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Introduction

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Union and community-based organizing and advocacy campaigns among low-wage workers have proliferated across the United States in recent years. Although they have been unable to reverse the dramatic decades-long deterioration in the pay, working conditions, and employment security of those who struggle to survive at the bottom of the labor market, these economic justice campaigns have significantly increased public awareness of the plight of low-wage workers and have won some important victories on the local level. Both labor unions and the growing number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) known as "worker centers" have spearheaded such efforts, using distinct yet increasingly overlapping strategies. The burgeoning immigrant rights movement has been actively engaged in this arena as well—reflecting the fact that a large (and rising) proportion of the low-wage workforce is comprised of undocumented immigrants.

Los Angeles is a national pacesetter in the new wave of low-wage worker organizing and advocacy; indeed this is a linchpin of the city's growing reputation as a unique urban laboratory of progressive political experimentation. The L.A. labor movement began to recognize and actively exploit the potential for organizing low-wage immigrant workers starting in the 1980s

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(Milkman 2006), well ahead of unions in other parts of the United States. Los Angeles is also home to several of the nation's leading worker centers—nonunion, community-based organizations that sprouted up all across the country in the 1980s and 1990s (Bobo 2009, chap. 6; Fine 2006; Gordon 2005). And crucially, whereas in other cities labor unions and worker centers tend to operate independently of one another, in Los Angeles they interact regularly and have developed, over time, a shared strategic repertoire.

Also contributing to Los Angeles's distinctiveness is the fact that no other U.S. metropolitan area has a larger concentration of undocumented immigrants, and in no other have immigrants been more politically engaged. Indeed, in 2006, when immigrants across the nation took to the streets to protest the punitive immigration reform legislation then under debate in the U.S. Congress, the largest and most animated demonstrations were in Los Angeles.[1] That massive explosion of protest helped to raise the public profile of a rich variety of low-wage immigrant worker organizing and advocacy efforts that had taken shape in Los Angeles during the preceding decades, led by both unions and worker centers (see Wang and Winn 2006). This volume profiles eleven of the most prominent such efforts. It includes examples of L.A. worker centers that define their mission in terms of ethnicity, geography, or immigration status; worker centers that focus on specific occupations or industries; as well as a selection of recent union organizing drives among low-wage workers. Taken together, the case studies collected here suggest the contours of a distinctive L.A. model of economic justice organizing and advocacy.

Central to that model is the shared strategic repertoire on which both unions and worker centers in Los Angeles have come to rely, representing an emerging synthesis of what were once distinctly different strategies. Initially, many worker center founders in Los Angeles (and elsewhere) explicitly rejected traditional trade unionism as an outdated and overly bureaucratic form of organization, ill-suited to the challenges of the late twentieth century. Although leaders of other local NGOs, whose focus was on supporting the rights of immigrants and refugees but who later took on worker center–like activities, were less hostile to unionism, they too saw organized labor as largely irrelevant to their own efforts. The worker centers and the immigrant groups alike concentrated their energies on advocacy and intensive grassroots leadership development, not on recruiting large numbers of members or establishing collective bargaining relations with employers. Over time, however, many of the L.A. worker centers began to emulate the successful strategies developed by local unions that were actively engaged in immigrant organizing; some even launched independent unionization drives.

Unions were initially at least as skeptical about the worker centers' strategic approach as the worker centers were about unionism. But as the worker centers gained credibility in the progressive community, key L.A. unions that were already engaged in organizing immigrants, like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNITE HERE,[2] began to adopt some of the community-based approaches to low-wage worker advocacy and organizing that the centers had developed. Thus, over time, what were at first distinctive and competing organizing models gradually began to converge, and a shared strategic repertoire took shape that involves a mix of union and worker center approaches. Some elements in this repertoire have parallels and precedents in other times and places, and many have been adopted by organizations around the country. But the model as a whole—an emerging synthesis of union and worker center strategies—is rooted in the social ferment of contemporary Los Angeles.

Los Angeles has neither the largest number of worker centers nor the highest rate of unionization among major U.S. cities.[3] But what may be more significant is that both types of organizations are more tightly networked in Los Angeles than are their counterparts elsewhere in the country. In her comprehensive study of U.S. worker centers, Janice Fine observes that whereas such organizations are generally "under-networked," Los Angeles is the exception to this rule: "Local networks... in Los Angeles enable worker centers to aggregate their resources and magnify their impacts," she notes. "In cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, no such local networks of worker centers currently exist" (Fine 2006, 240). Local unions are unusually well-integrated in Los Angeles as well, largely due to the efforts of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, one of the nation's most active central labor councils. The "Fed" has built formidable political capacity and has strong ties to the Latino community and to the city's vibrant immigrant rights advocacy groups (Frank and Wong 2004). Most important, in addition to networks among L.A. worker centers, and among unions thanks to the Fed's efforts, the city's worker centers and unions have become increasingly interlinked with one another over time, with staff members moving easily (and frequently) between the two types of organizations. This is a distinctive feature of the L.A. political landscape.

