and waitresses, and Latino busboys and dishwashers.

The campaign surged ahead in 1998 after KIWA successfully won back wages for 3 Latino workers who'd been paid just \$2.20 an hour. After a 5 month boycott and weekly pickets, the restaurant agreed to pay the workers \$14,000 in back pay, and a message was heard: KIWA stands for all workers, wherever they come from. Today, the group has extensive ties to LA's Latino community, and works closely with progressive Latino organizations including CHIRLA (see case study, p. 18).

Since the early days of high-profile pickets, the Restaurant Worker Justice Campaign has greatly improved working conditions in the industry, say KIWA organizers. In 1997, area restaurants had a 97% non-compliance rate with labor laws. By 2000, that figure had dropped by more than half, to 41% non-compliance.

But the struggle isn't over yet. Through the campaign, KIWA created an independent association of restaurant workers, the Restaurant Workers Association of Koreatown. Made up of both Korean and Latino workers, the association seeks to provide restaurant workers with a much needed voice on the job, as well as to win improvements in the industry through collective action. Today, the group is taking its message of working class solidarity to the street corners: home of hundreds of Korean-run grocery stores. The focus of KIWA's Market Workers Justice Campaign is to assist workers in the formation of a union.

## **Taking the High Road – The Temporary Workers Employment Project**

It was 1999 and Silicon Valley was booming. But while rents were soaring along with dot com salaries, the fastest growing employment sector in the area was temp work. Working Partnerships USA, the community-labor arm of the South Bay Labor Council, was already an active participant in public debates about policies affecting California workers. Now the group wanted to play a more proactive role in supporting temp workers and improving the conditions of their employment. So they started their own temporary agency.

The goal was straightforward: create a temp agency that could model 'best practices' – including higher wages, benefits, and aggressive training – in order to set higher standards for the entire temp agency. The implementation proved to be slightly more complicated. "We'd never started a business before," says Maria Escamilla, an Associate Development Director for Working Partnerships USA. The group quickly learned that in the cutthroat temp industry, "clients don't pick you because you're 'high road,' but because you're cheap," says Escamilla.

After four years in operation, the staffing service has begun to pick up steam. Six hundred temp workers have signed on, lured by higher hourly rates, an affordable health care package, and extensive computer and technical training. Partnerships with community groups including the Black Chamber of Commerce also funnel workers towards the service, which now does a level of business comparable to a small temp agency. “We didn’t think we could take down the huge staffing industry,” says Escamilla, “but we are showing that a better model can work.”

Working Partnerships also supports a more activist membership association, made up of staffing service members, along with other temps and contingent workers from the area. By joining, members gain immediate access to low-cost and portable health benefits, as well as free computer training. The association is also intended to give workers a sense of solidarity, not generally experienced by workers who move from job to job and workplace to workplace. In return, it is hoped that members will put that solidarity into action. Most recently, the association has advocated on behalf of a stringent temp industry code of conduct – on hold as of now – as well as supporting the efforts of small groups of temp workers to organize.

**The Temporary Workers Employment Project  
Working Partnerships, USA  
San Jose, CA**

**Founded:** 1999

**Partners:** South Bay Central Labor Council, San Jose religious and community groups

**Population served:** Temporary workers and other non-standard employees in the San Jose area

**Strategy:** Challenges temp work through ‘best practices’ temp agency; temporary workers’ membership association lobbies for industry changes

**Challenges:** Difficulty recruiting temporary workers; contradictions between ‘high road’ and market forces

What started as an ambitious three part project – a staffing service, membership association, and multi-track training program that could address the varying needs of area workers – has been scaled back somewhat. And as many worker centers can testify, offering services and benefits to workers is never a guarantee that organizing will ensue. But Working Partnerships staff members point with pride to their staffing service, which, after three years, shows that a better workplace model can survive in an industry not exactly known for ethical practices. “We don’t want the same models that the contingent workforce currently suffers from going on into the next generation,” concludes Escamilla. “By creating a new model, we can influence the industry’s standards.”

## Building Community Power: Casa de Maryland

It’s common to hear activists complain about the problem of high turnover in contingent worker organizing. Gustavo Torres, the Executive Director of Casa de Maryland, the state’s largest Latino organization, sees the problem in a different light. “It’s a challenge, but a good challenge,” he says. “When leaders leave, they take their skills with them. Of course we’d like them to stay, but some other state is going to benefit from their experience.”

