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Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream

Abstract

[Excerpt] Through their service provision, advocacy, and organizing work, worker centers are helping to set the political agenda and mobilize a growing constituency to make its voice heard on fundamental labor and immigration reform. This work, in and of itself instrumental to a brighter future for low-wage workers in the United States, is also indispensable to the revitalization of organized labor and progressive politics in America.

Keywords

United States, alien labor, immigrants, service, employment agencies, community centers, community organizations, labor union, organizing

Comments

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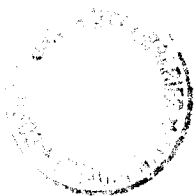
WORKER CENTERS

Organizing Communities at the Edge
of the Dream

JANICE FINE

ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE

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This book is dedicated to low-wage workers and low-wage worker organizations. Their struggles at the point where America's promise and reality collide enrich us all.

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WORKER CENTERS

INTRODUCTION

In the United States today, millions of workers, many of them new immigrants and people of color, are laboring on the very lowest rungs of metropolitan labor markets with weak prospects for improving the quality of their present positions or advancing to better jobs. It is unfortunate but true that ethnicity, race, and immigration status have enormous impact on the jobs they do, the compensation they receive, and the possibilities they have for redress when mistreated by employers.¹

When my grandparents came to this country from Vienna at the turn of the last century, they were only a few lucky steps ahead of the Holocaust. Upon arrival at Ellis Island, they had already come through many hardships and knew that many obstacles awaited them here in the United States. But one obstacle they did not face was the legal right to work. From the moment they arrived here, European immigrants received legal authorization to work and started down the pathway to citizenship. In stark contrast to those immigrants of my grandparents' generation, labor migrants today often have an extremely difficult time obtaining legal status or employment authorization.²

The story of immigrant workers in America and the exploitation and prejudice they faced is obviously not a new one. Earlier waves of immigrants encountered serious discrimination, took up some of society's dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, looked to their families and coethnics to build economic stability over time, and fought to expand workers rights and establish labor unions. In the past, large numbers of American workers, including immigrants and African Americans, were able to join together through unions to wage a common struggle for dignity, better wages, and better working conditions, but now unfavor-

able labor law and employer opposition have made this much more difficult. In addition to unions, mutual aid, and fraternal organizations, political parties, settlement houses, and urban churches also offered immigrants and African-Americans a means of joining together to navigate their economic and political way through American society. But today, although there are some important and inspiring exceptions to the rule, many of these old institutions are no longer available to the vast majority of the nation's working poor. New forms of labor market institutions including new types of unions, community-based organizations, and social movement groups are struggling to fill the void.³ This study examines one such promising emergent institution: worker centers.

Worker centers are community-based mediating institutions that provide support to low-wage workers. Difficult to categorize, worker centers have some features that are suggestive of the earlier U.S. civic institutions mentioned above. Other features, such as cooperatives and popular education classes, are suggestive of the civic traditions of the home countries from which many recent immigrants came. Centers pursue this mission through a combination of approaches:

- *Service delivery*: providing legal representation to recover unpaid wages; English classes; worker rights education; access to health clinics, bank accounts, and loans
- *Advocacy*: researching and releasing of exposés about conditions in low-wage industries, lobbying for new laws and changes in existing ones, working with government agencies to improve monitoring and grievance processes, and bringing suits against employers
- *Organizing*: building ongoing organizations and engaging in leadership development among workers to take action on their own for economic and political change

The combination of *organizing* with service and advocacy is what sets these centers apart from other worker centers and immigrant service organizations. The proportions of each of the three elements vary widely from center to center, as does the overall orientation the centers bring to their work.

MAPPING WORKER CENTERS

Given that they account for the majority, the focus of this study is immigrant worker centers in metropolitan areas, but these organizations exist as a subset

of a larger body of worker centers—contemporary community-based worker organizing projects that have taken root in communities across the United States in recent years. As a starting point, before we focus on immigrant worker centers, it is useful to think about this larger set of organizations. Working with an advisory board created for this project, we hammered out the definition of “worker centers” given above and then attempted to identify all centers that fit the definition. As Lawrence Goodwyn observed in *The Populist Moment*,⁴ a critical stage in the movement-building process is the “movement seeing itself.” I plot all of these organizations on a map of the United States, a regularly updated version of which can be viewed on the Cornell University Press website (<http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu>) on the page for this book. The full list of organizations included on the map are organized by state in Appendix B.

