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## The Worker Center Handbook: A Practical Guide to Starting and Building the New Labor Movement

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# The Worker Center Handbook: A Practical Guide to Starting and Building the New Labor Movement

## Abstract

[Excerpt] Worker centers are becoming an important element in labor and community organizing and the struggle for fair pay and decent working conditions for low-wage workers, especially immigrants. There are currently more than two hundred worker centers in the country, and more start every month. Most of these centers struggle as they try to raise funds, maintain stable staff, and build a membership base. For this book, Kim Bobo and Marién Casillas Pabellón, two women with extensive experience supporting and leading worker centers, have interviewed staff at a broad range of worker centers with the goal of helping others understand how to start and build their organizations. This book is not theoretical, but rather is designed to be a practical workbook for staff, boards, and supporters of worker centers.

Geared toward groups that want to build worker centers, this book discusses how to survey the community, take on an initial campaign, recruit leaders, and raise seed funds. Bobo and Casillas Pabellón also provide a wealth of advice to help existing centers become stronger and more effective. *The Worker Center Handbook* compiles best practices from around the country on partnering with labor, enlisting the assistance of faith communities and lawyers, raising funds, developing a serious membership program, integrating civic engagement work, and running major campaigns. The authors urge center leaders to both organize and build strong administrative systems. Full of concrete examples from worker centers around the country, the handbook is practical and honest about challenges and opportunities.

## Keywords

worker centers, organizing, worker rights, unions, faith communities

## Disciplines

Labor Relations | Unions

## Comments

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# **THE WORKER CENTER HANDBOOK**

**Kim Bobo and  
Marién Casillas Pabellón**

**A Practical  
Guide to Starting  
and Building the  
New Labor Movement**

**ILR Press**

an imprint of

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# Worker Center | 1

## Background and Vision



**Figure 1** New Labor members and allies march in support of Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. Photo Courtesy of New Labor. Photo by Louis Kimmel.

**D**omestic workers organize support for a statewide bill of rights. Restaurant workers rally outside a restaurant demanding that the owner pay them their stolen wages. Poultry workers expose dangerous chemicals used in their plant and bring in government inspectors. Day laborers organize themselves to move from an outside corner where they bid against one another for jobs to a safe location with clear policies for workers to get jobs and be paid fairly. Immigrant women challenge designer-brand labels that produce clothes in modern-day sweatshops. African American workers battle the exclusionary practices of temp agencies. Dairy workers gather at night to learn their rights. Tomato pickers establish new codes of conduct in the fields. Workers, through worker centers, are organizing for themselves and their communities.

Workers have always organized. From the Israelites in Egypt who organized a strike (Exodus 5) to the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union in the South and the mass organizing of northern workers in the 1930s, farmworker organizing in the 1960s, and the current worker organizing today. Organizing is part of the human spirit that seeks to be treated with justice and fairness.

Through organizing, leaders emerge and develop. Structures are put in place to train leaders, recruit members, and make decisions. Organizing campaigns to change particular workplaces, entire sectors, or public policies for all workers demonstrate and build power for workers.

Workers and their allies who are leading, growing, and developing the current worker center movement are following in the footsteps of labor and community organizers who went before them. Although the worker center “movement” appears new and in some ways is indeed creating some new structures and models, it is built on the shoulders of previous generations of organizers, both in the United States and elsewhere.

Cesar Chavez organized farmworker service centers in the 1960s that modeled the importance of integrating services and organizing. Worker centers build on that history.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian professor and educator, developed models for popular education that inspire worker centers today.

Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Gustavo Gutiérrez,<sup>1</sup> who supported poor workers and organized faith communities in the U.S. South, northern cities, and Peru, inspire worker centers to build faith partnerships and tap the moral imagination of the nation.

Courageous union organizers, like those at Teamsters Local 688 in St. Louis and Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, built models of community unionism that united workers and allies across racial lines to fight racial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Today's worker centers and their union allies strive to build organizations and movements that understand how capitalism uses race to exploit and divide workers and that address challenges workers face in their workplaces and their communities.

Organizing is part of the U.S. tradition. Organizing is part of the global tradition. Organizing is inherent in being human. Worker centers build on those traditions and bring to life a new incarnation of the human spirit.

## **Crisis for Workers**

Millions of U.S. workers are struggling to make ends meet. Ten million workers don't earn enough to reach the official poverty line. Millions more are one or two paychecks away from homelessness. Approximately 10 percent of workers earn \$8.50 an hour or

1. A Dominican priest who worked with poor people in Lima, Peru, and is widely considered a principle liberation theologian.

2. Robert Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism: Harold Gibbons, Ernest Calloway, and Working-class Citizenship* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), elucidates a long-forgotten history about fighting for community unions and challenging racism in St. Louis. Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2003), tells another forgotten story about unionism that fights for the full inclusion of workers in society.



less and 42 percent earn less than \$15 an hour. Those earning the lowest wages seldom have benefits. Among that bottom 10 percent of wage earners, 88 percent have no employer-provided health insurance, and 88 percent have no employer-provided retirement savings.<sup>3</sup> New contingency structures of work are creating low-wage “perma-temps” and so-called independent contractors, denying workers living wages and stable jobs. Millions of these workers, as well as additional middle-class workers, are victims of wage theft when their employers illegally underpay them or don’t pay them for their work. Thousands are needlessly injured on the job because their employers don’t provide adequate safety protection.

This crisis for workers has many causes, which is partly why worker centers operate on many fronts. The poverty wages and poor working conditions for many workers are caused in large part due to the lack of power workers have in society, particularly in relation to their employers. Historically the most important counterbalancing power for workers has been unions. When unions represented approximately a third of workers, as they did until the mid-1970s, they were able to set standards in many sectors, even if all workers weren’t members, and successfully advocate worker protections nationwide. Unions now represent less than 10 percent of workers and aren’t structured to support workers in a wide variety of small companies. Worker centers organize workers because there aren’t enough unions organizing workers.