Through a powerful combination of direct service, legal advocacy, and leadership development, Casa de Maryland has trained more than 75 new community leaders in the past three years. Many have come out of one of Casa’s worker centers – the group currently

operates two and will soon open another in Baltimore. The centers offer an array of direct services, including English lessons and computer training, along with food distribution, immigration assistance, and legal advocacy services.

The worker centers also provide access to jobs; employers wishing to hire day laborers and domestic workers must register with Casa, signing a contract that specifies the kind and length of employment as well as the wage to be paid. “The employers that don’t register with us are an easy target,” says Torres, noting that the group currently has court cases pending against 350 employers.

In recent years – Casa will soon celebrate its 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary – the group has become an increasingly effective advocate for immigrant and worker rights in Maryland. Two years ago, Casa helped to pass a victim trafficking law intended to protect domestic workers who’d been virtually enslaved

by their employers. Now the group is lobbying on behalf of a day laborer bill of rights. “The current law says that employers can wait two weeks before paying day laborers,” explains Torres. “We want that money available the next day.”

Of all of Casa’s programs, though, Torres is most proud of its leadership development training. The goal is simple: train workers to become experts in the issues that most affect them – immigration, legislation, the economy. The training lasts for three months, and has produced leaders, says Torres, who have the necessary skills to mobilize their own communities.

What they do with that training is largely up to them. Torres hopes that the group’s day labor leaders will go on to create many more worker associations – wherever they are - and that in turn, those associations will join together to form a national coalition – or union – of day laborers. “If we stick together,” says Torres, “we can produce much more. We can begin to produce a national agenda and people will pay much more attention to the day labor issue. This is our responsibility,” he concludes. “If we don’t take the initiative, someone else will.”

## Organizing Green Mountain Style: The Vermont Workers’ Center

Vermont has a reputation as one of the most progressive states in the U.S. The first state to recognize civil unions between gay and lesbian couples, Vermont has a strong progressive movement and boasts the only socialist representative in Congress. But the state’s progressive leanings often fall short when it comes to worker rights, says James Haslam, Executive Director of the Vermont Workers’ Center.

### **Casa de Maryland** **Takoma Park, MD**

**Founded:** 1985

**Partners:** Extensive network of political, religious and community groups in the Latino community; National Council of La Raza; labor unions

**Population served:** Immigrants, primarily from Central and Latin America

**Strategy:** Provide direct service to immigrant workers; train workers to become community leaders; mobilize the community for political change

**Challenges:** High turnover among workers/leaders; disconnect between community and large, staff-run organization

“Part of the problem is that the state is really anti-union,” says Haslam. But the culture is to blame too, he says, describing a ‘Green Mountain’ ethos which combines a strong work ethic with low expectations for wages, services, and political power.

The workers’ center, which was formed in 1998 out of a statewide living wage campaign, opened its doors with an ambitious agenda. The group set up a rights hotline, dispensing free legal advice and encouraging workers to organize. Word of the hotline quickly spread – the center gets more than 100 calls a month, “that’s a lot for Vermont,” notes Haslam – but organizing leads were slow to materialize.

Then last year, the workers’ center made a strategic decision. Building on the momentum of a successful nursing home organizing drive with the United Electrical Workers Union – the first ever by nursing home workers in

Vermont – the center moved to launch a campaign called ‘Justice for Health Care Workers.’ Headed by nurses and others in the health care industry, the campaign facilitates organizing in hospitals and nursing homes. The workers’ center, which recently affiliated with Jobs with Justice, mobilizes labor and community support on behalf of these initiatives.

The campaign has already scored some impressive victories. Workers at the UE-organized nursing home in Berlin, VT recently won a first contract, while community demands for safe staffing levels in the home proved so effective that they produced a statewide law mandating set nurse-to-patient ratios. Organizing drives have since begun at two other large Vermont hospitals.

The worker center has had an impact felt throughout the state, despite having few resources and a limited infrastructure – the center has only one full-time employee. Vermont is a small state, and organizers have a keen grasp of its local political terrain. The state also has a relatively homogenous population. 99% of the workers served by the center are white, notes Haslam, although a rapid influx of Eastern European immigrants in recent years has begun to complicate that mix.

The center sees its biggest challenge now as developing new ways to communicate with Vermont’s largely dispersed population of unorganized workers. “There used to be incredible organization in Vermont,” says Haslam. “Not just unions, but social groups. The question for us is how do you reach out to workers who don’t have unions?” One novel idea: use the existing network of registered deer hunters; more than 90,000 people are currently signed up. “Other worker centers have organized soccer leagues, but what about a hunting league?” asks Haslam.