The L.A. model of organizing and advocacy may be understood in part as the product of "mimetic isomorphism," or the process through which organizations facing similar environmental challenges and uncertainties imitate other successful organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Yet the city's unions and worker centers are rarely in direct competition; on the contrary, they regularly provide one another with advice and support. If on occasion L.A. worker centers have vied with one another for funding from the same foundations, cooperative efforts among them are also common, and some centers have even served as fiscal sponsors or incubators for one another. Indeed, the L.A. model, with its synthesis of union and worker center approaches, is less the product of organizational competition than of an interactive process of organizational cross-fertilization within a vibrant local advocacy network—similar to the "transnational advocacy networks" Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998, 1–2) have analyzed.

That synergy evolved gradually, as both unions and worker centers confronted the challenges of organizing the city's massive and relatively homogeneous undocumented immigrant population. Over time, the L.A. labor movement—which was ahead of its counterparts elsewhere in the United States in actively recruiting low-wage immigrants (including the undocumented) into its ranks as early as the 1980s, but which nevertheless faced enormous challenges—developed relationships with both worker centers and immigrant rights groups in local advocacy networks focused on economic justice. The city's unique political economy also helps explain the emergence of the L.A. model of low-wage worker organizing and advocacy.

The Growth of Low-Wage Work in Los Angeles

The model developed in the context of dramatic social and economic changes that reshaped southern California starting in the 1970s. Low-wage work proliferated as globalization, deregulation, and neoliberal economic restructuring undermined both labor unions and labor law enforcement, historically the twin bulwarks of protection for workers' living standards. This great transformation was by no means limited to Los Angeles, but it began earlier and developed especially quickly there, which in turn helped to galvanize the efforts of local unions and NGOs. The L.A. economy's expansion in the twentieth century's closing decades was accompanied by widening inequality between rich and poor, the rapid spread of labor law violations, and a huge influx of new immigrants.

Indeed, Los Angeles was on the leading edge of broader trends that soon fostered the growth of low-wage work throughout the nation. The real wages of U.S. workers without a college education had been stagnant or declining since the mid-1970s, despite increasing productivity, even as earnings rose among managers and professionals. Job security also was severely eroded in this period, as were benefits like health insurance and pensions, as well as vacations and paid sick leave (Mishel et al. 2007). And as employers sought to transfer market risk to subcontractors or directly to workers themselves, they assigned a growing number of jobs "temporary" status, even as day labor corners and other types of informal employment arrangements proliferated. Similarly, more and more workers found themselves classified—often incorrectly—as "independent contractors," often placing them beyond the reach of wage and hour law and other forms of legal protection (Kalleberg et al. 2000).

Even for those workers still covered by traditional workplace laws and regulations, violations became commonplace in this era. Labor law enforcement steadily deteriorated, with reduced staffing and funding, and employers increasingly ignored minimum wage and overtime laws, health and safety regulations, and other established legal standards (Bernhardt et al. 2007; Zatz 2008). These problems multiplied as union density declined sharply across the nation, not only because collective bargaining often generated higher standards than those required by law, but also because unions' capacity to monitor workplaces for labor law violations was greatly reduced. Deunionization was both a result of the broader economic transformation and helped to accelerate it, as more and more employers successfully undermined existing unions and vigilantly sought to combat new ones with the help of antiunion labor "consultants" (Logan 2002).

Deindustrialization and outsourcing further contributed to the downward pressure on wages, working conditions, and job security among less-educated workers. In the manufacturing sector, indeed, the reemergence of sweatshop conditions was driven directly by the pressure of global competition. Yet subminimum pay and labor law violations also became the norm in industries that are inherently local and thus invulnerable to outsourcing—such as construction, transportation, and the rapidly growing service sector. Thus not only globalization and outsourcing, but also deregulation and deunionization, drove the process of labor market transformation.

All these developments converged especially early and with particular intensity in Los Angeles, a city whose political economy had originally developed on the basis of cheap labor, as Carey McWilliams (1946, 276–77) observed long ago. In keeping with this historical legacy, by the end of the twentieth century southern California had the dubious distinction of being a national leader in the "low-road" economic restructuring that fostered the growth of low-wage work, labor law violations, and precarious employment arrangements. Los Angeles experienced impressive economic growth in the 1980s and 1990s, but the income and wealth generated by that growth was not shared with the city's burgeoning population of low-wage workers. Instead, inequality surged to levels even greater than those in the nation as a whole, along with a greater degree of polarization between "good" and "bad" jobs than in other regions (see Milkman and

Dwyer 2002). During these years, Los Angeles became notorious for an underground economy where transactions were increasingly conducted on a cash basis, and where payroll taxes and other types of regulation were routinely evaded (Haydamack and Flaming 2005).

