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CHAPTER FIVE

**Organizing Immigrant Workers**

*Case Studies from Southern California*

**Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong**

**F**oreign-born workers, especially those from Mexico and Central America, are the core of the low-wage workforce in contemporary southern California, and they have been the focus of many recent union recruitment efforts there. The regional landscape, like the national one, is littered with organizing failures, but there have also been some spectacularly successful efforts to bring Latino immigrants into the union fold during the 1990s. This chapter considers the two best-known success stories—one involving janitors who clean office buildings in Los Angeles and another concerning drywall hangers in the region's residential construction industry. We compare these two cases to two instances of large-scale immigrant organizing efforts that have yet to achieve their goals. One case involves garment workers employed by Guess, Inc. and the other concerns truckers servicing the Los Angeles—Long Beach port. On that basis we explore the conditions that have facilitated, and those that have impeded, recent efforts to unionize immigrants in the region, focusing particularly on the role of union commitment and strategy.

In all four of our cases, as in most manual occupations in late twentieth-century southern California, the labor force consists overwhelmingly of foreign-born Latinos. Thus, in our analysis the presence of an immigrant-dominated workforce is a constant, not a variable, and we cannot assess systematically here the relative “organizability” of foreign- and native-born workers. However, our research does confirm Delgado’s (1993) claim that immigrant workers, despite their obvious vulnerabil-

ity to deportation and other limits on their legal rights (especially for the undocumented), are by no means impossible to unionize. Anyone who doubts this need only consider the two cases of success, which created widespread awareness of the potential for immigrant unionization within southern California's labor movement in the early 1990s. Local 399 of the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) Justice for Janitors (J for J) campaign won a contract from a major building cleaning contractor in the summer of 1990, the triumphal conclusion of a two-year Los Angeles-based organizing drive that brought janitorial membership in Local 399 to 8,000, up from about 1,800 five years earlier. This was the largest private-sector union organizing achievement involving Latino immigrants since the United Farm Workers' victories of the early 1970s. Two years after the janitors' victory, a five-month strike by thousands of Mexican immigrant drywall hangers (workers who install the sheetrock panels that make up the interior walls of modern buildings) halted residential construction throughout southern California. This yielded a union contract that doubled drywallers' wages in Los Angeles and surrounding counties and brought 2,400 previously nonunion workers into Carpenters Local 2361.

These impressive victories appeared to lay the foundation for a broader effort to unionize the region's vast population of foreign-born workers, and hopes that this might occur were bolstered by the ascent of new, more progressive leaders to top positions in the national AFL-CIO in 1995. And yet, a decade after these two strikes, the vast bulk of the immigrant workforce in southern California remains outside the union fold. There have been scattered immigrant organizing successes in the area since 1992—most notably the 1999 union election that added 74,000 Los Angeles home-care workers to the ranks of the SEIU, many of them foreign born—as well as many campaigns ending in failure or stalemate. Our third and fourth case studies are high-profile examples from the latter group. One is the effort launched in the mid-1990s by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) and then continued by the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE) to unionize Guess, Inc.<sup>1</sup> The other case is the

grassroots organizing effort among the thousands of truck drivers who service the Los Angeles–Long Beach waterfront, now the world's third-largest port. These drivers launched a series of work stoppages in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in a massive and highly effective strike in 1996 whose main goal was to secure union representation with the Communication Workers of America (CWA). However, both the Guess workers and the port truckers, despite energetic and imaginative organizing efforts, remain nonunion today. By dissecting the problems these two campaigns confronted and comparing them to the successes of the janitors and drywallers, we hope to illuminate the factors that shaped the disparate outcomes.

Our basic claim is that internal union problems, which led to inadequate strategies or compromised commitment, was the key factor undermining the Guess campaign and the collapse of the 1996 port truckers' strike. The comparison to the janitors and drywallers suggests that unionization can be and has been achieved among immigrant workers under conditions generally similar to those that prevailed in the garment and truckers' cases. To be sure, there were some notable additional obstacles that organizers had to confront in the latter campaigns. The most obvious of these is the vulnerability to capital flight in the garment case. Unlike janitorial, construction, and trucking work, which are not geographically mobile, garment firms can and often do move work to new and sometimes distant locations to cut labor costs and to avoid or resist unionization. Indeed, Guess ultimately did relocate much of its production to Mexico in the face of the ILGWU/UNITE organizing drive, although this was as much a result as a cause of the campaign's weakness. Even with the constant threat of capital mobility, there is more apparel employment in greater Los Angeles today than anywhere else in the United States and more employment in apparel than in any other manufacturing industry in the area, so that there is no shortage of garment workers for union organizers to target. Moreover, immigrants have been successfully unionized in manufacturing settings in Los Angeles in recent years (see, for example, Delgado 1993 and Zabin 2000).

The Los Angeles–Long Beach port truckers also face some special organizing obstacles, most important the fact that as independent contractors the majority are legally ineligible for conventional forms of

<sup>1</sup> UNITE was formed in 1995 by a merger between the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers (ACTWU).

unionization. Yet this did not prevent the truckers from forming a number of independent labor organizations in the 1980s and 1990s nor from launching several large-scale strikes, culminating in the huge 1996 walkout that nearly succeeded in winning union recognition. Again, we argue that the negative outcome was due primarily to strategic weaknesses within the union, not to the peculiarities of the industry or the independent contractor problem.

Our effort draws inspiration from and in many respects is analogous to Bronfenbrenner's (1997a) pioneering research on union strategies, which seeks to specify the characteristics of organizing campaigns that are most likely to yield success. However, there are at least two important differences between her work and ours. First, whereas Bronfenbrenner's methodology is largely quantitative, based on analysis of hundreds of organizing campaigns, ours is qualitative and includes only a few cases. Second, whereas Bronfenbrenner analyzed unionization efforts culminating in elections held under the auspices of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the traditional route to union recognition in the United States, none of our four cases involved NLRB elections. In all of the occupational groups involved, this approach was ruled out by the particular organizational features of the industries in which they were embedded. Because building services, residential construction, and garments all rely on extensive subcontracting, a union electoral victory at any given firm would merely lead the building owner, housing developer, or clothing manufacturer to shift work to nonunion subcontractors, typically putting the newly unionized firm out of business and its employees out of work. NLRB-oriented organizing also is impractical in intermodal trucking, both because of the large number of firms in the industry and because the owner-operators that now dominate the occupation are not legally "employees" and thus are not eligible to vote in NLRB elections. Thus, in all four of our cases, the campaigns necessarily departed from the traditional unionization model oriented toward NLRB elections, relying instead on innovative strategies and tactics.