### **The Vermont Workers Center Montpelier, VT**

**Founded:** 1998

**Partners:** Central labor council, state employment agencies, community and religious groups

**Population served:** Working Vermont residents in multiple sectors

**Strategy:** Combines assistance to individual workers with organizing initiatives. As a Jobs with Justice affiliate, engages in solidarity campaigns

**Challenges:** Endemic anti-union culture in Vermont; most workers employed in small workplaces; lack of organized structures through which to communicate with working Vermonters

## Organizing at the Corner: The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles

The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, or CHIRLA, knows a lot about anti-immigrant sentiment. Formed in 1986, the coalition of 125 groups has tirelessly defended the rights of immigrants in a state where hostility to them is commonplace. But three years ago, the climate took a turn that surprised even CHIRLA activists. Local towns and communities began to pass ordinances strictly limiting the conditions under which immigrant day laborers, most of whom are Mexican, could solicit work.

“Some of the corners that day laborers were going to were in communities that didn’t want them there,” explains Myron Payez, CHIRLA’s worker rights coordinator. “The communities were basically using any law available to harass the workers.” For the estimated 20,000 day laborers who solicited work from some 200 corners around Los Angeles, the backlash was a potential disaster. But CHIRLA also saw an opportunity, says Payez. “We tried to get all of the stakeholders to sit at the table together,” he says. “There were a lot of misunderstandings, but in the end we created a better model.”

### **The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles** Los Angeles, CA

**Founded:** 1986

**Partners:** 125 grassroots organizations from LA to Riverside, CA

**Population served:** Immigrants, primarily from Mexico

**Strategy:** Brings together a multi-ethnic coalition of immigrant groups to promote the rights of immigrants; organizes day laborers and domestic workers

**Challenges:** California’s active anti-immigrant movements; far-flung nature of workforce; lack of government support for employment-law enforcement

The model was a job center; eight have since been set up around central Los Angeles, of which CHIRLA runs 3. Now, instead of working from busy intersections, day laborers have the option of looking for work at one of the centers. Employers come to the sites as well, seeking workers for gardening, construction, and manual labor. In addition to providing a physical space for job seekers, the centers also serve as a layer of protection between day laborers and their employers. “We do the negotiating,” says Payez. “What does the employer want? How much is he willing to pay?”

CHIRLA hopes ultimately to help the day laborers organize some form of union. But Payez acknowledges that that goal remains far off. For now, the group seeks to change the way day laborers are perceived in the city, and to make it clear that even if the work is ‘non-standard,’ day laborers perform useful work and are employed in a structured industry.

To build a sense of community among the laborers themselves, CHIRLA has organized soccer teams, a band, and even had day laborers run in the LA marathon – “running for dignity,” notes Payez. In turn, the organizing has produced a cadre of day labor leaders who fight for immigration reform and work on coalition building with other low-wage immigrant workers.

CHIRLA also has an ambitious project to organize the female immigrant workers who tend the gardens, clean the homes, and watch the children of wealthy LA homeowners. The Domestic Worker Project seeks to educate these workers about their rights – CHIRLA

offers a survival English class that teaches the necessary terminology to negotiate a salary, for example – while encouraging them to band together into an association. “We want to bring together low-wage workers across industries,” says Payez. “Domestic workers are all women, but their position is similar to day laborers.”

## From Neighborhood to Workplace: The Tenants’ and Workers’ Support Committee

The Tenants’ and Workers’ Support Committee got its start not as a worker center but as a neighborhood group, successfully battling gentrification in a formerly low-rent section of Alexandria, VA. But when recession hit the state in the mid 90’s, the group’s tenant members were faced with mounting workplace problems: layoffs, firings, sexual harassment, and low wages. “As a group, we were already dealing with civil rights, immigrant rights, and tenant rights,” says Jon Liss, the director of TWSC since 1991. “But our members were facing real problems on the job.”

By 1993, the group had set up worker committees in several of Alexandria’s hotels, and entered into a partnership with an HERE local. TWSC spent the next three years campaigning for better wages for hotel workers, improved safety conditions and more training. When a hotel worker was crushed and killed in an elevator, the campaign took on a new urgency. In 1996, the hotel workers got their first union contract.

It gave the group a taste of what successful workplace organizing might look like. TWSC has had no trouble generating interest among

Alexandria’s multi-ethnic workforce, but finding trade unions that can represent those workers has been a different story. The experience of strong, largely independent worker committees, for example, doesn’t always translate easily into the more conservative culture of a traditionally run union local. “We’ve even considered chartering our own local,” says Liss.