If low-road growth predicated on low-wage work was in keeping with the region's earlier history, in two other respects contemporary Los Angeles presents a sharp contrast to the past. First, whereas during the first half of the twentieth century the L.A. working class had been overwhelmingly U.S.–born (Fogelson 1967, 76–82), today immigrants comprise over a third of the city's population and close to half of its overall workforce. The L.A. foreign-born population, predominantly comprised of Mexicans and Central Americans, is also far more homogeneous than its counterparts in other cities. Moreover, the L.A. metropolitan area is home to about a million of the nation's estimated 11 million unauthorized immigrants, more than any other part of the nation (Fortuny et al. 2007). Undocumented immigrants, overwhelmingly Latino, are concentrated in the city's manufacturing, construction, and service industries, where wages are low, benefits scarce, and labor law violations widespread. But the erosion of wages and conditions was not caused by the influx of unauthorized immigrants to the region. Rather the deterioration of pay and conditions in these jobs largely *preceded* the immigrant influx; increased immigrant employment in Los Angeles (and later nationally) was thus more a consequence than a cause of that deterioration (see Milkman 2006, 104–13).

The second respect in which recent L.A. history marks a departure from the past is in regard to the city's organized labor movement. Whereas a century ago Los Angeles was an "open-shop" territory where unions were notoriously weak, in recent years it has earned a reputation as one of the few parts of the United States where organized labor is thriving, against all odds. Even as union density in the nation as a whole has continued its relentless decline, in Los Angeles (and in the state of California as a whole) density has been flat, and in some years it has risen substantially, since the mid-1990s (Milkman and Kye 2008). As I have argued elsewhere, this reflects (among other factors) the historical weakness of manufacturing and of industrial unionism in southern California. The dominance of nonfactory unionism in the local labor movement, in an earlier era, contributed to L.A. labor's relative backwardness; but in the age of deindustrialization the weakness of industrial unionism became a source of comparative advantage for the region. In addition, to the surprise of many observers, the vast and relatively homogenous flow of immigration to southern California that took off in the 1970s helped reinvigorate the city's labor movement (Milkman 2006).

Birth of the L.A. Model

Located at the epicenter of the labor market transformations of recent decades, Los Angeles has also been a leading site of innovative political responses to those transformations. Starting in the late 1980s, the city's unions began organizing the low-wage and immigrant workers at the bottom of the labor market—most notably in the SEIU's "Justice for Janitors" campaign. The worker centers that proliferated a few years later also contributed to the city's rich mosaic of advocacy and organizing efforts, along with a critical mass of immigrant rights NGOs. Over time, networks and synergies developed among these various types of organizations, all of which were developing economic justice campaigns.

The first wave of initiatives come directly from the labor movement and helped anchor the efforts that followed. Once a backwater of insularity and conservatism, in this period L.A. unions rose to the challenge posed by neoliberal employment restructuring far more effectively than their counterparts elsewhere in the nation. As Mike Davis (2000, 145) so aptly puts it, Los Angeles became "the major R&D center for 21st century trade unionism." Starting in the 1980s, some of the city's leading unions launched pioneering organizing drives among low-wage and immigrant workers. Early on, they learned to avoid the traditional National Labor Relations Board election–based approach to seeking union recognition. Instead, the L.A. affiliates of SEIU and UNITE HERE adopted a mix of top-down and bottom-up tactics to exert direct pressure on employers and to mobilize workers at the grassroots level. Their campaigns focused on organizing low-wage janitors, hotel workers, and others—many of them foreign-born and often undocumented. Highlighting the contrast between the impoverishment of low-wage immigrants and the vast wealth of Los Angeles' affluent population, the unions adroitly deployed the language of social justice to stake out the moral high ground—setting a template for the discursive strategies the worker centers would adopt later.

In this initial wave of efforts to organize low-wage immigrant workers, Los Angeles' innovative unions fit precisely into the pattern identified by Kim Voss and Rachel Sherman (2000): they faced a crisis of organizational survival in the wake of successful employer deunionization strategies; they had strong support from the national leaderships of the unions with which they were affiliated; and their leadership included individuals with experience in social movements from outside the labor movement.

Adding to the mix, among the architects of the L.A. immigrant unionization campaigns launched in the 1980s and 1990s were several seasoned veterans of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union. These organizers now confronted conditions in the urban low-wage labor market that bore a surprisingly close resemblance to those they had found among farm workers in the 1960s and 1970s. That these former UFWers had previous experience organizing immigrants proved to be an asset as well. SEIU and UNITE HERE in particular drew on many elements of the UFW's strategic repertoire (Shaw 2008). For example, just as the UFW had done in the 1960s, the L.A. low-wage union organizing drives of the 1980s and 1990s—of which the SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign soon became the iconic case—included extensive outreach to allies in the wider community, like churches and community-based organizations. Such coalition-building helped the L.A. labor movement overcome the social isolation that all too often had characterized it in the past.