The alternative organizing approaches that were used in launching these campaigns can be divided into leadership-initiated and bottom-up initiatives. Both the janitors' and the garment workers' campaigns were initiated by union leaders and were strategically designed to exert intensive pressure on the powerful individuals and groups within each

industry to win union recognition. While these two campaigns also included grassroots organizing among workers, both were launched by established union leaders and based on careful research. By contrast, the drywallers' and port truckers' organizing was begun by rank-and-file workers—including, to be sure, key individuals with strong leadership skills. Although the drywallers and truckers did seek and ultimately receive support from established union organizations, in both cases the involvement of established labor unions was limited and relatively belated. Indigenous organizing efforts among workers themselves were the main force propelling these two campaigns forward.

Based on this four-way comparison, we argue that what really matters is not whether a union organizing campaign begins as a strategic effort to put pressure directly on the decision makers in an industry or as a bottom-up, grassroots mobilization of workers on the ground. Rather, success seems to depend on effectively combining the two approaches into a comprehensive strategy. Both the janitors and the drywallers managed to bring these two crucial elements together, even though one began as a leadership-initiated effort and the other as a bottom-up campaign. In the Guess case, largely for reasons related to the 1995 union merger that made the ILGWU part of UNITE, what was originally conceived as a comprehensive campaign devolved into a more limited, publicity-driven effort; here the weakness of the grassroots organizing proved fatal. For the port truckers, the converse was true: The campaign's strength was at the level of bottom-up mobilization, while the CWA's coordination efforts at the top floundered, again leading to an unsuccessful outcome.

In both of these cases, internal union problems were the critical obstacles to success. Given the intense employer opposition that faces virtually all union organizing in the late twentieth century, any lack of resolve or strategic weakness on the union side can easily undermine a campaign. Although it is impossible to know with certainty what the outcome would have been if the organizers had done everything right at Guess and in the port truckers' campaign—and surely there are cases of organizing efforts in which the union does everything right but is nonetheless outmaneuvered by powerful employers—our comparison to the janitors and drywallers suggests that determined and skillful organizing, backed up with adequate financial and legal resources, can make or break unionization efforts among immigrant workers in southern California.

This seemingly voluntaristic analysis is not entirely without a structural dimension, however. Indeed, there were particular economic, political, and social factors that made these four occupational groups ripe targets for organizing in the first place, and thus it is hardly accidental that organizing efforts *emerged* in these four cases and not in others. However, our focus here is not on this question, but instead on explaining what happened after these highly promising efforts began, and specifically on the factors yielding success or failure. Before considering each case in detail, in the next section we briefly sketch out the key common background factors that the four share. Despite their location in different industries and sectors, all of the occupational groups involved were highly unionized in the southern California region prior to the post-1965 surge in immigration (although garment workers less so than the others). In all four, union density declined drastically before the immigrant influx, and the resulting deterioration in wages, benefits, and working conditions then led native-born workers to abandon these occupations in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They were soon replaced by low-wage immigrants, and as employment skyrocketed in all four fields, vigorous new organizing efforts emerged among the newly recruited foreign-born workers. These processes of union decline and immigrant incorporation into the labor market were remarkably similar across these otherwise diverse cases, and in all four, serious unionization efforts emerged in this context.

### Union Decline and the Immigrant Influx

Southern California historically was a bastion of the open shop, where unions never penetrated as deeply as in the northern part of the state. However, organized labor did gain a foothold in the 1930s and 1940s in many industries, janitorial, garments, trucking, and construction among them. By the early 1970s, union density (union members as a percentage of all nonfarm wage and salary workers) in the Los Angeles–Long Beach metropolitan area was roughly equivalent to that in the state of California as a whole, hovering around 30 percent. About 80 percent of residential drywallers and nearly all of the truckers servicing the Los Angeles–Long Beach port were unionized by the Carpenters and Team-

sters unions, respectively, SEIU Local 399 had about 5,000 janitorial members in the mid-1970s, including nearly all of those who cleaned the major downtown Los Angeles office buildings as well as some in surrounding areas. And although union density was less extensive in garments than in these other fields, the ILGWU had about 4,000 to 5,000 members in Los Angeles in the mid-1970s.

In all four cases, however, as employers went on the offensive both nationally and in the southern California region, union power collapsed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, precipitating deep cuts in wages, the virtual disappearance of fringe benefits, and dramatic deterioration in working conditions. In the Los Angeles–Long Beach area, union density fell from 30 percent in 1967 to less than 20 percent twenty years later; over that same period the decline was from 24 to 14 percent in the Anaheim–Santa Ana–Garden Grove metropolitan area of Orange County (just south of Los Angeles), and from 31 to 19 percent statewide (California Department of Industrial Relations, various years).

Capital mobility was often cited as the force behind union decline in the garment industry, yet regional employment in the industry expanded rapidly in this period even as the union virtually collapsed. Moreover, in building services, residential construction, and trucking, none of which can be relocated to take advantage of cheaper labor costs elsewhere on the globe, unions were equally devastated during this same period. In all these cases, employer determination to weaken or eliminate unions, along with an increasingly inhospitable political environment (leading to deregulation in trucking, among other factors), were the key forces propelling deunionization. Nonunion firms came to dominate all four industries in the region by the mid-1980s, despite their otherwise varied characteristics. This in turn led to the exit of massive numbers of native-born “Anglos” (and in the case of janitors, African Americans as well) from the workforce. But in the meantime, demand for labor in all four industries was expanding dramatically, so employers turned to the vast and growing supply of Latino immigrants. The region, and Los Angeles in particular, was the destination of choice for both documented and undocumented post-1965 immigrants, especially those from Latin America, and their arrival radically altered the composition of southern California’s working class. By 1990, one in three Los Angeles county residents was born outside the United

States. And whereas as recently as 1970, only 12 percent of employed persons in the five-county Los Angeles area (Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties) were foreign born; by 1990 the figure had shot up to 33 percent. Most immigrants in the region are Latino, and within that category they come primarily from three countries: Mexico (with by far the largest share), El Salvador, and Guatemala. In low-wage manual and service occupations like garment, janitorial, trucking, and drywall work, Latino immigrants are especially predominant (see Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996).

Native-born workers rapidly exited all four fields of employment as a result of union decline and the accompanying deterioration in wages and benefits, not the other way round. Some workers and union officials, particularly in the drywall case, blamed the decline in union strength on the availability of cheap immigrant labor in the region. But when we compare southern California to other parts of the United States, this view loses credibility. For example, in New York City, there was an influx of immigrants into janitorial work only slightly below the level in Los Angeles, yet there was no significant erosion in the union's strength, and wages remained relatively high. Similarly, in garments, the New York union declined far less than in Los Angeles, despite a massive increase in immigrant employment in both cities. By contrast, in both trucking and construction, there was a national process of sharp deunionization, yet in most parts of the country immigrants were not a significant part of the workforce. In construction, for example, nationally 90.6 percent of unionized workers were white in 1977-78 and 89.0 in 1989; similarly, nonunion construction workers were 91 percent white at both dates (Allen 1994: 415).