In the meantime, TWSC has expanded its organizing efforts into other sectors of the area’s huge service industry. An effort to organize childcare workers – called the “Unity Campaign” – targets women of color who are employed by the state. The workforce is multi-ethnic, a mix of African-American, Latina, and Bengali, but the issues are uniform: better wages, paid health insurance, and timely pay checks. “This is decentralized workplace organizing, but with membership at its core,” says Liss, noting that the campaign currently has about 200 members.

The group, which recently affiliated with Jobs with Justice, has also sought to build an effective worker rights coalition in Virginia. Working with unions and religious groups,

### Tenants’ and Workers’ Support Committee Alexandria, VA

**Founded:** 1986

**Partners:** Organized labor and religious groups

**Population served** Low-wage service sector and domestic workers in Virginia

**Strategy:** Builds power by geographic and workplace-based chapters; engages in direct workplace organizing; as a Jobs with Justice coalition, mobilizes labor unions and religious groups to improve wages and working conditions for Virginia workers

**Challenges:** Militant culture, emphasis on democracy, not always an easy fit with existing trade unions

TWSC helped to pass a living wage ordinance that boosts earnings for Alexandria service workers. The challenge that faces the group now, notes Liss, is to keep TWSC’s social base – largely women of color – while deepening and expanding its ties with the labor movement.

Even as TWSC has moved from the neighborhood to the workplace, the group has sought to hold on to its member-run, decentralized roots. Members are encouraged to start their own chapters – 12 or more members in an area can affiliate – and work on issues that are relevant to the specific region. Lots of little groups, says Liss, add up to geographic power. Establishing real workplace power, though, will take a more concerted effort. “To really take on the boss,” he says, “we have to be able to organize on a scale that matters.”

## Workers Making Change: The Workplace Project

The Workplace Project on Long Island was founded in 1992 on a simple principle: the people most directly affected by a problem are best suited to take leadership and change their situation. The people concerned were immigrant workers from El Salvador, Mexico, and the Caribbean. The problems were low-wages, sweatshop conditions, and virtually no regulatory protections.

It was a groundbreaking idea. Most unions hadn’t even begun to reach out to immigrant workers, and few organizations had anything like a worker perspective.

Today, many worker centers follow the Workplace Project’s example, especially when it comes to leadership development. “Ours is a good way,” says Nadia Marin-Molina, attorney-organizer for the Long Island group. “Groups know that there’s a real need for ‘worker work.’”

### Workplace Project Hempstead, NY

**Founded:** 1992

**Partners:** Long Island immigrant organizations, church groups, service agencies, labor unions and civil liberties groups

**Population served:** Latina/o immigrants

**Strategy:** Combines outreach, leadership training, membership building and workplace organizing to improve working conditions for low-wage immigrant workers

**Challenges:** Transient nature of workforce; hostility to immigrants on Long Island

The Project maintains one of the most rigorous membership models in the country. Workers who want to join – there are currently around 550 members – must go through either an 8 week workers’ rights course, participate in one of the group’s committees for 8 sessions, or take an equivalent mini-course. “People who become members really have to participate,” says Marin-Molina.

In recent years, Long Island has become infamous for both a dramatic surge in its population of immigrant day laborers and the level of hostility towards those workers by many local residents. In 2000, worker activists from the Project held a series of high-profile protests in the Village of Farmingdale, and successfully pressured officials to create a designated site at which day laborers could solicit work. The group has since expanded the effort into Nassau County.

But with hostility high, and the economy in a slump, organizing efforts have taken a back seat to confronting the backlash. “Right now, workers are fighting legislative attacks and

fighting for jobs,” says Marin-Molina. “If you can’t get a job, it’s much harder to fight to raise wages.”

If the backlash has made organizing more difficult – even churches are reluctant to provide space in which day laborers can meet, for example – it has also forged a spirit of determination on Long Island. A coalition of immigrant groups, labor unions, service agencies and civil liberties groups recently formed, and the Workplace Project’s member-leaders are playing a key role.

Meanwhile, the Project continues to reach out to immigrant workers in the low-wage service industries, from landscape and construction to restaurant and domestic workers. The group has formed two successful cooperatives: one for landscape workers, another for house cleaners.