The study methodology was largely qualitative, although a survey of forty organizations was conducted and the data were analyzed and presented in quantitative terms. The worker centers included in the survey are listed in Appendix A.

As of May 2005, there were 137 worker centers. The majority of the organizations (122) are identified as *immigrant worker centers*. As will become apparent, a wide range of groups has been included—African-American organizations, groups that work with immigrants as well as nonimmigrants, organizations that focus on workfare participants, groups that call themselves unions, and even groups that do not call themselves worker centers. I have endeavored to capture the full breadth of new types of community-based worker organizing projects that are currently active among low-wage workers.

The final component of the study was to conduct nine in-depth case studies. For this first study of the field as a whole, our inclination was to choose established centers that were well thought of. We set out to identify the different worker center models, evaluate the effectiveness of the worker center strategy in improving the lives of low wage workers, and highlight key lessons, strengths, weaknesses, and future challenges. This study assesses immigrant worker centers from a number of different angles and through a variety of interpretive lenses.⁵ Our questions going into it were urgent but straightforward ones. What are the institutional mechanisms for integrating low-wage immigrants into American civil society so that they, like those who came before them, are able to avail themselves of the benefits of ongoing organization, economic representation, and political action? Which organizations might become the fixed point in the changing world of work, able to provide the job training, skills development and placement, health insurance and pensions that many employees once accessed through firms? Given the racial polarization of the economy and the disproportionate representation of immigrants and people of color in low-wage

employment, what role will race and ethnicity play as constitutive categories for analysis, education, strategy, and action?

Chapter 1 examines the origins and development of the worker center phenomenon. I describe and explain the distinguishing features of these centers and provide brief “snapshots” of some, which are discussed later in the book. I also provide a brief overview of the immigrant communities and subsets of those communities in which worker centers are active.

Chapter 2 begins with an examination of the changing immigration pattern in modern U.S. history to provide a context for looking at the contemporary immigrant scene. This is complemented by a review of recent changes in the U.S. economy that have had a decisive impact on the status and conditions of low-wage immigrant workers today. Finally, I survey the dramatic decline of immigrant support systems over the last century, arguing that this change has been critical to the rise of worker centers.

Chapter 3 looks at worker center methods of outreach and recruitment, and the important role that community institutions play in this regard. I highlight a central paradox for immigrant worker collective action in general. On the one hand, strong ethnic identities and vibrant social networks facilitate organizing; on the other, the fluid nature of immigration itself and the ability of workers to preserve strong ongoing home country connections can sometimes mitigate against civic participation in the United States. I also explore the challenges of working across ethnicity in industries in which more than one ethnic group is employed as well as the interplay between class, gender, and ethnicity in worker center organizing and advocacy.

Chapter 4 examines worker center service delivery models and explores some of the reasons why centers have decided to make direct service provision an important component of their activities. I offer a closer look at some of the most common services provided and the ways in which these organizations are trying to tie service provision more closely to their mission of organizing and advocacy.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide an overview of strategies pursued by worker centers for raising wages and improving working conditions in low-wage industries. In chapter 5 I look at organizing that targets single employers and entire industries. Also surveyed are efforts to organize day laborers and create independent economic enterprises. Chapter 6 offers case studies of a variety of worker center relationships with labor unions and the efforts of some centers to create independent unions.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine centers’ public policy and advocacy activities. In chapter 7 I look at ways centers partner with governmental entities to foster enforcement of existing labor laws and regulations, and organize to push local,

state, and federal government agencies for administrative and policy changes. I also review the ability of centers to promote policy and legislative reforms that raise wages and improve working conditions for low-wage workers. Chapter 8 looks at centers' public policy campaigns that fight for immigration reform and immigrant rights and for a broader social justice agenda. I end this chapter with an overall assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of worker centers' public policy campaigns.

Chapters 9 and 10 are devoted to the internal organizational structures and approaches of immigrant worker centers. In chapter 9 I examine how the centers handle leadership development and political education of members, and how they bring people of color and young people into leadership positions. In this chapter, I also look at decision-making, organizational budgets, formal membership, and dues collection structures. In chapter 10 I provide an overview of the variety of networks in which worker centers are involved and offers an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of worker center internal systems, structures, and practices.