Native-born workers thus exited all four occupations in southern California in response to the changes induced by union decline. It was not immigrant competition that induced union decline, but union decline that led natives to exit and immigrants to enter these fields. Indeed, natives remained numerous in sectors in which unions maintained a presence (public-sector janitorial work, long-distance trucking, and commercial drywalling), while leaving the less attractive, newly deunionized positions to recent immigrants, who eagerly filled the void. Even in the garment trade, in which immigrants were a longstanding presence, native-born workers exited in the wake of the union's utter collapse, and immigrants became even more dominant.

By the late 1980s, then, all four of these occupations had been utterly transformed. The unions had been crippled, wages and benefits had declined dramatically, and the composition of the workforce had shifted toward nearly complete reliance on Latino immigrants. It was against this background that new union organizing campaigns were launched in the 1990s within all four industries. Long presumed to be "willing" to work for low pay and to be generally tractable, immigrant workers suddenly emerged as a core source of union militancy in the 1990s, to the surprise of most observers. In addition, Latinos rose to prominent leadership positions in the local labor movement, most notably with the (contested) election in 1996 of Miguel Contreras to head the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, the first non-Anglo to hold that position (Sipchen 1997). These many parallel developments in our four cases notwithstanding, the effort to revive unionism in each moved along distinct trajectories and with divergent outcomes. We are now ready to consider each of the cases in more detail.

### Successful Leadership-Initiated Organizing: Justice for Janitors

In the 1980s, then-SEIU president John Sweeney (who now heads the AFL-CIO) began a concerted effort to revitalize the union. He increased the resources devoted to organizing and recruited scores of new staff members, many of them progressives with experience in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Among other initiatives, Sweeney aimed to reorganize what had once been the SEIU's primary base, namely, building services, which had been severely eroded in many cities (although not in New York, Chicago, or San Francisco). The result was the national J for J campaign, which arrived in Los Angeles in 1988 after some modest successes in smaller cities, most notably Denver.<sup>2</sup> The leadership and most of the financial resources devoted to the effort came directly from SEIU headquarters, and in Los Angeles as in other cities where J for J was launched, the campaign proceeded not because of support, but rather active resistance, from many

<sup>2</sup>For a more detailed account of this case, see Waldinger et al., 1998.

established local union officials. Nor did this campaign originate at the grassroots level; it was the brainchild of a national, highly centralized leadership.

Both nationally and in Los Angeles, J for J deliberately steered clear of the NLRB representation election process for several reasons. Not only did that process increasingly favor employers in this period, but also, in the organizers' view, it unduly distanced the union from rank-and-file workers. "[NLRB] elections are controlled by the bosses," one organizer said. "It's an alienating process for workers and . . . separates the union from the workers." The NLRB process was in any case problematic in this industry, simply because most building owners' contracts with cleaning firms included 30-day cancellation clauses. If the union won a representation election, the building owner could simply switch to a new, nonunion cleaning contractor to effectively void the result. The architects of J for J, then, needed a non-NLRB organizing strategy that would target the building owners as much as the immediate employers (i.e., the cleaning contractors). What gradually emerged was the "comprehensive campaign," which one J for J organizer defined as "a war against the employers *and* the building owners, waged on all fronts [without] leaving any stone unturned." In the words of one Los Angeles janitor, "The strategy was attack, attack, attack." This was an industry-wide organizing strategy—essential given the building owners' ability to rapidly shift work from one contractor to another—and was designed to gain control over all the key players in a local labor market so that wages were taken out of competition.

One of J for J's major strengths was a business-oriented understanding of the industry. As one organizer put it, "We always try to understand the industry as it understands itself." From its inception, the Los Angeles campaign had a full-time research/corporate person, whose job was to gather information—later supplemented by data supplied by researchers at SEIU headquarters in Washington. One impressed management informant observed that the SEIU had the ability to "ferret out the weaknesses" of the ownership/management structure in any particular situation. This effort depended on access to highly skilled, often college-educated organizers and researchers, combined with the technological resources that enabled them to be effective. Once again this underscores the critical role of the progressive national leadership in J for J's effectiveness.

Research was important not only for targeting building owners and other key players in the industry, but also for activating the membership base. "Our economists know how to crunch the numbers. . . the real numbers," one organizer said. "Someone will get pissed if they learn that it costs the owner one cent to give them a raise." Understanding the industry, then, was a tool in the hands of the workers, allowing them to see how and why they had the potential to turn things around.

J for J also relied heavily on guerrilla-style legal tactics: While studiously avoiding representation elections, Local 399 did file complaints with the NLRB over discrimination against union activists and other "unfair labor practices." Organizers also pursued legal redress through other government agencies in protest of health and safety violations and the like. These efforts put economic pressure on the contractors, whose legal costs quickly mounted, and at the same time allowed the union to serve as the effective representative of the workers even without official recognition. "We called it 'acting union without a contract,'" an organizer explained. "That was what we tried to do with the workers of the nonunion companies. It didn't require a contract for them to redefine their relationship to their employer and to defend their rights." Filing unfair labor practice complaints also permitted janitors to go on strike under certain conditions with legal protection against being permanently replaced.

J for J also became highly skilled at orchestrating "in your face" media-oriented events. For example, a demonstration at a building that was profiled in the television series *L.A. Law* and was being cleaned by a nonunion firm dubbed the structure the "Home of the L.A. Lawless" in a publicity stunt that focused on various legal violations. In other instances, J for J took a group of workers to the country club frequented by the owner of a cleaning firm, where they raised a ruckus, chanting and screaming, and they performed street theater in front of a restaurant while an industry player dined inside. At the glitzy Century City complex adjacent to Beverly Hills, where the Los Angeles J for J campaign ultimately focused much of its energy, a series of such publicity stunts were staged to draw attention to the janitors' plight. "The denizens of Century City were not interested in having a bunch of Latino janitors out there in the daytime screaming and yelling," an or-

ganizer recalled. "It's fine for us to come in at night and clean their buildings, but they didn't want to look us in the face during the daytime." Such tactics publicly embarrassed key individuals in the industry while also making life difficult for building tenants.

Another critical element of the J for J strategy involved mobilizing political allies. The organizing campaign took place in the context of a massive building boom in downtown Los Angeles. As construction could not begin without approval from the city's Community Redevelopment Authority (CRA), the union had a powerful lever on which to lean. During this period the head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor sat on the CRA's board, as did other potential allies; consequently, no office tower built after 1987 opened up without a unionized cleaning crew. Similarly, the union could exert political pressure on developers and owners in many instances. "The only people with money to own buildings are banks, insurance companies, and pension funds," one organizer noted with only slight exaggeration. Such institutions often were vulnerable to the union's political leverage. An organizer recounted one example involving the ARCO Center, a huge office tower in downtown LA that was built with pension-fund money. "The owner didn't call us back. We found out that the pension funds invested in the project came from Ohio PERS [Public Employee Retirement System]. We called the union rep in Ohio, who called the real estate administrator, who then called the development partner, who then called the union."