The Workplace Project also has big plans for the future. One possibility involves forming an independent union of day laborers, who don’t fit easily into the traditional craft union model of organizing by trade. Marin-Molina would also like to see the group connect up with other worker centers in New York. “If we could coordinate more, we’d have thousands of workers,” she says. “The market is connected in many ways. Employers are willing to travel; we have to travel too.”

## Changing the Rules of the Game: The Day Laborers Organizing Committee

A recent survey of Cleveland’s homeless population turned up a startling statistic: some 70% of homeless men and 60% of homeless women work as day laborers. The finding shocked local advocates, says Dan Kerr, an organizer with the newly formed Day Laborers Organizing Committee. “The problem increased dramatically through the ‘90’s,” he says. “People who were homeless were also increasingly understanding that there was a link between homelessness and day labor.”

Cleveland has a long and vibrant history of labor and community activism; most recently, unions and community groups campaigned successfully for a living wage ordinance that will boost wages for some 4,000 local workers. The win convinced activists that they could take on the city’s burgeoning day labor problem. “We had homeless day laborers who supported the living wage ordinance in an active way, even though it would have little impact on their lives,” notes Kerr. “And while we were interested in low-wage workers in general, we thought we could accomplish more with a specific focus on day laborers.”

Unlike Chicago and other large urban centers where temporary agencies are scattered and decentralized, most day labor in Cleveland goes through 5 companies. Working through the media, social service agencies, and local legal advocates, the DLOC detailed abusive practices

### Day Laborers Organizing Committee Cleveland, OH

**Founded:** 2001

**Partners:** Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless, churches, labor unions, social service organizations

**Population served:** Day laborers in Cleveland

**Strategy:** Establish community hiring hall to serve as an alternative to temp agencies; organize and mobilize to improve existing jobs

**Challenges:** Limited capital; no staff

by the companies while campaigning for an alternative: a community hiring hall that would pay workers a living wage, provide health care benefits, free transportation, and job training. The city has since approved the development of a hall, and the City Council president has pledged \$30,000 to get it off the ground.

But that was the easy part. DLOC must now amass the necessary staff and capital to make the hiring hall a reality – at present, the group is run entirely by volunteers. What the day labor group lacks in resources though, it makes up for in strategic vision. The next phase of the campaign is to target Cleveland’s many publicly-financed stadiums, a number of which employ temporary workers as cleaners. “Because public financing is used to build and support the stadiums,” explains Kerr, “we think we have a real shot at winning some of those contracts.” The group also plans to target schools, churches and non-profits, slowly developing niches in small markets, with the larger goal of moving into the manufacturing sector.

While the community hiring hall could make a material difference in the lives of Cleveland’s day laborers, it isn’t the “be all and end all solution,” according to Kerr. Just as important is an action component – mobilization of day laborers and low-wage workers themselves – that can demand better jobs for Cleveland’s workers. “Ideally what you want is a situation where workers can move up the ladder and out of jobs that are inherently temporary,” says Kerr. “But for that to happen we need to change the landscape and the rules of the game.”

“But it’s important to remember,” Kerr concludes, “that not all jobs are permanent, nor need they be. For instance, union workers in the building trades don’t have permanent jobs, but they still have good jobs. One of our goals is to work creatively with unions to help ‘regularize’ jobs that aren’t permanent the way the building trades do.”

## Confronting Challenges; Moving Forward

The previous case studies tell only a fraction of the story about the surge in worker center organizing. Centers are popping up in communities throughout the country; in New York City alone, there are now more than six centers in operation.

The proliferation of worker centers is itself an important development. Potentially powerful alliances have begun to emerge – the nascent partnership between day labor groups, unions, and advocates for the homeless is just one. What’s more, the centers often function as virtual laboratories for new organizing strategies, as tactics are tested and honed, while groups try to balance the goal of worker participation with the desire to build lasting organizations.

But even the most established worker centers face huge challenges. High turnover among the contingent workforce is a real and constant frustration, particularly among the groups that strive to be led by contingent workers themselves.

Securing adequate funding is another struggle for many worker centers, even those that are well established. The centers surveyed here have budgets that range from miniscule – the Cleveland Day Labor Organizing Committee has only a few thousand dollars and no staff – to significant – Casa de Maryland has a budget of approximately \$1.5 million dollars. Most worker centers, funded by donations, dues, and occasional foundation grants, seem to be closer to the Cleveland end of the scale.

Does funding make a difference? Absolutely, say worker center organizers. Limited resources tend to constrain vision and curtail organizing agendas. For centers that are having an impact on their communities, budgetary constraints are a particular frustration. “Organizers will always say that they need more organizers,” says Dan Giloth of the Chicago Day Labor Organizing Project. “With us it’s really true. We could be doing so much more if we just had more juice on the ground. We’re doing all of the right things,” he concludes, “we just need to be bigger.”