Chapter 11 presents an overall assessment of the worker center phenomenon. I identify what I believe are the centers' greatest strengths and significant weaknesses and offer critical thoughts on their power and effectiveness. I also suggest changes to national labor, immigration, and social policies that could aid their efforts to improve the lives of low-wage workers.

Worker centers have emerged as central components of the immigrant community infrastructure and, in the combination of services, advocacy, and organizing they undertake, are playing a unique role in helping immigrants navigate the worlds of work and legal rights in the United States. They are gateway organizations that are meeting immigrant workers where they are and providing them with a wealth of information and training. Most centers provide a wide range of day-to-day work services: from one-on-one assistance to individuals who walk in the door with employment-related problems to mounting collective action campaigns to change employer, industry, or government policies and practices.

The world of worker centers is hopeful, compassionate, inventive, and dynamic. Confronting the "wild west" of America's largely unregulated low-wage labor markets, and the legal limbo in which many of their members live and work, worker centers have pioneered a host of innovative strategies that attempt to wrest order out of the chaos. The centers evince great skill at creative means of recruitment, leadership development, and democratic participation. They have effectively documented and exposed the exploitation of low-wage workers. They are altering the terms of debate, changing the way people understand the world around them, the problems they face, and the possibilities for social

change. In all too many cases, these centers are the only "port in the storm" for low-wage immigrant workers seeking to understand U.S. labor and immigration laws, file back wage claims, and organize against recalcitrant employers.

Through their service provision, advocacy, and organizing work, worker centers are helping to set the political agenda and mobilize a growing constituency to make its voice heard on fundamental labor and immigration reform. This work, in and of itself instrumental to a brighter future for low-wage workers in the United States, is also indispensable to the revitalization of organized labor and progressive politics in America.

CHAPTER 1

ORIGINS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF WORKER CENTERS

Millions of workers, large numbers of whom are immigrants and people of color, are today the mainstay of America's service, manufacturing, and agricultural economy. They suffer under a double burden—as low wage workers and as immigrants and/or people of color. As discussed in the introduction, this study focuses on immigrant worker centers, but these organizations exist as a subset of a larger body of contemporary community-based, worker-organizing projects that have taken root across the United States in recent years. This chapter will be directed toward describing this larger set of worker centers. Most of the rest of the rest of the book will draw upon data derived from the nine organizations chosen for case studies, most of which work with an exclusively immigrant constituency base.

While worker centers exist in cities of all sizes, including many medium and some small cities, they are heavily concentrated in the largest ones. The largest cities without a known worker center are Detroit, Atlanta, and Dallas. The regional distribution of worker centers shown in figure 1.1 offers a telling snapshot of recent immigration trends and demonstrates that the highest number of worker centers is in the Northeast and the West, with a growing number in the South and Midwest. Most are still in urban areas, but more have cropped up in suburban areas as immigrant workers have become mainstays of the service economy and in rural places as immigrant workers—not just those who harvest the nation's agriculture but also those who slaughter, process, and package our beef and poultry—are organizing to improve conditions.