The crisis is caused by weak labor standards, for one thing. The United States has some of the weakest labor standards in the industrialized world. It has no federal standard for paid sick days, vacation days, maternity leave, or universal health care. Some basic standards, like workers compensation to care for injured workers, are left to the states, resulting in a mishmash of programs or no programs. In addition, what labor standards exist are generally not well enforced, despite the best intentions of many dedicated enforcement staff. Federal and state labor agencies are woefully understaffed. Worker centers organize to establish new labor standards and increase enforcement.

The workers’ crisis is also caused by a lack of jobs. But while there are not enough jobs for all those who want and need to work, the United States has no comprehensive policy designed to create and preserve jobs. Such a policy simply doesn’t exist. Although the official unemployment figures may not look too bad, the real unemployment numbers are much higher if you count those who have given up looking for work, are working part-time instead of full-time jobs, and college grads who are working barista jobs because they can’t find jobs in their fields of study. High unemployment, without strong labor law enforcement or unions, creates an environment in which workers are afraid to speak up lest they lose their jobs and can’t find another. Workers who understand that their employers are not paying them well or even cheating them of wages often say, “At least I have a job.” Worker centers advocate for job programs and reducing barriers to employment and organize worker-owned cooperatives.

The crisis is also caused by immigration with no path to citizenship. The United States is a nation that has been built by immigrants. Even though there has often been discrimination against the latest arrivals, immigrants have been able to eventually

3. Bill Quigley, “Working and Still Poor,” Center for Constitutional Rights, [www.ccrjustice.org/working-and-poor-usa](http://www.ccrjustice.org/working-and-poor-usa).

become citizens and fully participating members of society. The last immigration “fix” was when Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which resulted in 2.7 million immigrants becoming citizens over the next few years.<sup>4</sup> There are now more than eleven million undocumented immigrants in the United States, and eight million of them are working or looking for work.<sup>5</sup> Thus more than 5 percent of the U.S. workforce is without a path to citizenship and is vulnerable to unscrupulous employers who would exploit them. History has shown that when a group of workers is vulnerable, some employers will seek them out and exploit them. Exploitation of immigrant workers undermines standards for all workers. Worker centers advocate immigration reform.

Growing inequality and concentration of wealth together make up another cause of the crisis for workers. Although the United States has prided itself historically on having a strong middle class, increasingly the middle class is struggling, and wealth and income have become concentrated in an increasingly small percentage of the population. This concentration undermines democracy because a relatively small percentage of families and companies contribute to political candidates and leaders and thus unduly influence them. Worker centers educate workers and allies about inequality and concentration of wealth and are figuring out how to engage workers in civil society.

Finally, the crisis is caused in part by racism, which is embedded in U.S. society, including its workplaces, its training of workers, and its labor laws. Worker centers have strong racial analyses and support immigrants and people of color in organizing and challenging structural racism and racial capitalism. (Nancy Leong defines racial capitalism as deriving social and economic value from racial identity.)

Workers are in crisis. The economy is in crisis. The fundamentals of U.S. democracy may well be in crisis. Yet workers are fighting back. Workers are addressing the causes of the crisis and finding new and creative ways to organize and build power. Crises create opportunities. Workers and worker centers are seizing the opportunities and changing the face of the nation.

## **Worker Centers Emerge**

Worker centers are community-based and community-led organizations that create a safe space where workers organize and build power. Workers learn about their rights, work with others to address problems they are experiencing, access training and services, and organize for social and economic change in their communities and nationally.

In 1990, there were approximately ten worker centers in the United States, but by 2000 there were roughly one hundred. In 2015 this number had increased to nearly 250.

4. Muzaffar Chishti, Diane Meissner, and Claire Bergeron, “At Its 25th Anniversary, IRCA’s Legacy Lives On,” Migration Policy Institute, Nov 16, 2011, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/its-25th-anniversary-ircas-legacy-lives](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/its-25th-anniversary-ircas-legacy-lives).

5. Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “Unauthorized Immigrant Population Stable for Half a Decade,” Pew Research Center, July 22, 2015, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/22/unauthorized-immigrant-population-stable-for-half-a-decade](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/22/unauthorized-immigrant-population-stable-for-half-a-decade).

This rapid development of worker centers is not unlike the rapid growth of settlement houses at the end of the nineteenth century, when immigrant workers moved to cities to work in sweatshops. The worker centers also build on Catholic labor schools, Jewish labor lyceums, and farmworker service centers.<sup>6</sup>

Worker centers are winning real victories for workers, both their own members and the broader community. Almost every worker center helps workers recover unpaid wages—sometimes a few hundred dollars, sometimes millions of dollars. Workers centers enable day laborers to set their own wages and standards instead of competing against one another on the street corner. Workers centers are leading efforts around the country to raise the minimum wage and pass laws to enhance enforcement against wage theft. Young Workers United in San Francisco led the effort to pass the nation's first law requiring employers to provide paid sick days to workers. Brooklyn-based Domestic Workers United led a six-year battle to pass the New York State Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights in 2010, which asserts the right to overtime pay and rest days, and other states have followed suit. These victories are concrete and significant, and as the movement grows, so too will the number of victories increase.

## Types of Worker Centers

Worker centers come in many shapes and forms. Some were formed around particular sectors of work. Many were formed by day laborers and their allies, and most of these are affiliated with the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON).<sup>7</sup> Some centers are focused on restaurant workers, and most of these are affiliated with ROC United.<sup>8</sup> Other centers focus on domestic workers, and most of these are affiliated with the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA).<sup>9</sup> Still other centers have emerged near large industrial centers, again focusing on one sector, such as poultry workers or warehouse workers.