But being bigger may come with a price. Since it was formed in 1985, Casa de Maryland has been transformed from a small direct service group housed in a church to the largest organization serving Latinos in Maryland. And while the group no longer has to worry about securing the necessary funding to pay the rent, Casa’s image as a large, professionally staffed organization can seem at odds with the community that it aims to serve. “Some of the day laborers don’t feel that Casa belongs to them,” explains Executive Director Gustavo Torres. “They feel that we’re a professional group.” He hopes to remedy the problem by encouraging the formation of small worker associations throughout the community – associations that require little funding, but still provide workers with a direct voice.

Finally, the worker center concept presents its own challenges. Many centers have been formed out of frustration at the inability or outright refusal of unions to organize low-wage, often immigrant workers. Freed from the bureaucratic structure of formal unions, the centers set out to create democratic worker-led movements that could demand and win real power. “Our goal was to build a working class movement,” says Vermont’s James Haslam.

As centers in Vermont and elsewhere have learned, however, it's not always so easy. The model of providing direct services – from ESL to legal advice to computer training – may attract workers, but it doesn't necessarily produce activists or lead to successful organizing.

Confronting limited resources and a membership in constant flux, worker centers are often tempted to focus all of their energy on one kind of job or one kind of worker. In the best situations, this strategy has produced concrete gains for thousands of workers. But few of the centers have been able to make their impact felt beyond a small group of workers, or a localized employment sector.

And that's not sufficient to change the labor market, says Laura Dresser of the Center On Wisconsin Strategy, a research and advocacy group that has partnered with several worker centers. "The goal has to be about more than helping workers get the worst jobs in the area. What we need to start thinking about is why there are so many bad jobs out there. That's a broader fight. It requires a strategic coalition and a range of strategies."

The 'bad job' question is particularly relevant for the growing number of centers who work with day laborers. It's important to target abusive agencies, says Nick Phillips, a policy analyst for the National Coalition for the Homeless, as well as to establish hiring halls that can serve as an alternative. But that's just a start. "A prime requisite for a well-run worker center is that it gives people the opportunity to move into permanent employment," says Phillips. "Don't assume that day laborers want to stay day laborers."

## Is a Worker Center Right For You?

Somewhere in the US, there may be a group of worker advocates meeting right now, discussing the possibility of starting a worker center, or trying to figure out how to revitalize an existing program. Perhaps you're one of them. While the challenges we've laid out in this report can seem overwhelming, it's important to keep in mind that a worker center is much more than a physical space. Worker centers are actually a collection of strategies and tactics, employed to improve the conditions of workers in a particular community. Before you sign a lease, therefore, or begin to worry about securing the necessary funding to make your center operational, consider the different strategies that existing centers employ:

- **Legal Services:** providing workers with access to lawyers, including employment and labor specialists; helping workers navigate state and federal labor law, including filing wage and hour complaints and NLRB charges; operating hotlines that workers can call for more information about their rights on the job.
- **Immigration Assistance:** Assisting immigrant workers to navigate their new communities (may include language training, housing and employment information, even assistance with drivers licenses); working in partnership with local immigration lawyers to educate immigrant workers about their rights.
- **Lobbying / Political Organizing:** Working in partnership with community organizations, community leaders, and lawmakers to bring about legal changes at the

state or local level. Examples include living wage ordinances, city council resolutions targeting abusive employers, or statewide measures aimed at improving conditions for contingent workers.