WEST

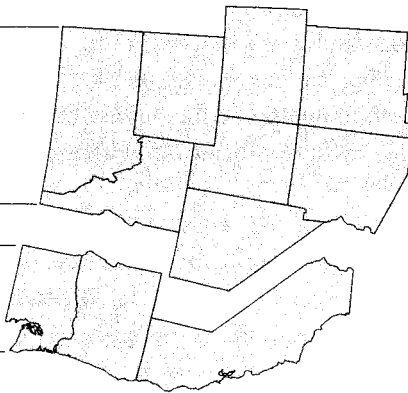
42 ctrs, 31%

Pacific

36 ctrs, 26%

Mountain

7 ctrs, 5%



MIDWEST

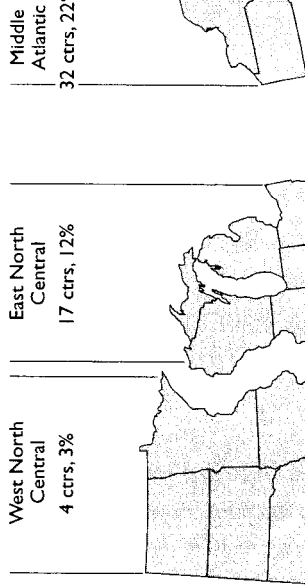
21 ctrs, 15%

West North
Central

4 ctrs, 3%

East North
Central

17 ctrs, 12%



NORTHEAST

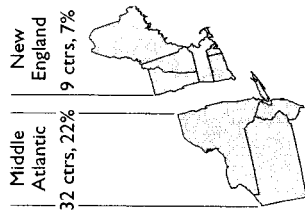
41 ctrs, 29%

Middle
Atlantic

32 ctrs, 22%

New
England

9 ctrs, 7%



West South
Central

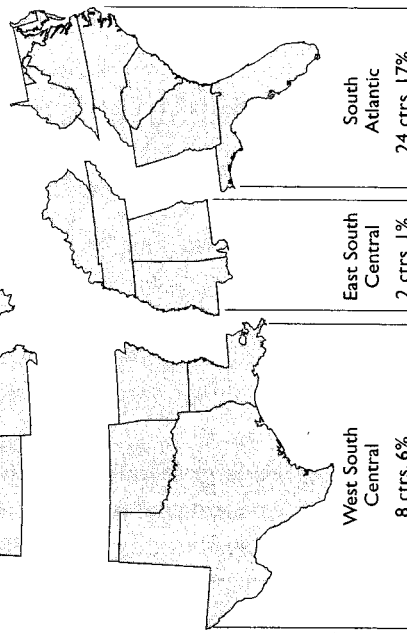
8 ctrs, 6%

East South
Central

2 ctrs, 1%

South
Atlantic

24 ctrs, 17%



SOUTH

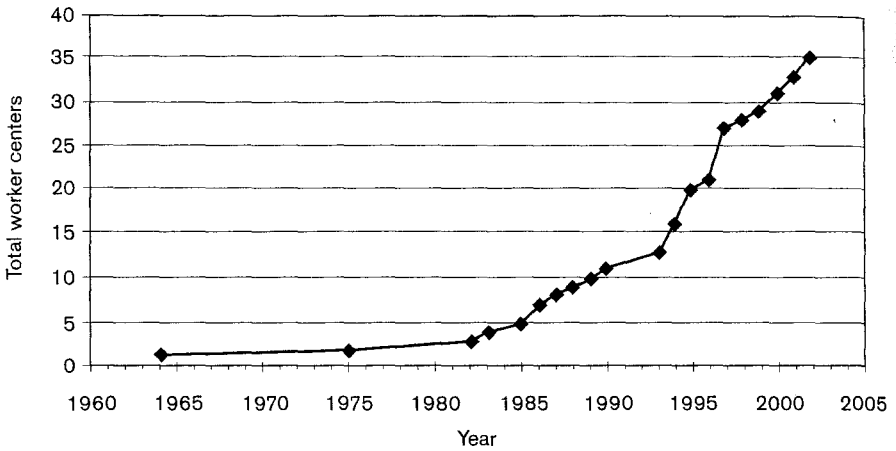
35 ctrs, 25%

THREE WAVES OF WORKER CENTER FORMATION

African American worker centers arose in the South in response to institutionalized racism in employment, the rise of manufacturing and “big box” retail, and the absence of labor unions as a vehicle for organizing. Immigrant worker centers have arisen in “generational waves” as certain immigrant groups have reached a threshold level of settlement and organization, and workers and their allies have grappled with ways to negotiate with the larger society about the terms and conditions of work and the larger set of integration issues (see figures 1.2 and 1.3). Often, the immigrant worker centers seem to have appeared after initial social service agencies and others have established themselves in these communities and begun grappling with employment-related problems.

The first contemporary worker centers were organized by black worker activists in North and South Carolina, immigrant activists in New York City’s Chinatown, along the Texas-Mexican border in El Paso, and among Chinese immigrants in San Francisco. They arose during the late 1970s and early 1980s in response to changes in manufacturing that resulted in worsened conditions, factory closings, and the rise of lower paying service sector jobs. Disparities of pay and treatment between African American and white workers as well as exploitation within ethnic economic enclaves and in the broader economy (including the informal sector) were also major catalysts for the creation of the first wave of centers. Some of these first centers were founded by activists who had been active in peace, student, civil rights, and worker movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although “pro-union,” they were critical of the existing institutions of organized labor. For example, CAFÉ and Black Workers for Justice were founded by individuals and organizations with long connections to the labor and civil rights movements who were struggling to bring organization to workers in the South after the post-World War II failure of labor’s southern offensive.¹ La Mujer Obrera (LMO) was founded by Central America solidarity and labor activists in El Paso in 1981 on the heels of a textile workers’ strike by Mexican women workers at the Farah Clothing Factory. Over the next few years, thousands of women lost their jobs as major textile manufacturers shuttered their operations, giving way to small sub-contractors and substandard working conditions. During the first five years of NAFTA, 15,000 jobs left El Paso and LMO worked to join Mexican women workers to the global economic justice movement. A flagship worker center, the Chinese Staff and Workers Association in New York City was, was initially founded by Chinese activists eager to assist the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) in helping Chinese restaurant workers unionize their workplaces.²

