

A NATIONAL WORKER CENTER - AFL-CIO PARTNERSHIP

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

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

ps0oymcooper worke

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

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

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

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

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

Creating A National Worker Center Partnership

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

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