Many centers form around ethnic groups, particularly immigrants. In Southern California, the Pilipino Workers Center formed to help Filipino immigrants. Voces de Frontera in Milwaukee was formed to assist Latino immigrants. So too were Casa de Maryland and Somos un Pueblo Unido in New Mexico.

Several worker centers that have existed for many years focus primarily on African American workers, such as Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina and the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights. Several additional black worker centers have emerged in the last few years.

There are also centers that view themselves as multi-sector and multiracial. For example, Arise Chicago works with Spanish-, Polish-, and English-speaking workers

6. For more information about Catholic labor schools and Jewish labor lyceums, see Kim Bobo, *Wage Theft in America* (New York: New Press, 2011), chapter 7. For more on farmworker service centers, see the description of the Cesar Chavez Foundation at the organization's website, [www.chavezfoundation.org](http://www.chavezfoundation.org).

7. For more information, see [www.ndlon.org](http://www.ndlon.org).

8. For more information, see [www.rocunited.org](http://www.rocunited.org).

9. For more information, see [www.domesticworkers.org](http://www.domesticworkers.org).

in a variety of sectors. The Northwest Arkansas Worker Justice Center works with Spanish-, Marshallese- and English-speaking workers from a variety of sectors, but especially from the poultry industry. Many of the multi-sector centers are affiliated with Interfaith Worker Justice.

Information about six worker center networks is available in appendix B.

## **Core Worker Center Programs**

Each worker center is unique. No two have the exact same programs and approach but most serve the functions described below.

***Build power and organize for social change*** Worker centers build power among workers to address their broader community problems. Worker centers have led and won campaigns to get paid sick days for all workers (in San Francisco), strengthen enforcement against wage theft (in many communities), require drinking water for construction workers (in Austin, Texas), remove employment barriers for formerly incarcerated workers (in Chicago), and enact bills of rights for domestic workers (in New York and California). Power is the ability to act and the ability to win real improvements in workers' lives, and worker centers are building this and exercising it to improve conditions for increasingly larger numbers of workers.

***Offer worker rights education and outreach*** Most workers have no idea what their rights are in the workplace, let alone what to do if their rights are being violated. Thus, worker centers educate workers about their rights and what they can do to address workplace problems. Worker centers tend to use popular education approaches that engage people based on their lived experiences.

***Organize to address workplace problems*** Worker centers help workers address problems they experience on the job. Wage theft and health and safety problems are the two most common problems addressed by worker centers. Most centers assist workers in filing claims with government agencies, connect workers with lawyers who can file suits for back wages, refer them to unions if they want to organize a local in their workplace, and organize direct action campaigns to get employers to pay workers their owed wages. One long-time worker center organizer described the centers as operating in the space between organizing and enforcement. The centers demand enforcement of laws, but they also organize to change and improve the laws.

***Train leaders*** Worker centers engage workers in addressing and solving their own problems. They train workers on their rights and how to organize to solve problems. Worker centers seek to develop a strong cadre of committed and experienced leaders who represent fellow workers and are connected with the community.

***Develop democratic structures for participation*** Most worker centers eventually develop some form of membership. But perhaps even more important, worker centers structure meaningful and engaging ways for workers to be involved in setting the directions and leading the programs of the worker centers and make decisions over their lives. Many workers are already leaders, and so the centers merely affirm and encourage their leadership. Others have never seen themselves as leaders but become leaders in the process of organizing campaigns.

**Challenge racism and concentrated power** Most worker centers have a deep understanding of racism and how concentrated power and unbridled capitalism are undermining democracy and hurting workers. Those involved in worker centers see themselves as part of the broader national and international movements seeking economic justice for all. They lead or participate in community struggles for access and fair treatment. They lead or participate in actions supporting workers in other communities, even across the globe. Political and economic education is integrated into the overall leadership training.

## Other Worker Center Functions

In addition to the core functions described above, many worker centers also serve the functions described below.

**Arrange for jobs at fair wages** Workers centers organized by day laborers create a way workers can negotiate for jobs at fair wages. Workers themselves create systems for negotiating with possible employers, setting and enforcing wage standards and sharing the work in ways that seem equitable. Many workers centers promote their hiring halls in the community in ways that produce more jobs for workers.

**Create worker cooperatives** Worker centers have created cleaning, cooking, and construction co-ops and companies. Usually cooperatives are started in sectors in which there are widespread problems. Workers decide they want to start and operate their own businesses so they can create better working conditions and keep more of the profits of their labor.

**Offer ESL classes and other special educational programs** Because so many centers serve immigrant workers, many offer English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Casa de Maryland offers financial education classes. Centers affiliated with the Restaurant Opportunities Center United offer training in how to work in the fine dining industry. Casa Latina in Seattle, which works primarily with day laborers, offers training on how to stay safe on the job and basic gardening, safe cleaning, and safe moving skills. Some centers partner with unions and offer construction trades training. These programs draw workers into the centers and help them develop skills.

**Advocate immigration reform and fight attacks on immigrants** Many worker centers were started by immigrant leaders or are deeply connected with immigrant communities. Thus these centers tend to be strong advocates for immigration reform and have led efforts to challenge public attacks on immigrants. Some centers assist workers in filing for special immigration programs, such as the documentation process for implementing President Obama's executive order on immigration. If workers' immigration status can be regularized, they will be much less vulnerable to exploitation.

**Sponsor social and recreational activities** Worker centers build community among workers. Some sponsor soccer clubs, host dances, and organize activities for youth. Worker centers become hubs of social activities. People are drawn to organizations that care about them as human beings and where they find and build community.