The second wave of centers emerged in the late 1980s and early to mid 1990s.



Note: While the number of worker centers has been increasing steadily since the late 1980s, new centers were opening most rapidly during the mid-1990s.

1.2. When did worker centers arise?



* 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

1.3. Rise in worker centers and foreign-born population

They appeared as large new groups of Latino immigrants, some in flight from the Central American wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, came to live and work in urban metropolitan areas as well as the suburbs, and growing numbers of Southeast Asians immigrated to the United States seeking work. Drawing on the first-wave centers for their organizational models, these groups were founded by a diverse set of institutions and individuals, including churches and other faith-based organizations, social service and legal aid agencies, immigrant nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and unions.

From 2000 to the present, a new wave of centers has emerged. Most of these continued to arise in the nation's cities. However, more of these centers are being organized in suburban and rural areas and in southern states in response to the large concentration of Mexican and Central American immigrants working in the service, poultry, meat-packing, and agricultural sectors. Also more centers are emerging among recent Filipino, Korean, African and South Asian immigrants, and more of them than in past waves are directly connected to faith-based organizations and unions.

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF WORKER CENTERS

Worker centers are community-based mediating institutions that provide support to and organize among communities of low-wage workers. As work is the primary focus of life for many newly arriving immigrants, it is also the locus of many of the problems they experience. This is why, although they actually pursue a broad agenda that includes many aspects of immigrant life in America, many of these organizations call themselves "worker centers."

Worker centers vary in terms of how they think about their mission and how they carry out their work. Nonetheless, in the combination of services, advocacy, and organizing they undertake, worker centers are playing a unique role in helping immigrants navigate life in the United States. They provide low-wage workers a range of opportunities for expressing their "collective voice" as well as for taking collective action.

Certain first-wave and early-second-wave centers have been the inspiration that others have modeled themselves on,³ but there is not one specific organizational model, strategy, or structure that predominates across all or most centers. Some of them, such as the eleven that are affiliated with the National Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice, do share a common strategic approach that is characterized by working through the faith community, cooperating closely with government agencies, encouraging union organizing, and, whenever possible, matching workers with local unions for that purpose. Many others, while

they might support and encourage union organizing, view their work less as feeding workers into unions and more as creating an independent power base of low-wage immigrant workers in their communities.

Regardless of which approach they take, most centers engage in many of the same types of activities. These include helping workers to claim unpaid wages, working with government agencies to improve enforcement, mounting direct action organizing campaigns against specific employers and sometimes across particular industries, and engaging in leadership development and popular education activities. Most of them also play an important role as general defender of immigrant rights in their communities.

One of the most interesting features of worker centers is their independence both from each other as well as from other national organizations or networks. As we will see, they have diverse origins and most did not start out as chapters of any national institution, or locals of a national union, or affiliates of a particular community-organizing network. Fifty-one of the 137 centers are now affiliated with one or more of the three national networks of worker centers: the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, Enlace, and Interfaith Worker Justice. (For more about the national networks, see chapter 10.)

While there is wide variation between centers in terms of program and emphasis, they have most of the following features in common:

Hybrid organization: All combine elements of different types of organizations, from social service agencies, fraternal organizations, settlement houses, community organizing groups, and unions to social movement organizations.

Service provision: Centers provide services, from legal assistance and ESL classes to check-cashing, but they also play an important matchmaking role in introducing their members to services available through other agencies such as health clinics. Many function as clearinghouses on employment law—writing and distributing “know your rights” handbooks and fact sheets and conducting ongoing workshops.

Advocacy: Centers conduct research and release exposés about conditions in low-wage industries, lobby for new labor and immigration laws and changes in existing ones, work with government agencies to improve monitoring and grievance processes, and bring suits against employers.