Building on such UFW-like efforts, and simultaneously leveraging longstanding relationships with elected officials, the L.A. local unions affiliated with SEIU and UNITE HERE carved out a bold strategic approach to low-wage and immigrant organizing in the 1980s and 1990s. They were among the first in the nation to actively promote living wage laws and also led in negotiating "community benefits agreements," under which developers agree to provide new jobs and other benefits in exchange for permission to build new projects (Gottlieb et al. 2005). In addition, starting in the mid-1990s, the L.A. labor movement decisively broke from the populist anti-immigrant backlash embodied in California's Proposition 187. Instead, the unions reached out to the growing Latino immigrant community, encouraging naturalization and voting registration among those eligible. This led to the consolidation of a powerful labor-Latino alliance that expanded the unions' political clout and laid the groundwork for enduring ties with the growing immigrant rights movement (Milkman 2006, 131–33).

In this period, L.A. unions gained a national reputation as leaders of labor movement revitalization. Meanwhile, however, with a much lower public profile, a variety of nonunion forms of organizing and advocacy among and on behalf of low-wage workers had begun to take shape in the city, led by the new worker centers. Their campaigns often focused on occupations in which unionization seemed difficult or impossible—such as day laborers or domestic workers—or tackled industries that unions had virtually abandoned as "unorganizable," such as garment manufacturing or restaurants. And unlike late-twentieth-century unions, they took up not only workplace issues but also the social needs of low-wage workers, such as education and housing (see Fine 2007, 341).

Worker center leaders and staff—typically highly educated young people, often women—were committed to social justice for low-wage workers but often ambivalent about trade unions, which they saw as ill-suited to the challenges of organizing informal economy workers, and also as overly bureaucratic, inflexible, and conservative. Some centers were organized on the basis of ethnic or national identities, like the Pilipino Worker Center (PWC) analyzed by Nazgol Ghandnoosh in this volume; others had a geographic or neighborhood focus, such as the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), the subject of Jong Bum Kwon's chapter; still others targeted specific occupations or industries, like the National Day Laborers' Organizing Network (NDLON) described in Maria Dziembowska's chapter, or the Garment Worker Center (GWC), which Nicole Archer and her coauthors explore.

Worker centers developed all across the country in this period, but southern California offered them particularly fertile soil. Along with the region's extreme economic polarization and aggressive low-road employers, the L.A. worker centers' growth was nurtured by the dynamism of the local labor movement with its early interest in organizing low-wage immigrants, and also by the longstanding presence of ethnically oriented, community-based organizations in the region (Gutiérrez 1995; Wong 2006). Los Angeles's huge concentration of undocumented newcomers also made it the capital of the emerging immigrant rights movement, which assisted those eligible for amnesty under the 1986 Immigrant Reform and Control Act (IRCA), and soon went on to address the ongoing problems that immigrants faced in the workplace. A key player here was the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), analyzed in Caitlin C. Patler's chapter in this volume, later joined by the Multi-ethnic Immigrant Organizing Network (MIWON), the focus of Chinyere Osuji's chapter.

The Mexican and Central American newcomers to Los Angeles who comprise the bulk of the city's unauthorized immigrant population, as well as the even larger number of legal immigrants, proved highly receptive to the recruitment efforts of unions and worker centers alike, despite many observers' early expectations to the contrary. Both types of low-wage worker organizing gained momentum after the passage of IRCA in 1986, which offered amnesty to millions of undocumented immigrants and—contrary to the legislation's intent—stimulated a massive influx of new immigration (see Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). The L.A. worker centers whose efforts are documented in this volume were all established in the post-IRCA period. Unions and ethnic- and community-based NGOs had facilitated IRCA's passage, and now they offered vital support to workers who were eligible to apply for legal status. This not only helped the unions build what would later prove to be critically important ties to immigrant rights advocacy groups but also deepened the labor movement's awareness of labor law violations and other issues disproportionately affecting immigrants.

Although the term *worker center* is of recent vintage, and few of the centers that exist today are more than a decade or two old, this mode of organization has venerable historical precedents in the settlement houses and other labor reform groups that served immigrant workers a century ago (see Fine 2006, 33–41).[4] Those Progressive-era organizations disappeared in the era of restricted immigration that began in the 1920s; but after 1965, when U.S. immigration policies were loosened, a new wave of immigrant-oriented NGOs emerged in the shape of worker centers. Few if any among these centers consciously emulated their early twentieth-century predecessors, however; and many were equally unaware of more recent models such as the UFW (Shaw 2008) or the community organizing traditions developed by Saul Alinksy's Industrial Areas Foundation (Osterman 2002; Warren 2001). Even local union drives like SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign were an indirect influence rather than a source of immediate inspiration for many of the worker centers in the early years of their existence.