The union was also able to mobilize linkages to local political leaders. In 1990, after the Los Angeles police violently attacked demonstrating janitors at Century City, the union, with help from the County Federation of Labor, contacted then-mayor Tom Bradley, who phoned the principal ownership interests at Century City to voice his concern over the incident. Yet another source of strength was support from unions representing janitors in other cities. Most important, the powerful leader of the giant SEIU Local 32B-32J in New York, Gus Bevona, lent a hand after viewing on video the Los Angeles police beating of the Century City strikers and putting pressure on the main cleaning contractor in Century City, International Service Systems (ISS), which was headquartered in New York and under contract with Local 32B-32J. "Bevona called the president of ISS into his office, and after making him wait for two and a half hours, threatened that if he didn't rec-

ognize the Los Angeles union, all hell would break loose [at ISS buildings in New York]," an organizer recalled. "The contract with ISS was signed that day."

Although all these elements of the campaign were critically important, ultimately J for J's ability to put pressure on employers also relied on its success in galvanizing the rank and file into action. For example, Bevona would not have intervened had it not been for the previous mobilization of strikers on the ground three thousand miles away. That the Los Angeles janitorial workforce was made up largely of Latino immigrants facilitated the mobilization process. Although J for J has enjoyed some victories in cities where immigrants are not a major presence in the janitorial workforce, the Los Angeles campaign was by far the most successful. "The reason that Los Angeles is the shining star of the union is that we've had the highest percentage of workers' participation, have the highest worker turnout, and the highest percentage of workers going to jail and getting arrested," an organizer explained. "At heart and soul, there has to be a mobilized workforce."

The social structure of immigration involved a series of interlocking networks that were central to the union-building process. In addition, the peculiar conditions of building service work helped create a sense of occupational community: Working at night, unlike most workers, the janitors were thrown together as a group. Many lived in the same neighborhoods or even the same buildings and rode the buses to work together. As an organizer put it, "even though L.A. is famous for no community, we found a community of janitors." Class consciousness may also have been higher among these particular immigrants, both because of their experiences in their home countries and because of the stigmatization that they suffered in the process of immigration. "If you ask, 'Que piensa de la union?' [What do you think of the union?], they answer, 'La union hace la fuerza' [Union is power]," an organizer recalled. Among the Central American janitors there was also a sizable group of seasoned activists who had been involved in left-wing or union activity back home. That experience did more than impart organizing skills or a proclivity toward activism; it put the risks entailed in a union drive into an unusual perspective. "With the Salvadorans, you find different attitudes," an organizer noted. "There, if you were in a union, they killed you. Here, you lost a job at \$4.25 an hour." If, as this suggests,

the social processes underlying immigration had the potential to facilitate union organizing, that potential was not always realized, as our next case study shows.

### An Unsuccessful Leadership-Initiated Campaign: Organizing Guess

In the mid-1990s, the ILGWU decided to make a concerted effort to organize one of the major players in the Los Angeles garment industry, namely, the designer jeans manufacturer Guess, Inc.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the janitors' case, the national union leadership did not impose the organizing campaign on a reluctant local leadership; rather, the Los Angeles organizing staff, working closely with the ILGWU's national organizing director, persuaded the top union leadership in New York to provide resources to launch the campaign. The impetus within the union was thus different than in the J for J case, emerging from mid-level leaders rather than at the top of the organization. But like J for J, the Guess campaign was an effort conceived by union leaders as part of a strategy for labor movement revitalization.

By the 1990s Los Angeles had emerged as the nation's largest center of apparel manufacturing. But the ILGWU's membership in the West had been declining since the 1970s, so that only a few hundred garment workers in Los Angeles were unionized—not even one percent of the industry's rapidly growing workforce of well over 100,000. The ILGWU leadership, headquartered in New York, still viewed Los Angeles as a remote hinterland and did not see the crisis there as an especially pressing concern. But locally, the ILGWU had accumulated an impressive record of experience in organizing the immigrant workers who had come to dominate the low-wage workforce in Los Angeles. Back in the mid-1970s, the union's Western organizing director developed a program targeting immigrant workers for recruitment and hired a cadre of about ten young, progressive Latino organizers for this purpose. They succeeded in winning union representation elections at

a substantial number of immigrant-employing plants in the vast industrial plains crisscrossing Los Angeles. Virtually all of these plants were outside the garment industry, however, including a muffler factory, a furniture shop, a plant that made pillows, and even a firm that manufactured tombstones. "We were not targeting any industries," one organizer recalled. "It was more, 'This has to be a movement of immigrant workers' than 'This is the garment workers' union.' We didn't concentrate on garments."

This effort did nothing to reverse the erosion of unionism in the Los Angeles garment industry, which continued apace. However, it had other important results. It offered a means of maintaining the ILGWU's Los Angeles presence, providing a new constituency that gradually replaced the members continually being lost in the garment shops as intense competition from offshore garment contractors fed employers' determination to eliminate the union from those few shops where it still had a foothold. The effort also helped shape a new generation of Latino union organizers, many of whom would devote their lives to the local labor movement and some of whom later became prominent local union leaders. Perhaps most important, this vigorous initiative targeting foreign-born workers in the late 1970s established the ILGWU's reputation in the local community as a union committed to organizing immigrants and addressing their particular needs. This was a path-breaking move in the context of the larger Los Angeles labor movement, which as yet had no serious interest in recruiting immigrant workers and many segments of which were overtly xenophobic.

Despite their success, many of the ILGWU's new organizers soon became frustrated. "It was like a revolving door, where we were bringing members in and members were going out the other door," an organizer recalled. "There were a lot of problems, internal problems, with the leadership. . . . We had business agents who didn't speak the language [Spanish] . . . so the shops that had Latino members were not serviced properly." The problem was that any organizing effort that targeted one garment shop was doomed to failure. The cutthroat competition that prevailed in the industry meant that keeping the union out was, from the employers' perspective, a matter of survival. If the union did succeed in organizing a subcontracting shop, the manufacturer could simply shift work elsewhere, forcing the shop to close down.

<sup>3</sup>This section is based on the authors' interviews with organizers as well as newspaper accounts of the Guess campaign and other documents.



As in the building services industry in which J for J emerged, this meant NLRB-oriented strategies were an exercise in futility. Cohort after cohort of ILGWU organizers came to the same conclusion: The only hope of organizing garment workers in Los Angeles was to organize industry-wide, or at least to target a whole subindustry making a particular product line, with the goal of taking wages out of competition. But this was a daunting prospect, for by the 1980s Los Angeles was the single largest garment manufacturing center in the United States, with rapidly growing employment. It did not help matters that back in New York the ILGWU leadership was slow to abandon its view of Los Angeles as just one more outpost on the vast nonunion periphery.