Most worker centers use a variety of approaches to build their work and develop strong communities. For additional information about what worker centers look like

and do, see Janice Fine's marvelous book *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (ILR Press, 2006).

## Who Starts Worker Centers?

Worker centers get organized and incubated by a variety of people and organizations. Many existing centers were started by workers upset about treatment by employers, and many of these workers had heard about or even participated in a worker center in another community.

Other worker centers are started by organizations already fulfilling one or more of their functions. For example, a local wage-theft clinic run by a law school may want to move into work that is deeper than just handling workers legal problems, or an immigrants' rights organization may organically move into organizing around worksite issues.

Sometimes leaders of academic institutions or policy think tanks that advocate workers' rights become interested in playing a more direct role in helping build long-term worker power. In some cases, they decide to start worker centers by building upon an already functioning service program, because workers come to them for help and advice on wage theft or other workplace problems.

Many community organizations, service providers in low-income communities, and religious institutions have started workers' centers in response to visible needs of workers in their community, people who have no other place to go or who view government enforcement agencies as cumbersome, ineffective, or inaccessible. Many day labor worker centers grew as a solution to community tensions around day laborers congregating on neighborhood sidewalks.

Worker centers are often started and led by people of color who are deeply connected to workers in the community and want to change society. Almost without exception, worker center leaders and founders are passionate, visionary, and bold. They are not willing to accept the status quo. They want to create a new society based on equity and justice. Many have strong analyses of how the conjoined political and economic system is failing workers and their families.

By and large, worker centers are founded and run by social change makers who have passion and drive. Part of the reason this handbook is necessary is to match the skills and best practices with the passion and energy of leaders. Few people who start worker centers know much about database maintenance, fund-raising, or the legal practices necessary for running a nonprofit. But change makers will do what it takes to build organizations and power.

## Core Values

The worker center is not just another social service agency. Most centers, and certainly the most effective ones meet the following criteria and do these things:

- Have a deep understanding and clear commitment to worker organizing among the steering committee and initial volunteers of the organization
- Include low-wage workers, or the proposed constituency of the organization, in the leadership of the organization

- Develop the voice and leadership of workers
- Build community support from allies
- Raise money to hire experienced organizers, familiar with low-wage workers issues
- Become recognized in the community as leaders on low-wage worker issues
- Develop strong and healthy relationships with the local labor movement
- Create democratic structures that enable workers and the center members to take part in decision-making about how to address their workplace problems
- Concentrate resources on campaigns that are strategic and winnable, and that workers feel widely and deeply about
- Hire some staff positions, especially organizers, from within the ranks of the worker center members
- Focus on equity and fairness built on an analysis of injustices done to frontline workers.

Worker centers are focused on workers—involving them, training them, developing them, and advocating change that improves conditions for them. Although worker centers alone cannot bring about the all widespread economic changes needed in society, they are important new forces for change locally and nationwide.

## Stages of Growth

Worker centers tend to develop and grow in somewhat similar ways, although each has its own unique twists and turns, and sometimes centers get stuck in one pattern of work. The leadership of the Interfaith Worker Justice Worker Center Network developed the following outline of “stages of growth” to describe the experience of many worker centers and suggest a path for building strong organizations that can challenge the root causes of wealth and income inequality and worker exploitation. Here are five common stages of growth:

***Worker Center Visioning Phase*** The Visioning Phase is the time when a handful of workers and community leaders begin dreaming about opening a worker center. These workers and leaders assess the community, draw in interested parties, and dream about what a worker center might do. During the Visioning Phase, a worker center should

- Convene a committee or task force of workers (and others concerned about low-wage workers’ issues) that then meets regularly
- Seek to have workers lead in the organization (even though that leadership may not be fully developed at first)
- Survey the community
- Create a vision of how to change and empower the community
- Reach out to Interfaith Worker Justice, NDLO, ROC, or other worker center networks for advice and assistance.

***Worker Center Start-Up Phase*** The Start-Up Phase is when a worker center goes from being an idea or a dream to a reality. This phase is characterized by structure-building, outreach, and individual engagement with workers. Most worker centers focus on

case-management-type activities dealing with wage theft. During the Start-Up Phase, a worker center should

- Clarify and confirm its vision and mission
- Formalize a leadership structure—eventually a board of directors
- Establish ways for workers to participate in decision-making in addition to the formal leadership structure
- Engage with workers and their communities
- Create points of entry and leadership development for workers (e.g., worker rights training and wage-theft clinics).
- Get a fiscal agent or apply for 501c3 status from the Internal Revenue Service, or both
- Deal with some of the legal and administrative matters presented
- Start developing a strategic plan for building the organization’s capacity, including a budget, a fund-raising plan, and a plan for leadership development
- Build relationships with labor and faith leaders, including applying for affiliation with your community’s central labor council
- Locate space where workers can meet and staff can operate (it is tough for workers to meet if there is no regular meeting location)
- Apply for affiliation with one or more of the worker center networks, depending upon the sectors and interests of your center.