As Fine (2006) has pointed out, worker centers are hybrid organizations with multiple functions. They not only organize low-wage workers directly but also provide legal services to those experiencing labor law violations, along with other social and educational services. They often engage in policy and legislative advocacy to improve labor law enforcement, and expose employer abuses to the public through media outreach as well as via direct appeals to consumers. Because so many low-wage workers are foreign-born, many centers engage in immigrant rights advocacy as well. The L.A. worker centers fit this general profile, but over time many of them have come to be strongly influenced by the strategic repertoire of the city's immigrant-oriented unions and by the immigrant rights advocacy community as well—which directly overlaps with the local worker centers in groups like CHIRLA and MIWON.[5]

Economic justice organizing and advocacy campaigns in Los Angeles, whether initiated by worker centers or by unions doing low-wage and/or immigrant organizing, typically draw on the following elements:

- strategic research on organizing targets to identify vulnerabilities and to extract politically valuable information;
- grassroots organizing focused on low-wage workers and leadership development efforts to empower those workers;
- legal initiatives, including filing claims with government regulatory agencies as well as lawsuits on behalf of low-wage workers subjected to illegal employment practices;

- building alliances with key actors in the local community—ranging from consumers to faith-based groups to ethnic and political leaders and organizations—to gain material and moral leverage over employers and government officials;[6]
- producing compelling narratives that include the stories and voices of low-wage workers themselves, and framing claims in the moral language of social justice;
- using such narratives to stage "public dramas" (Chun 2005) to attract media attention;
- shaming employers into making concessions; and
- generating public pressure on lawmakers to win passage of legislative and regulatory reforms.

The chapters in this volume document a wide range of campaigns with these elements, in various combinations and permutations, deployed by both worker centers and labor unions. To be sure, many economic justice advocates and organizers in other parts of the country also draw on this menu of strategies. What is peculiar to Los Angeles is the extensive interaction and mutual learning between unions and worker centers, which is still largely absent in other cities. Yet the union–worker center relationship is not entirely free of tensions, even in Los Angeles.

Worker Centers and the Limits of Advocacy

The worker centers first presented themselves as an alternative organizing form, sharply differentiated from the traditional union model both structurally and culturally (Fine 2007). Although they emphatically define themselves as part of a larger progressive movement dedicated to long-term social change, the centers bear little resemblance to either trade unions or "social movements" in the conventional sense of the term. They rarely attempt to mount large-scale popular mobilizations. The massive 2006 immigrant rights protests are the exception that proves this rule; nothing remotely approaching their scale has taken place before or since (see Bloemraad and Voss forthcoming). Nor are worker centers in the business of setting up long-term collective bargaining relationships with employers. Worker centers are small NGOs with limited resources (de Graauw 2008; Fine 2006), and most have found that they can deploy those resources to maximum effect by focusing on staff-driven research, media outreach, and legal and political campaigns to win concessions from employers and governments. Worker center leaders think of themselves as organizers, but most of the time they function as advocates (Jenkins 2002).

Whether on their own or in coalition with other community-based NGOs, such as immigrant rights groups or religious organizations (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008), worker centers operate in a manner that closely resembles that of the transnational advocacy networks (TANs) that Keck and Sikkink (1998, 1–2) have so insightfully analyzed. Like TANs, worker centers are "nonstate actors...[that] mobilize information strategically to help create new issues and categories and to persuade, pressure and gain leverage over much more powerful organizations and governments." Of course, worker centers are locally rather than transnationally oriented (unless one considers immigrant worker issues as inherently transnational); but apart from that the parallels between their mode of operation and that of TANs are striking.

Worker centers are professionally led and staffed by advocates—often lawyers or individuals with other types of specialized training—who "introduce new ideas, provide information, and lobby for policy changes" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 9). Like their TAN-based counterparts, worker center staff and activists frequently circulate from one organization to another: the "political entrepreneurs who become the core networkers for a new campaign have often gained experience in earlier ones" (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 14). Victor Narro's career, recounted in his afterword in this volume, is but one striking example of this kind of circulation in the L.A. context. Moreover, TANs and worker centers employ a similar repertoire of political strategies and tactics.[7]

Many worker centers devote considerable energy to grassroots organizing and education, as well as leadership development efforts. They not only provide basic information—both in written form and through workshops—to rank-and-file workers about their rights under U.S. labor and immigration law but also foster leadership development among their recruits. This work is explicitly rooted in the popular education methods of Paulo Freire (1970; see also Fine 2006, 13, 206–8), to which some key Latino immigrant worker center leaders were exposed in their home countries. The grassroots ties that worker centers have built in the community through these efforts are an especially important aspect of their work, directly informing their advocacy agendas.

In addition, many centers offer direct services to workers, especially in filing legal claims to remedy labor law violations. Because most U.S. employment and labor laws apply to all workers, regardless of immigration status, unauthorized immigrants can seek redress for violations, and worker centers often assist them (as well as low-wage workers who are U.S born or legal immigrants) in doing so. However, at least in the L.A. cases documented in this volume, the demand for legal assistance is so vast that most worker centers that start out with a service provision mission begin to limit this aspect of their work early in their organizational development. Not only are they fearful that service provision could rapidly absorb their limited resources; but also, they tend to view it as incompatible with the goal of long-term institutional change, since it merely treats the symptoms of the labor and immigration problems they want to address. They have had more success with class-action lawsuits, such as those described in the chapters by Garea and Stern on behalf of car wash workers and by Muñiz for janitors, in which litigation functions as a tool that facilitates worker organizing.