Finally, however, in the mid-1990s, the union decided to launch a major organizing campaign in the Los Angeles garment industry, targeting Guess, Inc., one of the largest firms producing in L.A., with approximately 3,500 workers, including those employed by subcontractors. As in the J for J case, the union organizers who proposed this campaign devoted extensive efforts to researching the garment industry in the region as well as Guess in particular. The firm's high visibility and high-profile public image were important considerations in choosing it as the target, since the union envisioned from the start a two-pronged approach that would include publicity about sweatshop conditions, and possibly a boycott, as well as a bottom-up organizing effort among Guess workers on the ground. In addition, the choice was appealing because Guess was highly profitable and thus could easily afford to pay union wages and to absorb the costs of its subcontractors' doing so. Another plus was the fact that nearly all of Guess's production was located inside the United States and concentrated in downtown Los Angeles. "Our feeling was that organizing Guess would be an awfully good alternative to organizing the whole sportswear industry in L.A., and it would give us a base," one organizer recalled. "It would be a launching pad to do something even bigger than that, which is what our goal was."

Although it was conceived as a prelude to something even more ambitious, the Guess campaign itself was a formidable organizing project. The fact that the company had such a large number of subcontractors—around 70—was the most obvious challenge because, as the organizers knew, unless they attacked on multiple fronts simultaneously, the company would be able to shift work around quite easily in re-

sponse to a strike at any given contractor. "We called it the octopus," one organizer explained. "It has all these tentacles. If you grab hold of one, it just sheds that one and kills you with the other ones." In an effort to address this problem, the union developed a limited, strike-based strategy. The plan stopped short of attempting to take the entire workforce—those employed at all 70 contractors along with those directly employed by Guess at the "inside shop" where sample making, distribution, and other activities were located—out on strike. Instead, the idea was to generate unfair labor practice strikes (in which, unlike "economic" strikes, employers are legally prohibited from hiring "permanent replacements" for strikers) at the inside shop and a few key contractors. "We wanted to have an army of 500 to 1,000 workers on strike from all those shops together and use them to picket all the others, and they would be the backbone of the campaign," an organizer recalled. Simultaneous with this "ground war," the ILGWU planned an "air war," a publicity campaign exposing the industry's sweatshop conditions, focusing on Guess in particular.

Like the J for J effort in Los Angeles, the Guess campaign was an initiative launched by union leaders rather than emerging from the grassroots. The ILGWU organizers who conceived the campaign, however, well understood the importance of rank-and-file mobilization. Had they carried out the plan originally envisaged, the Guess organizing effort might have closely paralleled that of the janitors. However, a number of developments intervened to put the Guess campaign on a very different, and as it turned out, far less auspicious, path. The most important of these was the merger between the ILGWU and ACTWU into UNITE, which took place just before the effort was slated to be launched. The internal politics of the merger and the attendant power shifts led to a significant scaling back of the original commitment to the Guess campaign, as different groups within UNITE scrambled for resources for the projects and agendas each wanted to pursue. The original plan for the Guess campaign had entailed a commitment of thirty highly experienced organizers, but in the end, as one staff member recalled, "We didn't get them. We got fifteen, half of whom were extremely inexperienced." And crucially, UNITE's top leadership in New York decided that the strike strategy originally envisaged was not viable and should not be pursued, and that instead the campaign should concentrate on the air war.

The campaign got off to a good start in the summer of 1996, when UNITE complained to the U.S. Department of Labor that Guess contractors were illegally involved in industrial homework, just before the privately held firm was scheduled to launch its initial public stock offering. UNITE picketed the Waldorf-Astoria in New York where Guess was holding a reception for potential investors, and distributed a “white paper” detailing various alleged labor law violations the company and its contractors were engaged in. Soon after, UNITE filed a class action suit on behalf of a group of garment workers for labor law violations. These efforts generated a great deal of national publicity, thanks to Guess’s high-profile product line, and at first the air war seemed to be going quite well for the union. The stock offering was postponed, and Guess launched its own public relations countercampaign. “We had a tremendous impact on them . . . at the level of their image, which is their single biggest vulnerability,” one organizer recalled. “They were infuriated and scared.”

But then Guess began to fight back against the union’s various efforts with renewed vigor. The firm shifted work away from contractors where the union seemed to have some strength, which led to layoffs, with devastating effects on morale. A few months after UNITE’s campaign began, Guess filed the first in what would later become a long series of lawsuits against the union. Shortly afterward, in January 1997, the company announced that it was going to begin shifting a major component of its production, almost all of which had been in the United States before, to Mexico. Although the union filed charges with the NLRB, arguing that this was illegal retaliation against the union’s effort to organize, the effects of this announcement were devastating. “It’s basically a death blow,” one organizer said. “We have moved the work out of the country, fuck you! You know, you may fight us with some lawsuits for a while, but it’s over. Workers know it’s over. Society knows it’s over. We do have the right to produce whatever we want, and if you don’t like it, too bad.”

The company poured millions of dollars into legal maneuvers, and the union likewise was forced to devote enormous sums of money to what can only be described as a legal morass. Although the union has never abandoned the effort entirely, no one expects a victory, and the campaign made no headway whatsoever toward reversing the longer-term failure to organize the garment industry in Los Angeles. UNITE

did a great deal of creative publicity in this campaign, and succeeded in building alliances in the wider community, involving students as well as a range of other supporters in its boycott efforts and even attracting support from public figures who urged consumers not to buy Guess products. All this paved the way for the anti-sweatshop campaigns which have taken off since. The Guess campaign was far less successful on the ground, however, partly because of the decision not to engage in strike activity and partly because of the limited number of organizers assigned to the effort. While the union spent millions of dollars on the legal side of the campaign, this was entirely involuntary. At the outset, they were unwilling to pour funds into rank-and-file mobilization, or the “ground war” in UNITE’s terms. This is the most striking point of contrast to J for J, which committed extensive resources and energy to rank-and-file mobilization as well as to the other elements of its campaign.

### **Successful Bottom-Up Organizing: The 1992 Drywall Strike**

Whereas the J for J and Guess campaigns were launched by experienced union leaders, the drywallers’ organizing began at the grassroots.<sup>4</sup> The story begins in October 1991, when Jesus Gomez, an immigrant from El Maguay, a small village in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, complained of being cheated out of some of his pay by a drywall contractor. Residential construction was severely depressed at the time, and the piecework rates for drywall hangers had fallen to a new low of about 4 cents per square foot, which meant earnings of only about \$40 to \$75 for a ten-hour day. Gomez, then 33 years old, who had been hanging drywall since 1975, vividly remembered the days when the industry was unionized and when pay rates were double that. Along with several other experienced drywallers who became leaders of the strike—most of them also from Gomez’ hometown of El Maguay—he had suffered the consequences of the union’s decline for a decade, and now he

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed and fully documented account of this case, see Milkman and Wong 2000.

decided it was time to fight back. He contacted some Carpenters union officials, who offered him meeting space in their Orange County union hall. Gomez began visiting job sites and talking up the idea with other drywallers he knew, many of them old friends from home.