- **Social Organization:** Providing social networks in order to create a sense of community among particular groups of workers. Examples include sports clubs (e.g. soccer and hunting leagues) and cultural groups.
- **Visibility:** Raising the profile of workers who might otherwise remain invisible. Examples including public demonstrations, media and political lobbying.
- **Direct Social Services:** Providing free or affordable social services to workers. May include food pantries or co-ops, subsidized transportation passes, or access to group health care benefits.
- **ESL:** Offering English training to specific communities of immigrant workers. May be combined with worker rights education, allowing immigrants to assert their rights on the job, and overcome divisions between immigrant groups in the workplace.
- **Access to Jobs:** Providing information about local labor markets. Or serving as a hiring hall or job center for local workers. Acting as a mediator between workers and employers, setting wages or employment conditions, intervening on behalf of workers.
- **Skills Training:** Providing workers with access to a variety of employment related training, including computer and technical training, construction skills training, and job readiness training. May be offered in partnership with existing programs including union apprenticeship programs, community college courses and labor resource programs.
- **Leadership Development:** Providing educational training to workers that enables them to become leaders of their own community. May include citizenship education, political and economic training, public speaking, and organizing training.
- **Solidarity:** Working with local unions and community groups to pressure specific employers, offer support for organizing efforts, and mobilize a constituency that is broader than the specific demands being made. Also serves to include specific groups of workers – that might otherwise be atomized or isolated - into a broader movement for social justice.
- **Organizing for Collective Bargaining:** Working with local unions or independently to secure some sort of collective bargaining arrangement for a group of workers. May involve organizing workers into an existing union local, or forming a ‘proto’ union that offers workers access to some kind of benefits, while enhancing their collective rights on the job.
- **Linking Up With Others:** Reaching out to groups across the country and the world. Contingent work is a global phenomenon. Many worker centers are joining networks—

like NAFFE—and making contacts even beyond North America in an effort to set global standards or pressure the global corporations that dominate the economy and increasingly employ contingent workers.

Only a handful of the worker centers surveyed here are actively pursuing *all* of these strategies; most concentrate on just a few. Furthermore, organizers at existing worker centers are quick to testify that much of what they do involves networking pre-existing initiatives, from teaming up with legal clinics, to partnering with apprenticeship programs run by local building trades unions. “It’s important to learn from the experience of programs that are already out there,” says Casa’s Torres. “There’s a real temptation to re-invent the wheel.”

The strategies outlined above have in common one essential factor: each one, employed effectively, will serve to improve the lives of workers. And that, in the end, is what a worker center is all about.

# # #

## Appendix 1: A Checklist for Progressive Worker Centers and Hiring Halls

In April 2002 NAFFE’s Temporary and Day Labor Action Group met in Chicago. The meeting’s primary focus was worker center and hiring hall strategies. A number of allied organizations—each of which operates a worker center or hiring hall—also participated in the meeting. In total, about a third of the three dozen organizations attending the meeting currently operate some kind of worker center or hiring hall. A version of this report was presented at the meeting.

Over three days, delegates discussed a range of challenging questions: Are worker centers really an effective alternative organizing strategy for contingent workers? If so, how can they be made more effective? How can they work with existing institutions such as unions? Do worker centers undermine efforts at unionization? Can non-profit hiring halls and temporary help agencies be social change agents, or do they merely reinforce the low wage labor market by rationalizing the supply of cheap labor? How do they differ from for-profit companies? How can they help workers to organize?

There was broad agreement that worker centers can be effective in meeting the needs of workers in difficult to unionize, contingent jobs. By “bundling” an assortment of tactics, worker centers offer a holistic approach to organizing that goes beyond the workplace or the industry. This is especially important among high turnover workers like day laborers who change employers, workplaces, and industries regularly.

Delegates also agreed that hiring halls, which are often components of worker centers, can be important contributors to social change strategies. First, they can increase incomes for workers in existing labor markets. While competitive pressures make significant *wage* increases difficult to achieve even by the best worker-run hiring halls, hiring halls can raise *incomes* by distributing work more fairly. Second, perhaps more importantly, hiring halls can create the social and physical space to help workers to organize.

The meeting concluded with a general agreement that NAFFE and our progressive allies should support worker center strategies that are rooted in the fight for social change. But worker centers and hiring halls come in all shapes and sizes. To ensure that they remain rooted in the fight for social justice, delegates created the following checklists of principles and standards for worker centers and hiring halls.

*A checklist of standards for progressive worker centers:*

- ❑ Provides information about labor, employment, and civil rights laws
- ❑ Provides up-to-date and useful information on the local labor market
- ❑ Helps workers with grievances with employers
- ❑ Involves workers in the governance, leadership, and planning in a meaningful way
- ❑ Has a clear and transparent political agenda and is involved in a broader social movement
- ❑ Seeks to build democratic community and civic participation
- ❑ Is located in a place that is accessible to workers
- ❑ Works to build alliances with unions and other worker organizations

*A checklist of standards for progressive hiring halls*

- ❑ Provides a better alternative than working for a for-profit agency
- ❑ Advocates for the best wage possible
- ❑ Promotes stable employment and a fair allocation of jobs
- ❑ Seeks to find permanent work for those who desire it
- ❑ Does not charge any fees apart from normal membership dues or reasonable organizational time commitment
- ❑ Is organized as a non-profit and re-invests any surpluses in the hiring hall
- ❑ Promotes health and safety standards by turning down dangerous jobs
- ❑ Fights for the decriminalization of homelessness
- ❑ Does not discriminate against the undocumented, supports the legalization of undocumented workers
- ❑ Screens prospective employers to weed out abusive or unsafe conditions