***Worker Center Growth Phase*** Once a worker center has its basic structures in place and relationships with many workers, it is ready to begin developing ways to be more effective in addressing problems workers face. Usually this means that worker centers develop campaigns at a worksite or legislative campaigns that can enforce or strengthen existing laws. During the Growth Phase, the worker center should

- Hire staff to support and oversee the center’s development
- Develop a membership program
- Recruit members actively
- Offer significant training opportunities
- Create a worker leadership structure
- Apply for 501c3 tax-exemption from the Internal Revenue Service
- Initiate and run workplace justice campaigns that address problems in broader ways than can be done by simply addressing individual cases
- Offer organizing training and political education sessions
- Develop a system in which case management leads to organizing (case management is a tool, not an end)
- Engage workers and allies in public direct action
- Develop a strategic organizing plan
- Build organizational identity and capacity
- Communicate regularly with members and allies via newsletters, e-mail, a website, and social media
- Expand the budget and diversify funding sources, especially through grassroots fund-raising
- Participate in joint activities between worker centers



- Deepen relationship with allies (work on a joint campaign or partner on a grant)
- Move to larger office space to accommodate growth if necessary; consider whether it would make sense to purchase your own place

**Worker Center Leadership Phase** The Leadership Phase is when the worker center becomes a recognized social change leader in its community and within the network of other worker centers, helping support and grow other worker centers around the country. There are probably only a dozen worker centers now in this phase, but many more are on their way. In this phase, the worker center should

- Mentor those developing worker centers in earlier phases
- Provide visionary leadership in growing and engaging worker centers throughout the country
- Hire rank-and-file worker organizers and provide them with strong training and mentorship
- Lead and win bold, visionary campaigns for the future of work that not only seeking to recover unpaid wages but also fight for better wages, benefits, and standards
- Build a stable, mature organization with
  - Strong financial systems and internal controls
  - Grassroots fund-raising structure (worker fund-raising, dues)
  - Active board
  - Broad and diverse leadership
  - Large and active membership
  - Ability to get people to turn out for meetings, events and rallies
- Deepen relationship with allies in organized labor, the faith community, academia, business, the legal community, and other nonprofits
- Generate regular media coverage of the organization and its actions based on its reputation, media relations, and experience in working with the media
- Articulate a clear and compelling narrative of how workers can challenge and change major systems of oppression and misuse of corporate power
- Implement positive changes and expand on victories.

**Worker Center Social Movement Phase** There are probably only a couple of worker centers in the United States that have developed enough to be considered a real social movement, but some are dreaming about how their worker centers can become serious political forces in their states and communities. In the Social Movement Phase, a worker center should

- Build or collaborate with other worker centers to establish statewide presence
- Win significant victories regularly
- Be run by strong leaders, many of whom were groomed by the movement
- Have a steady and diverse funding base
- Conduct broad-based political education program in the community
- Organize civic participation programs (voter registration and voter education)
- Partner with others nationwide to influence or change an industry or large company
- Help build and lead a national movement for economic justice
- Run members for political office.

This book is designed to help you develop a worker center by building on the experiences of others. It offers chapters on getting started—doing visioning and other early work, building your program, and running a healthy nonprofit organization to get you through the growth phases. The book then provides suggestion on how to take the work to scale.

Settlement houses grew dramatically from the 1900s through the 1930s. Unions grew dramatically in the 1930s. Catholic labor schools and Jewish labor lyceums grew from the 1930s through the 1950s. Worker centers are growing by leaps and bounds right now. Although they are all doing important and good work, the challenge is how to get most of the centers out of the early stages of development and strong enough to be significant forces in their communities. This book is an attempt to share the lessons of existing worker centers so that new centers can move through the early phases of development more smoothly so that their leaders and reflect on ways to work to scale in order to play a more meaningful and powerful democratic role in bringing about economic justice.

Building worker centers is challenging but rewarding. May this handbook contribute to advancing the movement!

**Part I**

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**STARTING A  
WORKER CENTER**

# Surveying Your Community | 2

## Key Questions

**W**orker centers are formed for various reasons and are focused on different regions, constituencies, and sectors. Thus it is important as you begin assessing your community to consider key questions around scope and focus. You don't have to answer the questions immediately, but you and your new leadership team will need to answer them as you move forward. There are no perfect answers, but the answers to these questions will help focus your planning, programs, and even your community assessment.

***What is your geographic focus*** Will you focus on your city, your state, one section of your city, or one section of your state? Your center will serve workers from where?

***Who is your primary constituency*** Will you organize and serve all low-wage workers, or will you focus primarily on a particular ethnic or racial group? How does your leadership reflect your constituency?

***Do you have a sector focus from the beginning*** Will you work primarily with construction workers or restaurant workers or another particular sector? Check the list of worker center networks in appendix B to see if there is a network that you should contact initially to get advice.

## Why Survey the Community?

Whether you are a small group of workers trying to build a solution to the issues you and others face in your community or staff at a community organization, union, or academic institution, the first step to building a worker center is to find others who care, both more workers and more allies. Survey what organizations are already organizing and working with low-wage workers in the community. There are many reasons for taking the time to survey the community:

- You don't want to duplicate efforts.
- Turf is important, and you want to be respectful of what others have already built.
- You want to make sure that your worker center is addressing real community needs, and the only way to do that is to talk with workers and the broader community.
- You want community support or buy-in. This is best achieved by talking with people from the very beginning.

- You can learn about amazing workers who are already providing leadership within their communities.
- Having the support of your allies will add to your legitimacy when you start. As the old saying goes, “You are who you hang with.” So try to surround yourself with organizations that have already established themselves as respected and powerful leaders in the community.
- Understanding your allies and the forces opposed to change will help you understand community power relationships.
- You can find people who can be strong leaders in building the center.

If your community is small and you have worked in the community for a long time, perhaps you already know the key players. But in most situations, it is helpful to conduct a thorough survey of the community. This can be done by one or two people over a three-to-six-month period, or it can be done more quickly by dividing up segments of the community among a number of people. Early mapping and surveying efforts are great opportunities to test the commitment of early supporters, potential board members, and possible staff.

The Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH) not only did surveys initially, it also brought together a focus group of stakeholders to get their input in planning a worker center.

Several experienced worker center directors commented upon reading drafts of this chapter that their processes for starting their worker centers were much less formal and much messier. Nonetheless, they all thought that such a systematic approach makes sense.

One worker center network decided to start a center in community before talking with workers. The organization hired several staff, developed a program, and set up shop without talking with the most important people. Within a year the center had imploded, and the organization had to shut it down. A thorough survey might have prevented wasted effort and resources.