Immigrant networks were as crucial here as in the J for J campaign, perhaps even more so. Although these immigrants from a small village in western Mexico lacked the political sophistication and experience of the Salvadorans who were involved in the janitors' campaign, the drywallers' social cohesiveness was even stronger. The fact that at least a few hundred men from El Maguay worked in the drywall trade and were bound by close kin and friendship ties was a critical source of the solidarity that emerged in the organizing campaign. "That was the key, right there," recalled a drywall worker who accompanied Gomez on some of the early organizing rounds. "Having that big group from one area." After many months of meeting, first in Orange County and then throughout southern California, drywallers were recruited into the campaign by the hundreds, and finally they struck on June 1, 1992.

Although the Carpenters union did make meeting space available for the organizing effort, the union members and staff—at this point still heavily Anglo and far more conservative than the SEIU leaders who orchestrated the J for J effort—were sharply divided in their views of the emerging drywallers campaign. While some saw the potential of the movement, many others were hostile to the Latino workers who now dominated the industry, seeing them as responsible for the deterioration of pay and working conditions that had occurred in the 1980s. Most were deeply skeptical about the prospects of the new organizing drive that Gomez had launched. "They said, 'No, you can never organize those guys,'" recalled a Latino member of the Carpenters' staff and an early supporter of the effort. "You're beating your head against the concrete."

This was, then, a bottom-up campaign which the Carpenters simply would not have initiated on their own. As it turned out, however, the union's coolness toward the effort proved quite fortuitous. The fact that Gomez and his allies, who called themselves the "Movement of Drywall Hangers," were not affiliated with any "labor organization had one key advantage: They were not subject to the 30-day legal limit on picketing for union recognition in construction (after which the law requires that a petition be filed for an NLRB representation election).

Indeed, when the anti-union Building Industry Association filed unfair labor practice charges against the Carpenters, the complaints were dismissed for lack of evidence, precisely because the union was not an official sponsor of the strike. Employers did get temporary restraining orders in some cases, but even this was more difficult than usual, thanks to the strikers' independent status. As management attorneys pointed out later, the "strategy of declining representation by a traditional labor organization in the early stages of the strike was an important tactic."

Initially, the walkout was extremely successful, shutting down virtually the entire industry from Ventura County (just north of Los Angeles) to the Mexican border. There were many allegations of intimidation and violence from the outset. Although it is difficult to know how extensively such tactics actually were used, they were particularly potent in the context of the immigrant networks within which most drywallers were enmeshed. "The Hispanic community is pretty tight; most of these people know where everyone lives," one contractor explained. "The guy down the street is a union supporter, you want to go to work, he sees you leave in the morning with your tools, he's going to report you to the union thugs, that you're working. They're going to threaten you."

Solidarity began to falter, however, as the employers began to defend themselves more effectively, and the strike wore on into a second month. Increasingly desperate for income, some of the strikers began drifting back to work. Things improved somewhat when the AFL-CIO regional office set up a "Dry Wallers Strike Fund," soliciting contributions to help strikers pay their rent and other bills, as well as donations of pro bono legal assistance. This appeal ultimately yielded over \$2 million from over twenty different unions, with the Carpenters contributing easily the largest share. Food and money were also donated by a range of community and church groups. As the police began to arrest and jail strikers by the hundreds, the AFL-CIO fund became increasingly critical for bail purposes. Legal assistance was coordinated by the California Immigrant Workers' Association (CIWA), an organization founded by the AFL-CIO in 1989. The combination of funding for bail payments and sophisticated legal assistance proved highly effective. "The thing that really helped us was being able to bail leaders out of jail and keep 'em on the ground," an organizer explained. "That kept the morale going. As we accelerated the strike and pulled more workers off the job

sites, it was the ability of those workers to look out there and constantly see their leaders willing to take the risk, going to jail."

As in the janitors' campaign, the role of the media was also important. The strike began only a few months after the Los Angeles "riots" in the spring of 1992, so that the sensitivity of the police to media scrutiny was at its peak. The strike organizers and their supporters in the AFL-CIO and CIWA took full advantage of this. "We said, 'It's a Latino Rodney King,'" an organizer recalled. In part because of this, the strikers were able to win highly sympathetic media coverage. "There were just great articles talking about the conditions these workers were in," an AFL-CIO staff member said. "And it was front-page stuff, and it was on television, and here we were in the midst of this hostile, anti-immigrant community, and yet there was such solid public support for these strikers. . . . The media coverage was outstanding."

In late July 1992, after the strike had been going on for about two months, CIWA-funded attorneys filed unfair labor practice charges against several builders and contractors with the NLRB, alleging that the temporary restraining orders the employers had obtained to restrict picketing at job sites violated the strikers' constitutional rights. At the same time, in what would prove a far more important legal offensive, the same attorneys complained to the U.S. Department of Labor that drywall contractors had violated the overtime pay provisions of the 1938 Federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). These complaints to the Labor Department were soon followed by dozens of class-action lawsuits seeking back pay for these alleged FLSA violations. By all accounts these suits played a pivotal role in the strike, ultimately bringing the contractors to the bargaining table and leading to a strike settlement agreement in November 1992. There were large sums of money at stake here, not only back pay for unpaid overtime over a three-year period, but also punitive damages and attorneys' fees. The employers' potential liability in these suits decidedly tipped the balance in favor of settling the strike, which they now sought to do after months of intransigent refusal to negotiate. "Once those [suits] were filed," a drywall executive recalled, "there were some people that had great exposure and some of those people with great exposure very quickly decided that maybe we should find a way to settle this lawsuit and the strike. It became in their interest to become a union contractor and have all this go away."

Starting in September, the Pacific Rim Drywall Association

(PRDA), a trade group comprised of nonunion residential drywall contractors, which previously had no involvement in labor issues, began meeting with strike leaders and with representatives of the Carpenters union, who only at this point stepped forward with an offer to represent the strikers and help them obtain a union contract. By November, when the settlement agreement was concluded, the PRDA had grown substantially, embracing an estimated 75 percent of the drywall industry in the five-county Los Angeles area. In November they agreed to recognize the Carpenters as the exclusive bargaining agent for the drywallers (without a representation election); the strikers became dues-paying union members; and employers signed a two-year union contract providing for higher wages and medical benefits in exchange for withdrawal of the FLSA suits against the signatory firms.