For most worker centers, then, litigation and/or advocacy tend to take priority over service provision, but despite the aspirations of these organizations, that emphasis may actually limit the potential for long-term change. As Steve Jenkins argues in his critical analysis of worker centers in New York City, the concrete reality of advocacy largely involves "professionals such as lawyers and social workers [who] *mobilize elite institutions* such as government agencies, foundations, media, or courts to help clients achieve the changes they are seeking....However, the changes that can be achieved are limited to those that are palatable to elite decision-makers." Ultimately, Jenkins suggests, this approach reduces "the radical aspirations for worker power...to a liberal belief in the transformative force of truth and justice" (Jenkins 2002, 61, 72; see also Piven 1975). The accomplishments of the centers do make a difference, and advocacy may be the best use of their limited resources; yet their self-conception as agents of radical social change belies the inherent constraints of advocacy.

Many worker centers do engage in grassroots, community-based organizing in addition to their service and advocacy efforts. In her analysis of this aspect of center activities, Fine distinguishes between "economic action organizing" and "public policy organizing" (Fine 2006, 101), depending on whether employers are the target of a campaign or, alternatively, if the goal is to seek new legislation or some other public policy initiative. In either case, the term *organizing* has a very different meaning in this context than in the union world. Some worker centers actively recruit "members," but most find it difficult to forge long-term relationships with workers once the immediate need for legal services or the like have been addressed. Low-wage workers often work long hours, commute great distances, and have families to care for, which leaves them with little time to devote to membership activities in these organizations, particularly without the incentive of ongoing representation of the sort unions can provide. As a result, whether focused on extracting concessions from employers or on public policy advocacy, worker center campaigns are usually staff-driven efforts in which relatively few workers actively participate.

The unions that organize immigrants and other low-wage workers have faced these problems too; indeed the SEIU in particular is often criticized for being too "top-down" and staff-driven, and for recruiting too many highly educated "outsiders" into leadership roles (e.g., Early 2004). But the crucial difference is that, unlike unions, most worker centers lack the institutional capacity and the financial resources necessary to maintain a large membership base.

Worker centers do successfully engage rank-and-file workers in campaigns, often for extended periods of time, and sometimes even as paid staff. If the workers involved are undocumented, which is often the case, their participation in campaigns can also involve them in what Jennifer Gordon (2005, chap. 6) calls "noncitizen citizenship." Although their presence in the United States is unauthorized, and they lack voting and other citizenship rights, undocumented workers can still testify at public hearings, make personal appeals to legislators, and engage in "public dramas" or other types of protests. These activities are at the center of worker center advocacy efforts, which vitally depend on the willingness of ordinary workers to tell their stories. Those stories—strategically disseminated via the mass media—fuel the symbolic politics that are central to the strategic repertoire of local advocacy networks.

Tensions and Convergence between Unions and Worker Centers

Nearly all of the nation's worker centers—97 percent, according to Fine (2006, 121)—have at least occasional contact with unions. But the relationship between worker centers and organized labor is complicated and sometimes fraught with tension. Sometimes there is cooperation between the two—especially in the L.A. context—but in many instances the relationship involves mistrust or even direct antagonism (Fine 2007). Many worker centers were established by activists for whom mainstream unions were anathema: bureaucratic institutions fundamentally inhospitable to the empowerment of rank-and-file workers. Yet worker centers have increasingly drawn on the repertoire of strategies and tactics that service sector unions like SEIU and UNITE HERE had developed in the 1980s, especially their media-oriented, research-intensive efforts to win public sympathy for low-wage and immigrant workers and to exert pressure on employers in order to extract concessions.

Organized labor has always engaged in advocacy and promoted legislation on behalf of working people, but starting in the 1980s, some unions—faced with intensifying employer attacks and other threats to their survival—began to deploy "corporate campaigns" that advanced explicit moral claims on behalf of labor's cause aimed directly at the public (Manheim 2001). Typically those claims were made as part of defensive struggles involving already-unionized workers, but in this same period a few unions—SEIU and UNITE HERE most notably—launched aggressive efforts to organize the unorganized, and they increasingly embraced the corporate campaign approach too. They recruited highly educated staff members similar to those that worker centers later came to rely on, who had the research skills and other expertise needed for these types of campaigns. In Los Angeles, where these unions were actively organizing immigrant workers in low-wage service industries, they began to frame their claims in terms of social justice, highlighting the extreme disparities between low-wage immigrant workers and the affluent communities they served.