## **Survey Workers**

The first and most important group of people to survey is workers. Some leadership teams are composed primarily of workers and thus have lots of means for surveying and talking with workers. Other planners are not as deeply connected to workers as they need and want to be. The purpose of surveying workers is twofold. First, you want to learn more about the pressing concerns of workers in the community and what a center might do to address them. Second, you want to identify existing leaders who could help build the center.

Set a reasonable goal of surveying workers. If you already have ten strong worker leaders who are deeply connected in the community, ask them each to talk with ten other workers. If your numbers are fewer and you will need to go through other organizations to find worker leaders, you may need more modest goals or to take more time to reach workers. The workers you survey should reflect the constituencies you wish to engage in the center.

Create your own survey questions with simple questions like these:

- What problems have you experienced in the workplace?
- What are common problems you hear about from others?

- What do you think could or should be done to address the problems?
- Are these issues you might help work on?
- Which key leaders in your community have worked on these issues?
- What kinds of programs or services could a center offer that you would find attractive?

In many communities, immigrants and low-income workers are invisible to the broader community. The survey process helps identify and illuminate what is often hiding in plain sight.

The Worker Rights' Center of Madison (Wisconsin) grew out of a study of working conditions for Latino immigrants initiated by the newly formed Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice. The ICWJ launched the Latino Workers Project in 1999 to better understand the changing demographics of the community, further investigate growing complaints of workplace violations among Latino immigrants, and identify specific actions that the newly formed organization and the coalition it built through the project could address. Through the Latino Workers Project, the Interfaith Coalition marshaled support from the state university and the local Dominican college. Student volunteers were recruited to help with outreach efforts, including interviewing a wide range of service providers, agencies, and congregations that interacted with the growing Latino immigrant community. The Interfaith Coalition organized a series of well-advertised and well-covered community forums that highlighted the issue of workplace exploitation of Latino immigrants in the community.

With the formal structure of a community study, community leaders agreed to serve on an advisory panel (fact-finding delegation), which provided useful history and experience and also gave the effort greater legitimacy and gravitas. Several dozen volunteers went door-to-door surveying in neighborhoods identified by the university's Applied Population Laboratory as having a high concentration of low-income Latino residents. The survey instrument used asked a range of questions about workplace standards and economic status.

One of the recommendations coming out of the study and report was the need to establish a worker center. The process of producing the report helped build the community support for the report's recommendations, provided useful data and information about the community, and served to advertise the project to the community at large. In the process of doing the report, the organization recruited simultaneous interpreters for its meetings and forums. This group grew to become a worker cooperative of interpreters and translators that the worker center still works with fifteen years later. The attention and process helped prepare the ground for the next step in establishing the worker center. Getting seed funding was much easier with the groundwork that had been done through the Latino Workers Project.

## Survey Community Organizations

Figure out what community organizations are working with low-wage workers, especially those you are interested in organizing and serving. Talk with leaders of immigrant advocacy groups, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, St. Vincent de

Paul, local community organizing groups, soup kitchens, homeless advocacy groups, and legal services groups. Ask the following kinds of questions:

- Do workers come to you about workplace problems?
- What kinds of problems do you hear about?
- Have you found ways to help them address those problems? If so, how?
- Are you familiar with worker centers? (Be prepared to explain, of course.)
- Do you think a worker center could be helpful in addressing those problems?
- How might you work with a worker center?
- Who else do you think might be interested?
- Do you know of possible funders in our community?
- Which workers are known as leaders on these issues?
- Do you know of workers who have led actions or organized others at their workplaces?

There is a good chance that many of the community organizations have already been doing some of the functions that you hope your center will assume. People at some organizations will be excited about your center doing these tasks so they don't have to do them. Others will feel threatened. Regardless of the response, approach these first contacts with the understanding that you are laying the foundation for long-term relationships. You are likely to work with these organizations and individuals for a long time once the worker center is established.

## Survey the Labor Community

Worker centers are an important new part of the labor movement, so it is critical to talk early on with leaders from organized labor. Generally you should have someone from labor leadership involved in your initial planning meetings.

In most communities, it is best to begin by meeting with the president of your local or regional labor council. You can find local contact information by visiting the AFL-CIO website at [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org). The AFL-CIO, the largest federation of unions in the country (although there are some large unions not affiliated with it), has been very supportive of worker centers. It has signed formal agreements with most of the worker center networks and has encouraged its local leadership to work closely with worker centers.

In large towns, central labor council (CLC) presidents are paid. In smaller communities and regions, these are volunteer or part-time positions. When you meet with the president or other leader, you should begin by getting to know the person. Find out about his or her background. How long has the person been in the leadership position? How did the person become a labor leader? Use the time to begin building a personal relationship if you don't already have it. This person is important for the future of the center.

Then ask the following kinds of questions:

- What community resources or organizations do you know that help low-wage workers who are not in unions?
- What unions are organizing low-wage workers?

- **What are the biggest challenges unions in our community are facing?**
- **Are you familiar with worker centers?** (Be prepared to explain, including the strong support for them from the AFL-CIO.)
- **Are there ways a worker center might help and work with labor unions in this community?**
- **What union leaders would be the most interested in a worker center? Which ones represent many low-wage and immigrant workers? Could you introduce me to them?**
- **Would you like to be on the initial planning group?**
- **If not, what is the best way for us to keep you abreast of our progress?**
- **Are there unions that might be able to offer financial support for the center?**
- **What are the best labor, employment, and workers' compensation law firms in town?**
- **Who else should we be talking with about this?**
- **Which labor council delegates would be interested in supporting the worker center?**

CLC presidents have a wealth of information about the local economy, major employers, potential funding sources, and local funding opportunities. A president may have a seat on the local United Way. Some CLCs may have extra physical space that might be donated to your center.