Although the contract represented a substantial improvement from the viewpoint of the immigrant workers involved in that it doubled wages relative to prestrike levels, neither the wages nor the benefits were comparable to what drywall hangers had enjoyed in the earlier union era prior to the 1980s. Wages had already risen during the strike and thus were not perceived as onerous by the employers. "It was a good agreement," a drywall contractor said. "It did have health insurance but the men had to pay for half of it. And there was no pension, none of the things that you normally associate with a union." Moreover, there was an unusual clause in the contract, providing that if the market share held by union drywall firms in the area fell by 20 percent or more, wage rates would be determined by market conditions. Another limitation was the refusal of the drywall employers in San Diego, who had resisted the strike far more vigorously from the outset, to join in the PRDA-brokered settlement. Instead, with financial support from the anti-union American Builders and Contractors (ABC), they filed a massive lawsuit against the Carpenters union under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act in November 1992, just after the strike was settled to their north, accusing the union of orchestrating the strike and the violence associated with it. The RICO suit was settled two years later but still casts a dark shadow over union organizing in construction and elsewhere (Brody 1995). Yet by any standard the drywallers strike was a massive victory for organized labor, and along with the janitors' success should have put to rest any doubts about the "organizability" of immigrant workers in contemporary Los Angeles.

### The Port Truckers' 1996 Strike: A Bottom-Up Campaign That Fizzled

Our fourth and final case study involves another case of bottom-up organizing, in many ways very similar to the drywallers case in its origins, though without a comparably triumphal conclusion.<sup>5</sup> In the spring of 1996, about 5,000 Latino truck drivers who haul freight from the port of Los Angeles—Long Beach to warehouses, rail terminals, and other destinations, went on strike. Like the drywallers, they were initially self-organized; also like the drywallers, they eventually turned to organized labor for assistance. In this case the workers did not link up with the union which traditionally had represented workers in their occupation (the Teamsters) but instead with the CWA, which took up the organizing opportunity energetically despite its lack of previous experience with this segment of the workforce.

In an earlier era, virtually all the truckers servicing the port had been Teamsters union members. But in the late 1980s, the combined impact of deregulation of the trucking industry and the nationwide employer assault on organized labor led to a rapid process of deunionization. Accompanying this was a shift away from conventional forms of employment, as the trucking firms increasingly used independent contractors to haul freight. These were owner-operators who leased or owned the vehicles they drove, although more often than not all the arrangements were made by the trucking firms who also controlled the flow of work. The employers initially benefited from the new arrangement because it transferred many of the risks of the industry to the drivers. But this organizational shift also reduced the barriers to entry and soon led to the proliferation of smaller and smaller trucking firms servicing the port. The ensuing curthroat competition produced a spiral of declining pay rates and deteriorating working conditions, even as demand for truckers boomed as the Los Angeles—Long Beach port emerged as the nation's largest. The pay system changed from hourly to per-load rates, which spurred a dramatic decline in efficiency in the freight-loading process, because once the drivers themselves were forced to absorb the

costs of waiting time, neither the shippers nor the trucking companies had an incentive to maintain a centralized dispatching system.

As in the janitorial, drywall, and to a lesser degree even garment cases, deunionization and the accompanying devolution of pay and working conditions led many native-born workers to leave port trucking jobs, shifting to long-distance trucking or other pursuits. Latino immigrants rapidly poured into the vacancies thus created. By the late 1980s this new workforce had already begun to organize itself—a process greatly aided, ironically, by the long periods of time drivers spent waiting for their loads at the port, which was also one of the main issues that galvanized protest actions. A two-and-a-half week strike in the summer of 1988 launched by the independent Waterfront/Rail Truckers Union (WRTU), for example, focused primarily on the issue of excessive waiting time. The WRTU was no longer a visible presence when the port truckers walked out again in November 1993 in a more loosely organized protest action sparked by diesel fuel price hikes and environmental regulations. Another group, the Latin American Truckers' Association, emerged in the aftermath of this strike.

Such fleeting episodes of solidarity failed to produce any lasting organization, and on occasions when the truckers made overtures to unions, they were apparently rebuffed. But these strikes demonstrated the potential disruptive power of this occupational group, who were capable of bringing the region's entire transportation network to a standstill. A series of independent truckers' organizations emerged in the industry over the years, some of which explored the possibility of unionization, but none gained a firm footing. Then, in the mid-1990s the truckers made a bid to affiliate with CWA Local 9400, whose membership is comprised primarily of telephone workers. This unlikely affiliation came about because one of the rank-and-file trucker activists had a personal contact in CWA, and because unlike other unions the truckers had approached, this one proved receptive.

With rudimentary help from the CWA staff, the rank-and-file activists recruited members steadily in 1995 and 1996, and as in the drywallers case, they gradually drew more and more truckers to their meetings. Starting with a small group of fifteen workers, they built the organization until thousands of truckers were in regular attendance at

<sup>5</sup>This section is based on the authors' interviews with organizers as well as newspaper accounts of the truckers' strike.

meetings. Unlike the drywallers, however, the truckers had no concentration of immigrants from a single area or even from a single country (they included Mexicans as well as Central and South Americans); more dispersed immigrant networks nevertheless helped in the organizing process. Another important factor facilitating the organizing was the continual close contact truckers had in the physically isolated space of the port terminals, where organizers were able to make excellent use of the long hours truckers were compelled to spend idly waiting for their loads. In addition, as they waited and as they worked, they continually had before them the example of durable unionism *inside* the port, where the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) had long represented the well-paid cargo handlers within the shipping terminal gates.

With help from the CWA, the truckers launched a series of demonstrations to publicize their plight and to seek support from the wider community. In October 1995 they organized a giant convoy of trucks from the port all the way to downtown Los Angeles, where they extracted a supportive resolution from the Los Angeles City Council; in February 1996 they organized a similar convoy in Long Beach. There were also various political efforts to challenge the legal definition of the truckers as independent contractors, which was the most basic obstacle to unionizing them. As they were not employees as such, they were not legally eligible for unionization, and might even be vulnerable to sanction under antitrust law if they organized. Because the union made little progress on this front in the political arena, they turned to direct action once again.

In planning the May 1996 strike, the CWA developed a two-pronged strategy to overcome the independent contractor problem. First, they decided to strike for union recognition against the dozen or so trucking companies operating at the port that still had traditional employment structures. Second, and simultaneously, they encouraged workers to become part of a scheme developed by Donald Allen, an entrepreneur who approached the CWA in early 1996 with the idea of establishing a new firm, the Transport Maritime Association (TMA), which would hire the truckers as conventional employees and recognize CWA Local 9400 as their union. TMA would then lease the truckers' services to the existing trucking companies, thus short-circuiting

the independent contractor problem. Although the prices shippers would have to pay for trucking initially would be higher, this plan had the potential of rationalizing the system by creating a new dispatching system that would compensate for the additional costs and lay the foundation for higher wages and benefits.