## Appendix 2: A list of organizations interviewed for this report

### **Building and Construction Trades Dept., AFL-CIO**

815 16th St. NW  
Washington, DC 20006  
Tel: (202) 347-1461  
Fax: (202) 628-0724  
www.buildingtrades.org  
Contact: Will Collette

### **Campaign on Contingent Work**

33 Harrison Ave, 4th floor  
Boston, MA 2111  
Tel: (617) 338-9966  
Fax: (617) 426-7684  
Email: ccw@igc.org  
Contact: Jason Pramas

### **Casa de Maryland**

310 Tulip Ave.  
Takoma Park, Md. 20912  
Tel.: (301) 270-0442  
Fax: (301) 270-8659  
www.casaofmaryland.org  
Contact: Gustavo Torres

### **Center on Wisconsin Strategy**

University of Wisconsin-Madison  
1180 Observatory Drive  
7122 Social Science Building  
Madison, WI 53706  
Tel: (608) 263-3889  
Fax: (608) 262-9046  
www.cows.org  
Contact: Laura Dresser

### **Chicago Day Labor Organizing Project**

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless  
1325 S. Wabash Street, Suite 200  
Chicago, IL 60605  
Tel: (312) 435-4548  
Fax: (312) 435-0198  
www.chicagohomeless.org  
Contact: Dan Giloth

### **Cleveland Day Labor Organizing Committee**

2902 W. 11<sup>th</sup> St.  
Cleveland, OH 44113  
Tel: (216) 694-2169  
www.clevelanddloc.com  
Contact: Dan Kerr

### **Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA)**

1521 Wilshire Blvd.  
Los Angeles, CA 90017  
Tel: (213) 353-1333  
Fax: (213) 353-1344  
www.chirla.org  
Contact: Pablo Alvarado

### **Coalition of Immokalee Workers**

P.O. Box 603  
Immokalee, FL, 34143  
Tel: (941) 657-8311  
Fax: (941) 657-5055  
www.ciw-online.org/ciw.html  
CoalImmWkr@aol.com  
Contact: Greg Asbed

### **Dolores Huerta Center for Worker Rights**

2100 Maryland Parkway, Suite 9  
Las Vegas, NV, 89109  
Tel: (702) 866-6008  
Fax: (702) 866-6012  
Contact: Myra O'Campo

### **Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates (KIWA)**

3465 West 8th Street, 2nd floor  
Los Angeles, CA 90005  
Tel: (213) 738-9050  
Fax: (213) 738-9919  
www.kiwa.org  
Contact: Paul Lee

**North American Alliance for Fair Employment**

33 Harrison Ave., 4th floor  
Boston, MA 02111  
Tel: (617) 482-6300  
Fax: (617) 426-7684  
[www.fairjobs.org](http://www.fairjobs.org)  
Contact: Tim Costello

**Temporary/Day Labor Project**

National Coalition for the Homeless  
1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, #600,  
Washington, DC 20005-3471  
Tel: (202) 737-6444  
Fax: (202) 737-6445  
[www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)  
Contact: Nick Phillips

**Tenants' and Workers' Support Committee**

3805 Mt. Vernon Ave.  
Alexandria, VA 22305  
Tel: (703) 684-5697  
Fax: (703) 684-5714  
Contact: Jon Liss

**Vermont Workers Center**

P.O. Box 883  
Montpelier, VT 05602  
Tel: (866) 229-0009  
[workerscenter@pjcvvt.org](mailto:workerscenter@pjcvvt.org)  
[www.vtlivablewage.org/workers.html](http://www.vtlivablewage.org/workers.html)  
Contact: James Haslam

**Working Partnerships**

Working Partnerships Membership Association  
2102 Almaden Road, Suite 107  
San Jose, California 95125  
Tel: (408) 269-7872  
Fax: (408) 266-2653  
[www.wpmembers.org](http://www.wpmembers.org)  
Contact: Tiffany Ente

**The Workplace Project**

91 N. Franklin Street, Suite 207  
Hempstead, New York 11550  
Tel: 516-565-5377  
[www.workplaceproject.org](http://www.workplaceproject.org)  
Contact: Nadia Marin-Molina