In contrast to such union organizing drives, however, most worker center economic justice campaigns neither strive for nor result in large-scale worker recruitment or ongoing collective bargaining relationships with employers. Sometimes this reflects practical considerations—for example if the employers are geographically dispersed or constantly shifting (as for day laborers or domestic workers); in other instances it reflects worker center leaders' disillusion with unionism as a vehicle for lasting social transformation, as well as the far more limited resources that worker centers, unlike unions, have at their disposal. Worker centers' "economic action organizing" typically aims to pressure employers for concessions directly, or through legal avenues, without seeking to build permanent membership-based organizations. Such efforts often succeed in winning settlements from employers, under which individuals or small groups of workers receive back pay or other types of remedial compensation, and which also may include employer promises to refrain from future labor law violations. Examples include the "Forever 21" campaign discussed in the chapter by Nicole Archer and her colleagues, and the Korean restaurant campaign Jong Bum Kwon documents.

Worker centers have also launched many successful "public policy organizing" campaigns, winning passage of new legislation or regulations that provide concrete benefits for low-wage and immigrant workers—although ensuring adequate enforcement has often proven difficult in the aftermath of such victories. Examples include the successful effort to pass regulatory legislation for car wash workers in California, recounted in the chapter by Susan Garea and Alexandra Stern; or the successful defeat of local antisolicitation ordinances affecting day laborers that Maria Dziembowska discusses in her chapter.

Unions also routinely engage in public policy organizing, but considering that most worker centers are tiny organizations with a handful of paid staff and modest financial resources, their record of legislative and public policy accomplishments is extremely impressive. Even campaigns that do not achieve their concrete goals—those that employers manage to resist, or that encounter political opposition that block their policy or legislative aims—often affect public perceptions and debates, like the "successful failures" Eve Weinbaum (2004, 267) has analyzed:

> Successful failures do not always transform the economy, or the social or political landscape, but they can accomplish crucial outcomes. First, [they] demonstrate to marginalized groups that resistance is possible, even against powerful forces of oppression. Second, they create structures and networks of people that are essential to any mobilization attempt—for even if they decline, they always have the potential to be rebuilt. Third, struggle itself trains people in the skills of political action and democratic citizenship. Fourth, small victories along the way teach marginalized communities the strength and power of collective action, and thus make them more likely to stand up for their goals in the future. And finally, failures in particular teach communities the strength and power of their opposition—essential knowledge for any political effort.

This perspective is relevant to even the most successful worker center campaigns, which typically yield concrete improvements in pay and conditions for very small groups of workers. The primary achievement of such campaigns is on the moral and discursive level, gaining wide publicity for labor law violations and other problems affecting low-wage workers. This is the comparative advantage of small-scale organizations with very limited resources, for "the existence of an injustice can be communicated by even a handful of people" (Jenkins 2002, 64). As Victor Narro has pointed out, the L.A. worker centers in particular have "impacted the way the media reports on and the way the larger public perceives immigrant and low-wage worker issues....changing the climate and altering the terms of debate at the local level" (Narro 2005–6, 512–13).

Yet as Jenkins has pointed out, "unlike union campaigns where workers can potentially demand higher wages, vacation days, and health insurance," worker centers tend to engage in "advocacy campaigns primarily confined to remedying illegal practices" (Jenkins 2002, 69). He adds that while foundations are more than willing to support efforts to give "voice" to workers who would otherwise be voiceless, to expose them to the media, and to include them on public advisory panels, this does nothing to alter the fundamental power relationship between workers and employers.

If few worker center leaders would fully agree with Jenkins's critique, many have come to recognize the limitations of their capacity to foster lasting social change using the worker center model alone. This, in turn, has led some to reconsider their initial view of organized labor and to experiment with efforts to promote unionization among low-wage workers. They typically have formed independent unions, rather than collaborating with established labor organizations, which many continue to regard as overly bureaucratic and insufficiently accessible to direct participation from rank-and-file workers. In some cases, as well, worker centers' efforts to build ties to existing unions have been rebuffed outright (Bobo 2009; and Fine 2007 for examples).

Worker centers' independent union efforts have often encountered serious obstacles. Like all unionization drives in recent years, these are typically met with intransigent resistance from employers. Given that resistance, as well as the limited resources and lack of experience of most worker centers with unionization, these independent efforts have been largely unsuccessful, as illustrated by the examples described in the chapters on the Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance by Jong Bum Kwon and on the Pilipino Worker Center by Nazgol Ghandnoosh in this volume. Nevertheless, such attempts to foster unionization suggest the increasing convergence in the strategies being pursued by unions and worker centers in Los Angeles, and the ongoing process of mutual learning and synergy across the divide separating the two types of organizations. The L.A. Taxi Workers' Alliance, analyzed in the chapter by Jacqueline Leavitt and Gary Blasi, is another example of an organization that draws on both union and worker center models, although because most taxi drivers are not legally "employees" traditional unionism is not an option here.