Lured by the promise of a substantial increase in pay and a generous fringe benefit policy, and with active encouragement from both rank-and-file organizers and CWA officials, over 4,000 truckers signed up to work for Allen. Although they could not legally go on strike as independent contractors, they were perfectly free to decline offers of work and to accept TMA's offer of employment. The May 1996 "strike," which was the result of some nineteen months of careful planning, involved thousands of independent contractors who did precisely this, along with a handful who simultaneously struck for union recognition against the small number of firms with conventional employment arrangements. It was a formidable show of strength for the truckers, by far the most effective of the strikes they had launched over the 1980s and 1990s.

The shipping companies, alarmed by the specter of unionization, responded initially by rerouting some ships to other West Coast ports and won court injunctions barring mass picketing in front of the terminal gates. The trucking firms consistently refused to employ CWA-affiliated truckers employed by TMA, and began to recruit replacement workers from out of the area. Allen then threatened to operate as a rival trucking company, rather than as a labor-leasing operation. There was extensive support for the strike from the church and community groups, who organized food banks and the like. The CWA offered funds to strikers threatened with foreclosure or facing other financial problems due to the loss of income associated with the walkout. Other local unions also endorsed the strike.

This highly innovative strategy for overcoming the legal issues surrounding the status of independent contractors helped galvanize the most effective of the series of strikes the port truckers had mounted in the 1980s and 1990s. However, a number of unexpected developments undermined the effort. One of the top CWA leaders who had been involved in the organizing from the outset had a heart attack due to the excessive heat at an overcrowded union meeting in the early

days of the strike, which was demoralizing and disorienting for the strikers. More important, it turned out that Donald Allen lacked the capital to carry out his promises, and in any case the trucking firms refused to do business with him, so that ultimately the entire TMA scheme collapsed. The CWA had never really investigated Allen's financial situation, although questions had been raised about this in the press. There were other problems as well. It might have been possible to time the strike in tandem with the ILWU's contract dates which would have allowed longshore workers to walk out in support of the truckers, but the CWA declined to do this. (In the end the only organizational gain to emerge from the strike was that the ILWU won the right to represent intra-harbor truckers, those hauling freight within the port from one terminal to another, a previously unorganized group.) It didn't help matters that the CWA officials who were at the helm of the effort were non-Spanish-speaking Anglos, although they did put some rank-and-file truckers on staff in the course of the campaign.

Thus, as in the Guess case, this organizing effort was undermined by a series of internal union difficulties. There was no lack of commitment to strikes on the part of CWA in contrast to UNITE, but a combination of bad luck and inadequate planning on the part of a union that was trying its best to organize an industry in which it had no previous experience and limited knowledge paved the way to defeat. In contrast to the extensive research effort behind the J for J and Guess campaigns, here the CWA was operating with a limited staff and had no prior experience in the industry. The union had the best of intentions but proved ill-equipped to mount the kind of serious investigation of the industry as a whole or of the financial viability of TMA on which the strategy depended so centrally. The immigrant workforce was keenly motivated and had basically organized itself, but they needed the guidance and expertise of an established union to confront effectively the multibillion-dollar shipping industry, which had long resisted unionization. CWA did attempt to rise to the occasion, but without the research capacities of SEIU or even UNITE, and without the legal leverage that proved so pivotal in the drywallers strike, it could not bring the campaign to a successful conclusion, and instead the rank-and-file enthusiasm gradually dissolved into disillusion and defeat.

## Conclusion

As all four of these cases illustrate, Latino immigrant workers in southern California are capable of extraordinary militance. In the wake of the janitors and drywallers victories in the early 1990s, it seemed that Latino immigrant unionism had a bright future. As one janitors union activist put it, "We Latino workers are a bomb waiting to explode!" Yet whether this potential can become the basis of durable labor organization depends on the ability of experienced leaders (most likely, but perhaps not necessarily, based in preexisting unions) to channel it into a viable strategic direction, rooted in a careful analysis of the economic context and of the industry power structure. What can we learn from the janitors' and drywallers' success, and the Guess campaign's and port truckers' lack of it, that might facilitate such efforts in the coming years?

Despite their contrasting initial organizing approaches, there were many common elements in the two successful campaigns. Both involved industry-wide organizing: The janitors organized the entire building cleaning market in downtown Los Angeles and Century City, and the drywallers organized the vast bulk of workers in their trade in the wider region's residential construction industry. Both overcame the many obstacles to unionizing industries in which subcontracting plays a major role, by using strategies that avoided NLRB elections and instead finding means to pressure employers. In both cases union recognition was directly linked to contract negotiation; thus, the long delays that so often plague even highly successful NLRB-oriented campaigns were avoided. Both unions built alliances in the wider community and used highly creative tactics to win public support and to put pressure on the employers, including media-oriented efforts that were critical in responding to the police activity directed against both strikes. In both, too, migrant networks played an important role. Both campaigns galvanized workers, trained new union leadership, and resulted in workers developing a strong sense of ownership of the campaign.

Successful unionizing efforts, at least those conducted outside the conventional NLRB representation election framework, must contain *both* serious commitments of resources, leadership, *and* expertise from the existing labor movement and extensive mobilization from below. It is less important whether the union leadership component or the grassroots mobilization effort comes first (the two cases of success are

opposites in this respect) than having one stimulate the other. Immigrant workers are ripe for organization, but success is unlikely without a strong commitment and adequate leadership from existing unions. In the Guess case, UNITE's commitment was insufficient, particularly to bottom-up organizing; in the case of the port truckers, the rank-and-file mobilized themselves but the CWA proved ill-equipped to coordinate a winning campaign. Thus, our comparison suggests that union capacity and strategic planning matter; indeed, they can make the difference between success and failure.

Even our two successful cases are problematic in that the consolidation of unionism in the immigrant workforce after the initial organizing victory encountered serious difficulties. The Carpenters failed to sustain the share of the market it had at the time of the strike settlement, and SEIU Local 399 was plagued by internal factionalism. The Los Angeles janitors were later incorporated by the International SEIU (after Local 399 was placed in trusteeship) into Local 1877, and then in April 2000 went on to launch another successful strike ten years after the original organizing strike.

The revitalization of the labor movement in southern California, where the working class is increasingly dominated by foreign-born workers, will require not only more organizing victories like those of the janitors and drywallers, but also effective reshaping of the institutional life of unions so that immigrants are at the vital center. Winning union recognition, however, is only the first step in labor organizing. Among other things, consolidating immigrant unionism means effectively incorporating immigrants into leadership at all levels and building on the dynamism evident in the rank-and-file mobilizations that emerge in organizing campaigns to strengthen and consolidate the new unions. And the labor movement must signal its support of immigrant workers on a broader level, as the new AFL-CIO leadership did in February 2000, in a historic reversal of its previous policy, calling for a new amnesty for undocumented immigrants and for an end to legal sanctions against employers who hire them (Greenhouse 2000a). Only this kind of comprehensive effort can fulfill the potential for immigrant organizing that our case studies document. The revitalization of organized labor in southern California, and perhaps even in the United States as a whole, may hinge on whether unions are able to rise to this challenge.