Organizing: Centers build ongoing organizations and engage in leadership development among workers to take action on their own behalf for economic and political change. This organizing may take different forms depending on the center, but all share a common commitment to providing a means through which workers can take action. Centers pursue these goals by seeking to impact the labor market through direct economic action on the one hand and public policy reform activity on the other.⁴

Place-based rather than work-site based: Most centers focus their work geographically, operating in a particular metropolitan area, city, or neighborhood. Often workers come into a center because they live or work in the center's geographic area of focus, not because they work in a specific industry or occupation. Within local labor markets they often target particular employers and industries for attention, but most worker centers are not work-site based. That is to say, their focus is not on organizing for majority representation in individual work sites or for contracts for individual groups of workers. Some day laborer centers do connect workers with employers and negotiate with them on wages and conditions of work.

Strong ethnic and racial identification: Sometimes ethnicity, rather than occupation or industry, is the primary identity through which workers come into a relationship with centers. In other cases, ethnicity marches hand in hand with occupation. Discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity is a central analytic lens through which economic and social issues are viewed. In addition, a growing number of centers are working at the intersection between race, gender, and low-wage work.

Leadership development and internal democracy: Most centers place enormous emphasis on leadership development and democratic decision-making. They focus on putting processes in place to involve workers on an ongoing basis and work to develop the skills of worker leaders so that they are able to participate meaningfully in guiding the organizations.

Popular education: Centers identify strongly with the philosophy and teaching methods of "liberatory education" that Paulo Freire popularized and draw on models of popular education that originated in Latin American liberation movements and the American civil rights movement. They view education as integral to organizing. Workshops, courses, and training sessions are structured to emphasize the development of critical thinking skills and bringing these skills to bear on all information that is presented.

Thinking globally: Centers demonstrate a deep sense of solidarity with workers in other countries, have an ongoing programmatic focus on the global impact of labor and trade policies, and participate in campaigns that bring organizations together to take action transnationally. Some worker center founders and leaders had extensive experience with organizing in their countries of origin or were inspired by popular movements there and actively draw on those traditions in their current work. Many centers maintain ongoing ties with popular organizations in the countries from which workers have migrated, share strategies, publicize each other's work, and support each other as they are able.

A broad agenda: While centers place particular emphasis on work-related problems, they have a broad orientation and generally respond to the variety of

issues faced by African Americans and recent immigrants to the United States, including education, housing, health care access, and criminal justice issues. They are also on the front lines regarding immigration-related issues such as defending access to drivers' licenses and helping workers deal with social security no-match letters.

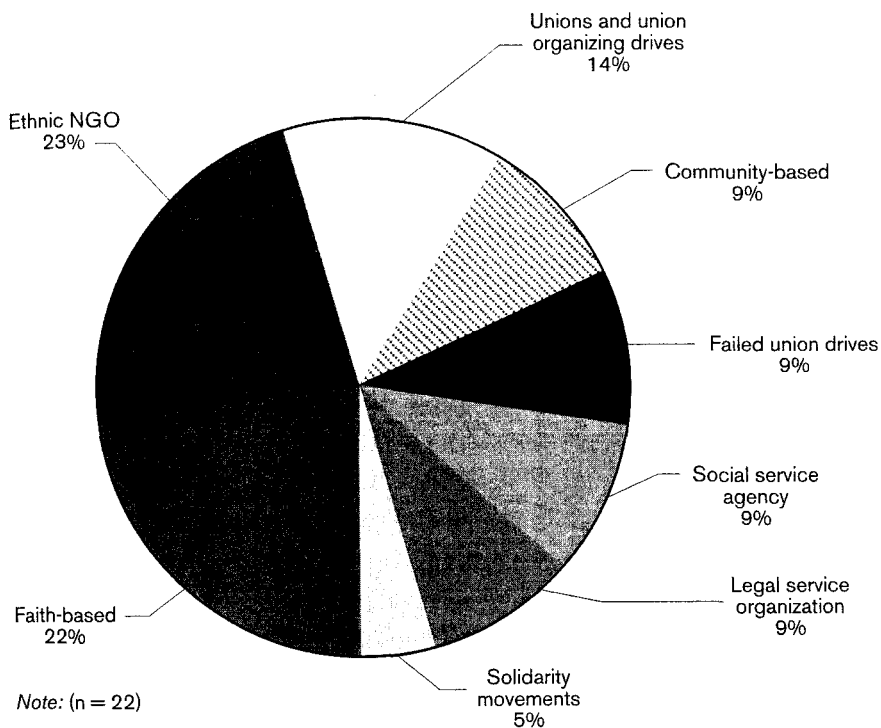
Coalition building: Centers favor alliances with religious institutions and government agencies, and seek to work closely with other worker centers, non-profit agencies, community organizations, and student and activist groups by participating in many formal and informal coalitions.

