

Workers' Centers and the New Labor Movement

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The international economy is going through a period of profound restructuring, and everywhere we look the organization of work and production is changing. With few exceptions, these changes have been a nightmare for working people. Hundreds of thousands of US workers have seen their jobs eliminated by new technology and the reorganization of production. Large manufacturing sites are being replaced by smaller, dispersed shops – among these a revitalized network of sweatshops that exploit immigrant labor in a growing unregulated, underground economy.

The US labor force is being increasingly transformed into a contingency workforce; part-time, temporary and contract jobs now comprise a third of the workforce in the US and more than half of the new employment created each year. A disproportionate percentage of this workforce are women, people of color, and immigrants

The lack of organized response to this process of economic and political restructuring has been as striking as its destructive impact. Today less than 12% of private sector workers are in unions and even these are experiencing dramatic declines in their standard of living. The support of unions to labor-management cooperation schemes and to employer sanctions against undocumented workers highlights the source of their failure to respond: the fact that they take their ideological lead from big business. Similarly during the fight over NAFTA, unions lined up with one section of capital against another instead of siding with workers here and abroad.

Immigrant workers, workers of color and women workers, whose experiences have given them a deeper sense of what it means to be exploited, have naturally taken the lead among those seeking an independent way forward – and have thus most often been at the center of the workers' center phenomenon. These workers' centers can be at the center of building a new labor movement because they provide a clear vision about the source of the recent attacks on workers and how to respond. And this new labor movement built on an independent way of thinking should encompass not just the groups mentioned above but all workers. At the core of this new way of thinking is the self-organization of workers to fight for their needs independent of the needs and ideas of the corporations.

The New Labor Movement

Workers centers are in a position to begin constructing a new labor movement with an independent, clear vision. These centers have two primary characteristics: 1) they are multi-trade, uniting workers across craft and industry; and 2) they unite workers where they live as well as where they work.

The new labor movement must build its power from the bottom up. It must be a dynamic, participatory grassroots movement – one that fights for the economic, political and social needs of all working people.

We need to develop a new way of fighting, with tactics appropriate to it, to unleash workers' energy in the struggle for these needs. Workers' centers, which by their structure combine the power of workers where they live and where they work, can integrate a variety of tactics into a more holistic organizing approach which confronts corporate and state power. Workers' centers are not providers of community services to make up for functions neglected by unions. They are organizers of struggle with a major emphasis on workplace fights as well as community struggles. In addition they call for a unified fight for jobs, food, education, health, housing, political liberty and peace before corporate productivity and profitability.

Workers' Center and the New Labor Movement

Workers' center will play a major role in building the new labor movement. To advance this movement we need to come together and share with one another and with those interested in learning about this model, the lessons of our experience in building centers. Among their characteristics are:

Workers centers are multitrade: By organizing across trades and across industries – and organizing unemployed, underemployed, and never employed workers – workers' centers allow workers to strategize and mobilize around their common class interests. This multitrade character allows them to go beyond

collective bargaining struggles over particular interests to fight together around common economic, social and political issues.

Workers' Centers link up workers where they work and where they live: Workers' centers organize workers as members of a community and as members of a class, not solely as employees in a single workplace or industry. This enable members to draw on their social power both where they work and where they live in fighting for their rights, and furthermore enables them to gather together to analyze collectively how the two spheres are linked.

Workers' centers are fighting organizations: Workers' centers are organizations of struggle. They are not service providers, advocacy groups, or training centers – although they will use all these things in the course of their fight. They are places where workers can come together to educate themselves about the sources of their problems, to discuss what strategies and tactics to adopt, and to organize struggles around them.

Workers' centers are mass organizations with a democratic organizing process: Workers' centers are based on the philosophy that workers have the capacity to develop and lead their organizations, given the time, space and resources to develop their skills and analysis. Workers' centers are membership mass organizations, as open as possible, which use a democratic internal process. They develop clear processes for decision-making and planning that demystify the organizing process and keeps control of the organization in the hands of its membership and out of the hands of an organizational elite.

Organizing not unionizing: The problem with unions is not just that some are bureaucratic, or fail to take up social issues, or fail to fight militantly enough for contracts. The problem is that unions limit themselves to fighting for improvements within the collective bargaining process itself.

Workers' centers are not unions or pre-union formations. They do not represent workers in collective bargaining. Centers sometimes support workers engaged in bargaining struggles, but as a step toward further organizing on a broader basis around broader goals.

There are those within the traditional union movement who seek to use workers' centers as a means toward the goal of unionization, who seek to take advantage of this new organizational form to promote their own institution's survival and with it the continuation (with some adjustments) of the essential premises and methods of U.S. trade unionism. In contrast we view workers' centers as one way of building the new labor movement. We view unionization as a tactic, not as a strategy; we do not seek to promote the development of workers' centers to lay the groundwork for future expanded unionization. Rather we wish to organize workers into a new labor movement, one that goes beyond unionization and ruptures with the assumptions, methods and organizational forms of the past.

Combating racism, sexism and homophobia; building working class unity: Workers' centers have a commitment to creating specific resources and space for the development of specially oppressed groups as leaders at work and in their communities, and thus of centers themselves. Given where and how centers have sprung up this has already been the reality, but must continue to be so as centers spread to new communities throughout the class as a whole.

Workers' centers recognize the differences in culture and language among working people who have been discriminated against, and strive to allow space for the self-organization of these groups. At the same time centers are committed to addressing class issues, promoting a working class identity and the creation of a working class culture of struggle and solidarity through the development of new values and social relations within the organization.

Commitment to political education, leadership development, and liberation: Workers' centers are committed to fighting for long-term changes that will enable workers to have genuine economic, political and social power. This commitment to fundamental change goes side by side with the commitment to developing a mass organization and broad community base. Thus workers' centers seek to implement an organizing model which will raise workers' consciousness and present opportunities for them to develop as leaders and commit themselves to the liberation of workers from exploitation and oppression.