## Survey the Religious Community

Congregations and religious leaders in the community are critical allies. Congregations that serve low-income families can help you reach workers and may be very interested in supporting the development of a worker center. More-affluent congregations may have active social justice programs with members interested in supporting you. The religious community tends to be respected, well-connected, and have lots of resources that can help you build and develop a worker center. Around the country, congregations support worker centers in the following ways:

- Offering free or low-cost office space or meeting space
- Recruiting volunteers
- Giving money
- Promoting training sessions
- Providing work groups for special projects (sometimes youth groups and sometimes adult groups)
- Participating in delegations to help workers recover unpaid wages.

If you aren't sure where to begin, ask a clergyperson who is active in the community to provide you with an overview of your religious community. What are the congregations that minister primarily to low-income workers and poor people? If you are focused on a particular constituency, ask about the congregations that serve that constituency. What are the congregations that have been actively involved in helping low-income families through soup kitchens, shelters, and advocacy? (These congregations will likely be interested in your work.)



In most communities, and sometimes even in neighborhoods, there is a council of religious leaders. Sometimes it is interfaith, and sometimes it is just Christian clergy. These councils usually are volunteer associations, but the presidents or chairs tend to know most of the clergy and would be a good place to start.

In larger cities, there are denominational staff who are important to meet. For example, the Catholic Church is divided into dioceses. A bishop presides over a diocese. In the diocesan office, there will be important people to know and meet. Explore the website of the diocese to find good folks. There might be a social-action director, or a Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) director, or a Hispanic Apostolate director. All would be good folks with whom to meet. Other denominations and faith bodies may have key folks who work on social justice who would be good to meet.

Check to see if your community has a Jewish Community Relations Council. If so, meet with the leadership.

Similar to meeting with labor leaders, you are trying to build a relationship. Begin by getting to know the person and his or her background, and learn about the priorities of the congregation or denomination. After you have gotten to know about the person and congregation or denomination, ask the following kinds of questions:

- How does your faith group help address poverty?
- Have you been involved in supporting an increase in the minimum wage or other advocacy for workers?
- What kind of worker problems have you heard about in the community?
- Have you heard about wage theft? (Be prepared to explain.)
- Are you familiar with worker centers? (Be prepared to explain.)
- Do you think a worker center could be helpful in addressing those problems?
- How might you work with a worker center?
- Who else do you think might be interested? In your congregation? In the community?
- Do you know of possible funders in our community?
- Which congregations are known as leaders on these issues? Which denominations or faith groups?
- Do you know of workers who have led actions or organized others at their workplaces?

## **Survey Academic Institutions**

There are almost always faculty and student groups at universities and colleges that would be interested in supporting a worker center. Look for faculty members who teach labor history, social ethics, social movement history, labor law, community organizing, social work, Latin American studies, or business ethics. If you happen to have a labor studies center at a nearby university, start there. If there is a school of public health, find the faculty who teach occupational health. Because so many new worker centers do a wage theft study within their first couple of years, you will want to find potential academic partners to work with you on this and other reports you might prepare.

If you are having trouble finding contacts, see if there is someone connected with the Scholars Strategy Network ([www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org](http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org)) who might help you.

Student activists often are huge supporters of worker centers. Every worker center has students who volunteer, translate, and participate in actions. So many young people understand personally the travesty of low-wage work because they work in restaurants, retail stores, and other places that are known for low pay and poor treatment of workers. Even if they personally weren't taken advantage of, they have seen the abuse of other workers. In addition, most college students know people who have graduated but have not found jobs in their fields and are still working in low-wage jobs. Consequently, issues of work and wage theft are deeply felt for many students.

With faculty members, ask the following kinds of questions:

- Who in your institution teaches or writes on low-wage-worker issues?
- Are there faculty members who have supported labor struggles in town or at the university?
- Who might work with a worker center on research projects, such as investigating wage theft in the community?
- Who handles interns or community service projects?
- Who handles work-study? Do you know if work-study students are ever placed with nonprofits? (Some colleges use all the work-study slots internally. Others allow them to work for nonprofits.)
- Who else in other schools should we talk with?

With students, ask the following types of questions:

- Which student groups on campus have supported worker issues?
- What kinds of things have you done?
- Which groups should we meet with?
- Are you familiar with worker centers? (Explain how helpful students have been in other communities.)
- How do you think your student group might be interested in getting involved?
- Do you know student groups on other campuses?

## **Survey the Philanthropic Community**

Fund-raising will need to be one of your top priorities if you want to grow the work. It takes money to hire staff, get an office, and reach out to lots of workers. Thus, it is good to talk with potential funders early on. At a minimum, you should survey key foundation folks who fund social justice work in your community. Don't worry, the list won't be very long! Also, talk with someone at the United Way about its focus on low-wage workers.

There will also be a set of big individual donors who might support the work, but it may be hard to meet with them. Is there a friendly director of another nonprofit who might introduce you? Or a supportive religious leader who knows potential individual donors? Or a union leader who could introduce you?

If you can, try to have at least one of the low-wage workers who are part of your leadership team be a part of the meeting with the foundation leaders. Having a worker talk about his or her experience in the community makes it clear that the problems are urgent.

For folks in the philanthropic community, ask the following kinds of questions:

- What kinds of low-wage worker projects and campaigns are you already supporting?
- Do you know about the roles worker centers have played in other communities? (Be prepared to explain.)
- Do you think you might support a worker center in our town?
- What would we need to do to be considered for support?
- What would be the concerns you might have about a center?
- Who else in the funding world should we be talking with? Can you introduce us?