Small and involved memberships: Most centers view membership as a privilege that is not automatic but must be earned. They require workers to take courses and/or become involved in the organization in order to qualify. At the same time, there is a lot of ambivalence about charging dues, and while about 40 percent of centers say they have a dues requirement, few have worked out systems that allow them to collect dues regularly.

ORIGINS OF WORKER CENTERS

Worker centers in general have emerged in response to the decline of institutions that historically provided workers with a vehicle for collective action. Immigrant worker centers have emerged as a consequence of the explosive growth of immigrant communities and the absence of infrastructure to support their needs. Concerned individuals and institutions have looked to the worker center model to address the increasing needs and demands of these newcomers. According to data collected from our survey, 23 percent of worker centers were founded by ethnic NGOs; 22 percent by churches, Catholic Charities, or other faith-based community organizing projects; and 27 percent by a combination of legal service organizations, social service agencies, and community-based organizations. Five percent were founded by Central America solidarity movement activists, as they realized that what had once been viewed as a temporary arrangement until refugees could return home had grown into permanent communities struggling to establish themselves economically and politically (see figure 1.4). Although 64 percent of worker centers are now stand-alone institutions, 36 percent continue to be connected to some larger institution.

While worker centers have grown out of a range of institutions, they have sprung from a common desire for a local organization that would provide services, conduct advocacy, and encourage organizing on the part of low-wage workers in the absence of anything else. Stories of their founding often share



1.4. Worker center origins: Parent organizations

certain traits: a catalyzing event in which something happens to an individual or group of workers that leads them to seek support from an existing organization or visible leader. These workers and the allies they find to help them then try to figure out how to address the immediate situation but often discover that the particular issue they have confronted is emblematic of a much larger problem, and one that no existing organization is addressing. In this way, a host of ethnic NGOs, churches, legal aid centers, social service agencies, and university communities have almost literally “backed into” organizing and advocating for low-wage workers. They did so upon discovering that a service approach was simply not enough and that there was a void in terms of institutions for collective action among low-wage workers. As widely as these institutions differ from one another in form and function, most seem to have settled on the worker center model when their existing programs and strategies proved inadequate. Given below are some examples:

- The Workplace Project, one of the first of the second-wave worker centers, began as a project of CARECEN, a social service agency for Central American immigrants in Long Island, as more and more immigrants came to its offices seeking redress for unpaid wages and other employment-related problems.
- The Chinese Progressive Association established its worker center as a result of a campaign to fight for vocational training for dislocated garment workers in Boston's Chinatown.
- Casa Maryland, a social service agency for recent Central American immigrants, moved into organizing workers when a day laborer crisis developed in close proximity to their offices. This in turn catalyzed advocacy work at the state and federal level around the rights of day laborers to seek employment and led to voter participation efforts among the larger Latino communities in Silver Spring and Baltimore.
- The Filipino Worker Center of Los Angeles, founded by a group of young Filipino American UCLA graduates, provides support to the most recent waves of Filipino immigrants, many undocumented and working in the private sector home-health industry without benefits and access to organization.
- The Pomona Economic Opportunities Center, was founded after day laborers who had been gathering on the same corner and waiting for employers for fifteen years were banned from doing so by a new city ordinance. The day laborers, along with students from Pitzer College, city officials, and representatives from Home Depot, petitioned to get public money for a worker center and organized themselves to provide ESL and other classes to the workers.

Nine percent of worker centers were founded explicitly to fill the gap left by the decline of unionization in particular industries, and another 14 percent in connection to unions and union-organizing drives. These include:

- Black Workers for Justice (BWJ) grew out of a local campaign in 1981, in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, by three black women who were fired by the local K-Mart for raising questions with management about racially discriminatory practices. The vision of BWJ leadership has been to create an organization that straddled the civil rights movement, the labor move-