

A NATIONAL WORKER CENTER - AFL-CIO PARTNERSHIP

Worker centers are a new type of community-based institution that advocate for the rights of workers who typically do not have union representation and provide these workers with a wide range of opportunities for collective and individual empowerment. These worker centers play multiple roles, including raising wage and labor standards for workers in their communities, as well as helping workers gain a voice in society. Many worker centers provide legal assistance regarding employment-related issues. Some offer workers' rights and other job-related training classes and workshops. Others conduct research and report on sub-standard conditions in specific industries. Yet others focus on enforcing labor standards under the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and other employment laws and regulations. In a number of instances, worker centers have tried organizing or they have referred workers seeking union representation to established unions.

Worker centers have grown significantly in number over the past decade. Ten years ago, there were less than a dozen such centers in the United States; today, there are over 140 in 31 states, in rural areas as well as in large urban centers.

Many of these centers are important to the immigrant community and play an essential role in helping immigrant workers understand and enforce their workplace rights. In doing so, they also play a critical role for all workers B immigrant and U.S.-born alike B by fighting unscrupulous employers who try to use the immigrant workforce to lower wage and other benefit standards that protect the entire workforce.

Other worker centers serve African-American communities or a more racially and ethnically mixed population. Worker centers in the South are working with Latino and African American communities, for example, to bridge cultural differences that are causing tensions in these communities and dividing workers in the workplace. Worker centers are conducting culturally appropriate workers' rights trainings that highlight the need for worker solidarity.

In some communities, worker centers and unions have been working collaboratively on a variety of issues: lobbying state legislatures and city mayors and councils to pass worker-friendly laws and ordinances; identifying and shining the spotlight on industry and employer-specific abuses; enlisting government agencies' support to devise more effective enforcement strategies. Recent examples of cooperation include the joint lobbying of worker centers in Chicago and the Illinois AFL-CIO in support of a new law that would criminalize the failure of employers to comply with state wage and hour law, and the common efforts of a D.C. worker center and the D.C. Labor Council that resulted in a badly needed overhaul of Washington's workers' compensation system. In 2003, worker centers in Los Angeles and the California Federation of Labor were the chief sponsors of a law that regulates the use of contractors and sub-contractors in the construction, farm, garment, janitorial and security guard industries. In

the South, a worker center has been providing training to union organizers on the rights of immigrant workers, as well as cross-cultural issues, and has provided bilingual steward training jointly with the union.

In a few places, experiences involving local worker centers and the labor movement have been less positive, such as where worker centers were seen by unions to be supplying workers to non-union contractors, causing the lowering of wage standards, or where unions were seen by worker centers as promoting legislation that served labor's interests at the expense of non-union workers. We must recognize that in certain locations, the labor movement and the worker centers do not always share the same immediate interests.

In the overwhelming majority of locations, however, the relationships have been non-existent--with the two communities having very little contact--despite their typically common interests in many of the same issues. Rutgers University Professor Janice Fine, in one recent survey, found that only 14 percent of worker centers had a direct connection to unions or union organizing drives.

Meanwhile, as the worker center community becomes more organized and takes on more of the same struggles the labor movement has traditionally fought, it has become increasingly clear that the effectiveness of each impacts not only on its own members, but on all workers--union and non-union, immigrant and non-immigrant--who share a common interest in establishing and maintaining good jobs with decent wages and benefits.

Worker centers are, in fact, a vibrant and important part of today's labor movement. A stronger relationship with the AFL-CIO will benefit both organized workers and the worker centers, which need an institutional relationship with the organized labor movement in order to translate gains they accomplish on behalf of the workers they serve into the lasting improvement of working conditions.

Creating A National Worker Center Partnership

The goal of a National Worker Center Partnership is to strengthen the ability of the labor movement and the worker centers to promote and enforce the workplace rights of the workers served by both organizations, including immigrant workers, building and construction trade workers, low-wage workers, meatpacking industry workers, and many others by building connections between these organizations, especially at the local level.

The worker centers will benefit greatly from the labor movement's extensive involvement and experience in policy and legislative initiatives on the local, state and national levels. This relationship will also benefit the unions and other affiliates of the AFL-CIO by allowing them to connect to the worker center communities in a structured and meaningful way and to develop new methods in partnership with these centers in order to expose abuses and improve workplace standards in various industries to the benefit of all workers--whether union or non-union; whether immigrant or U.S. born.

To meet these goals, the President of the AFL-CIO is hereby authorized to issue Certificates of Affiliation to individual worker centers, or to an association of worker centers, at the request of a state federation and/or central labor council where the worker center is located, provided that the state federation and/or central labor council has determined that the partnership will be mutually beneficial and the organizations have shared goals. The partnerships will be forged on a voluntary basis. State and local labor movements that see value in developing closer ties to the worker center movement are hereby encouraged to do so; no state federation or central labor council and no worker center that does not wish to enter into such an affiliation arrangement shall be required to do so. Further, in all cases the President shall provide to all national affiliates advance notification of a request to issue a Certificate of Affiliation, so that any national union that objects to a particular affiliation may have the opportunity to do so.

Such certificates of affiliation will authorize the worker center in question, and/or an association of worker centers, to affiliate with the local state federation and/or local central labor council in order to build ties between these organizations and enable them to work cooperatively on issues of mutual concern. Such affiliation will entitle the worker center/association of worker centers to a representative in the state federation and/or central labor council in question. The President is further authorized to establish a fee for worker centers seeking Certificates of Affiliation, but such fee shall be no more than that applying to constituency groups and/or retiree groups similarly affiliated. The President may establish such other rules relating to certificates of affiliation as he deems necessary, which shall be reported upon to the Executive Council.

Workers served by worker centers that receive such certificates of affiliation, or by their associations, shall be eligible for membership in Working America, the AFL-CIO's community affiliate. Such worker centers will promote and encourage Working America membership where it makes sense for the worker center to do so. Working America and the worker centers in question will develop specific materials geared to the community for this purpose.

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