### **Survey Labor and Employment Attorneys**

If you have a strong union movement in your community, ask labor leaders about friendly attorneys in your community. Meet with those recommended.

You can also find attorneys who work on labor and employment issues by checking the websites of attorney association groups. For a list of the kinds of attorneys to approach, see chapter 29. Begin by finding out who in your community is a member of the National Employment Lawyers Association ([www.nela.org](http://www.nela.org)) or the Workplace Action and Litigation Group ([www.wilg.org](http://www.wilg.org)) and approaching them.

Ask attorneys these kinds of questions:

- How long have you been representing workers?
- What kinds of cases do you see most often?
- What industries or sectors in the community seem to have the most problems?
- Are you familiar with worker centers? (Be prepared to explain.)
- Would you be able to help with the development of a center?
- How might you be able to help?

Most worker centers work with attorneys in a variety of ways. Use these meetings to build long-term relationships.

### **Keep Good Notes**

After each meeting, be sure to type up good notes. Jot down names of key people to meet when you learn of them. Make sure you get and keep each person's contact information. Eventually you should build a database of contacts. Initial survey meetings will help build your database.

Write a summary of the key contacts and institutions in each category—community organizations, labor, religious community, academic community, legal community, and philanthropic community.

After you have met with a wide variety of people, think about who had the most passion for your work. Who was excited about building a worker center and wanted to help? Who was well connected with workers, resources, and allies?

If you learn about another worker center that already exists or another group of people who wants to form one, schedule a meeting right away. Perhaps you can join forces. If it doesn't make sense to join forces, figure out how to define the differences in the

**work and/or constituencies and support one another. The movement does not need more groups competing and badmouthing one another.**

Use the results of your survey and the initial answers to the questions around geographic focus, constituency, and sector focus to figure out who should be invited to the first planning meetings. Chapter 3 outlines how to recruit a leadership planning team, and then chapter 4 looks at how to prepare for the first meetings.

# 3 | Recruiting a Leadership Planning Team

Many people like to be in on a project from the beginning. It allows them to have input into the design and direction of the project. They get to know the others who have a dream of starting and building a worker center. The initial leaders are likely to be the most active volunteers, promoters, and supporters, including financial supporters. Consequently, it is good to think carefully from the beginning about who could and should be invited to the initial leadership table.

The very first visionary leadership planning team may indeed be a very small group that is charged with conducting the community survey, but don't begin to formalize even this team, let alone a more structured board, before you have done a thorough assessment of the community as identified in chapter 2. Care must be taken to assure a balanced, thoughtful, and committed founding group.

Once you've completed the community survey and followed up with most of the key people recommended, especially those who were repeatedly recommended, you can begin recruiting people to take part in the planning process. Not everyone will want to or be able to participate so don't worry about inviting more people than you really hope will come.

## Consider the Categories of Leaders

Building a worker center takes skills and connections. First, you want workers in low-wage jobs who have already shown leadership and passion around standing up for themselves and others. Next, you want community leaders who already work with workers in low-wage jobs, such as community organizations, social service agencies, and unions, particularly unions that organize workers in low-wage jobs, as well as official AFL-CIO leaders. Review the results from your survey.

Then you want community leaders that are well connected and respected throughout the community and can bring networks and resources. Religious leaders, employment attorneys, and philanthropic staff are usually well networked in the community. Again review the results from your survey.

The Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa had a very strong planning process. The organizers had the following organizations, in addition to workers themselves, involved in the planning process: American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees, Local 12; American Federation of Teachers, Local 716; Catholic Diocese of

Davenport; Church of the Nazarene; Consultation for Religious Communities; Faith United Church of Christ; First Mennonite Church of Iowa City; Grupo Manantial (mothers' group); Hawkeye Labor Council, AFL-CIO; Housing Fellowship; Iglesia Torre Fuerte; Immigrant Voices Project; International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 238; International Union of Painters & Allied Trades, District Council 81; International Union of Painters & Allied Trades, Local 447; Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement; Iowa City Congregational United Church of Christ; Iowa City Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO; Iowa City Sanctuary City Committee; Iowa Helping Center; Iowa State Building Trades; Service Employees International Union, Local 199; St. Patrick Catholic Church of Iowa City; Sudanese-American Community Association; UE Local 896, COGS; Unitarian Universalist Society, Iowa City; United Food & Commercial Workers, Local 431; United Brotherhood of Carpenters, Local 1260; University of Iowa Center for Human Rights; University of Iowa Clinical Law Programs; University of Iowa Labor Center; and University of Iowa Latino Law Students' Association

### Clear First Date with Critical People

If there are a handful of folks whom you believe *must* be at the first planning meeting, clear the possible dates with them before making a public announcement. Set the date a month or so out to convey the seriousness of the meeting and to give you adequate time to personally recruit people.

Draft the first agenda based on the suggestions in chapter 4. Send a letter of invitation to participate in the planning process along with a draft agenda to each person on your prospective planning leadership list. Send this out three to four weeks ahead of time. Ask for RSVPs and give a deadline for responding.

### Call Everyone

The most important thing to get people to a meeting is phoning. Place a personal call to each person on the prospective planning leadership list. Review the purposes of the meeting and why you would like the person to be there. Get the person's commitment over the phone to be at the meeting. Do not rely on e-mail for the first confirmation of participation.

Talk with each person about:

- Your vision for a worker center
- Why the person you are inviting is important to the process
- Who else has been invited and why this will be a great group of people with whom to work and plan
- How you will try to tap each person's strengths and respect everyone's time.

A couple of days before the meeting you can e-mail or text everyone who has said he or she is coming and ask for a second confirmation. If you don't hear back from the person, call again.

An organizers' rule is that half of those who told you twice they are coming will actually show up. Given the excitement that you should be generating about this project,