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WORKER CENTERS GIVE IMMIGRANTS SERVICES, VOICE AMID SIMMERING DEBATE

About 140 centers in 80 U.S. areas advocate for mostly low-income, undocumented workers who face discrimination, poor working conditions, lost wages

Immigrant workers are changing the landscape of low-wage work and the labor market, with President Bush advocating a guest-worker program, Congress pushing increased border security and patrol, and the first-ever national study detailing widespread exploitation of day laborers. But as national policy is debated, a locally-based, grassroots movement is taking the initiative to assist millions of immigrants in the American workforce who face poor pay, bad working conditions and few prospects to advance to better jobs. A new book from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) takes one of the first, comprehensive looks at the rising phenomenon of the immigrant worker center – the fast-growing institution that improves the lives of immigrant workers through service advocacy and organizing.

Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream – by Rutgers University professor and EPI research associate Janice Fine and published by Cornell University – looks at the impact of 140 organizations in over 80 cities, suburbs and rural areas in 31 states identified as worker centers, community-based and -led groups that provide support to low-wage immigrants and help them integrate into society. The services from these centers – growing from just five in 1992 to at least 140 across the nation currently – include information, training, and direct assistance in such areas as workers’ rights, labor law, health care referrals, occupational safety and health, legal services, and English as a second language. What sets these centers apart is the addition of organizing and advocacy to secure workers’ rights, especially for undocumented workers who have no voice or recourse from employer abuse or hazardous job assignments, according to Fine.

These centers – most with five or fewer staff members and small budgets – compel employers to treat workers better and improve conditions on the job through campaigns that usually lobby local governments or companies for safer worksites, recovery of unpaid wages, enforcement of labor laws, and other goals. A prominent example is the successful four-year national boycott of Taco Bell that was organized by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida that resulted in improved wages for tomato pickers.

“Low-wage immigrant workers toil under conditions resulting from a perfect storm of labor laws that have ceased to protect workers, little effective labor market regulation, and a national immigration policy that has created a permanent underclass of workers,” said Fine. “Worker centers give a voice and power to people who often lack both.”

The book details how these worker centers differ from unions and nonprofit service providers, reviewing for example, the centers’ emphasis on leadership development. In that area, centers give training on workers’ rights, chiefly basic civics (structure of American governance), as well as public speaking and advocacy (for media, local policymakers, and campaigns) and on nonprofit management. Here is a detailed list of what worker centers do:

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- The greatest demand comes from assistance with filing and pursuing claims for unpaid wages. On average, worker centers collect between \$100,000 and \$200,000 a year in back wages for workers. Several have won lawsuits that have recovered millions of dollars for workers.
- Most centers focus their work geographically, working in a particular metropolitan area, city or neighborhood. Unlike unions, their focus is not organizing for majority representation in individual work-sites or for contracts for individual groups of workers.
- Centers view education as integral to organizing. Workshops, courses, and training sessions are structured to emphasize the development of critical thinking skills.
- Worker centers tend to have very small budgets and most of their funds go to paying salaries and overhead. With the exception of a few with trailers, very few of the centers own their own buildings. Given how small they are, center staff often operate as “jacks of all trades,” doing fundraising, administrative and legal work, organizing and advocacy.
- To demonstrate a sense of solidarity with workers in other countries and focus on the global impact of labor and trade policies, many centers maintain ongoing ties with grassroots organizations in the countries from which workers have migrated, share strategies, and publicize each other’s work.

Fine also suggests policy reforms including a better system of monitoring and enforcing compliance with federal and state labor laws; legislation on industry-specific minimum standards on overtime, benefits, and wages; and health coverage.

Worker centers are important, especially as we now have the largest influx of foreign workers in the nation’s history coupled with a profound absence of labor market regulation and an immigration policy that has created a permanent underclass of low-wage workers, according to Fine. Because most of the centers’ success comes through public policy rather than direct pressure on firms and industries, Fine sees the advocacy and campaigning part of the centers growing as much as the services arm, in order to advance the rights of workers.

“While centers are still struggling to achieve economic and political power, they have succeeded at providing a dynamic, ongoing vehicle for action,” said Fine. “As such, they play a unique role.”

Janice Fine is Assistant Professor of Labor Studies and Employment Relations in the School Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers University.

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