Unions and organized labor federations, searching for new strategies in the face of the precipitous decline in the organized share of the U.S. workforce over recent decades, have become increasingly intrigued by and receptive to the worker centers' efforts—especially in the aftermath of the huge immigrant rights marches of 2006 (see Fine 2007). In August 2006—not coincidentally, just a few months after those marches—the AFL-CIO announced a new partnership with worker centers, making it possible for them to formally affiliate with state and local AFL-CIO bodies.[8] As Maria Dziembowska's chapter in this volume notes, both the American Federation of Labor—Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and the Laborers' union (which left the AFL-CIO in 2005 to join the rival Change to Win labor federation) have forged formal ties with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), headquartered in Los Angeles. NDLON in turn has recently embraced the view that unionization is key to improving the lives of day laborers (Fine 2007, 350). And the United Steel Workers union recently launched a campaign to organize L.A. car wash workers, hiring staff from the worker center movement and building on the previous work of legal advocates in that industry, documented in Susan Garea and Sasha Stern's chapter in this volume. These developments recall Dorothy Sue Cobble's (2001, 1997) insights about the contemporary relevance of all-but-forgotten modes of union organization that flourished in the early twentieth century, such as those rooted in a geographical space rather than a workplace. Indeed, both unions and worker centers have (often unwittingly) begun to revive these older organizational forms in recent years.

Over time, then, the strategic repertoires of L.A. worker centers have increasingly borrowed from the playbook of the local labor unions that first pioneered low-wage and immigrant worker organizing in Los Angeles. The converse is also true: in recent years, those unions have drawn on the worker centers' efforts in their own campaigns, as the last three chapters in this volume illustrate. Both Joshua Bloom's analysis of the L.A. security officers' union campaign and Forrest Stuart's study of the hotel workers' organizing near the LAX airport highlight the use of community outreach strategies. A third chapter, by Karina Muñiz, documents the SEIU's innovative partnership with unionized L.A. building service employers, the Maintenance Trust Cooperation Fund (MCTF), which jointly monitors the regional janitorial industry for labor law violations in a manner that replicates the work of many worker centers.

Although in all three cases, labor unions were the protagonists, all three also embraced community-based approaches to organizing. In the hotel and security officer union drives, nonunion allies in the wider community—including clergy and church groups, political clubs, elected officials, and a variety of other constituencies—played integral roles in the union campaigns. The L.A. security campaign is an especially powerful example of the cross-fertilization between union and community-based organizing approaches. The extensive involvement of African-American clergy and community leaders in that campaign went well beyond the level of community involvement in the Justice for Janitors' campaign two decades earlier. The hotel organizing effort Stuart recounts, similarly, was centered on a community-based coalition strategy. Finally, the MCTF case, as Muniz notes, also has striking parallels to the worker center model. Here the SEIU forged a unique tripartite cooperative arrangement that involved not only the union but also employers and government enforcement agencies in an ongoing effort to improve nonunion janitors' conditions and at the same time protect the gains of unionized janitors.

Looking Forward

Union organizing among immigrants and other low-wage workers was a key component of the L.A. model from the outset, but the ethnic- and community-based organizing and advocacy approaches developed by the city's worker centers have significantly expanded the horizons of the labor movement in recent years. In turn, L.A. worker centers have become more open to conventional unionism over time, recognizing at least implicitly the advantages organized labor has in staff and financial resources as well as in institutional capacity. Worker centers have come to appreciate the potential advantages of establishing collective bargaining relationships with employers in order to win significant and lasting social change—even if they remain skeptical about the top-down, bureaucratic aspects of traditional unionism. Thus L.A. unions and worker centers have learned from one another, and their organizing and advocacy approaches have increasingly converged. A similar process of mutual learning has unfolded in regard to the immigrant rights movement, which has been increasingly concerned with workers' rights, not least because of the Bush administration's dramatic escalation of workplace raids and deportations in the aftermath of the spring 2006 immigrant rights marches (Bacon 2008).

As the Latino immigrant population itself becomes more and more widely dispersed geographically, and as low-wage work itself becomes increasingly widespread, the L.A. model of organizing and advocacy is of growing relevance nationwide. The prospect of new opportunities for labor movement growth in the aftermath of the 2008 election, in the context of a dramatic economic crisis that has brought renewed public attention to the plight of working people, further adds to the model's potential appeal. Even before that, there were signs that the local advocacy networks that helped to foster the convergence of union and worker center strategies in Los Angeles were beginning to emerge elsewhere. In New York City, the Taxi Workers' Alliance was invited to affiliate with the Central Labor Council in late 2006, and since then the council has built relationships with other local worker centers as well (Greenhouse 2008b). In Chicago too, there is growing rapprochement between worker centers and local unions (Eyck 2008).

Thus the case studies of low-wage worker organizing and advocacy by L.A. worker centers and unions in the chapters that follow—most of which have not been documented previously in any detail—should be of widespread interest well beyond the boundaries of Los Angeles itself. The challenges ahead are massive, but the L.A. model, rooted in synergy between worker centers, with their vibrant grassroots community ties, and progressive unions, with their legacy of extensive financial and institutional resources, may be the nation's most promising approach to addressing the needs of low-wage workers in the coming years.