

Organizing the Unorganized: the Coalition of Immokalee Workers
and Latino Migrant Farm Labor in the 21st Century

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Political Science Senior Thesis

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Spring 2008

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I. Introduction

The presence and power of labor unions has been declining steadily over the past few decades after reaching a peak in the mid-twentieth century. Until recently, union density (the proportion of the workforce represented by unions) had diminished to minimal proportions and unions were watching their political influence dwindle with it. Unions' share of the workforce dropped from a high of 37% in 1946 to less than 14% today.¹ Many factors have contributed to this decline. Deindustrialization meant that more and more manufacturing union jobs were outsourced over seas. The growth and consolidation of corporations has made it easier for business to obtain deregulatory labor measures from the government, almost entirely reversing the many pro-labor regulations instituted as part of the New Deal. In addition, privatization of the (largely unionized) public sector marked a move away from labor unionism in the US.

In the face of these obstacles, local unions limited their efforts to basic "business unionism." They focused on economic issues, such as wages and benefits, and enforced contracts for members on the shop floor, but did little more than this. Similarly, unionized workers remained inactive and paid dues with the expectation that unions would solve their problems for them and represent their interests. Organizing drives, particularly those which involved significant work disruption, were practiced less and less frequently and the labor movement became more like an "institutionalized interest group than a social movement."²

As the threat of unionism diminished, so did the quality of employment for many American workers. Employers no longer felt pressure to match unionized wages and

¹ Voss, Kim and Sherman, Rachel(a), "Breaking the Iron Law of Oligarchy: Union Revitalization in the American Labor Movement," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 106, No. 2, (September 2000): 303-349, p. 311

² *Ibid.* p. 304

benefits. Work conditions plummeted and the workforce transformed. By the late 1980s, many industries had completely transformed into unionless sectors with lower wages, less benefits, and mostly Latino workers.

Latino immigrants are arriving to the United States in masses looking for work. Latino workers make up 40%-50% of new entrants to the US workforce.³ They are largely concentrated in urban areas and low-wage, low-skilled jobs, where union representation is nearly nonexistent. Considering their poor working conditions, Latinos have shown an intense desire for economic advancement, even proving themselves more receptive to unionism than native-born workers.⁴ When given the opportunity, they have demonstrated themselves to be ready and willing to mobilize.

We find ourselves today at a crossroads where a struggling immigrant population and a deteriorating labor movement can help and potentially revitalize each other. Labor unions can help low-wage, uneducated Latinos gain higher wages, better benefits, and the tools needed to climb today's tall socio-economic ladder. At the same time, the ever-growing population of Latinos has shown themselves willing to organize when given the opportunities and incentives. Combining these two forces has produced many of the labor movement's few notable successes in recent years, suggesting that the future of Latinos and the success of Labor depend largely on how well an interdependent relationship can develop between the two. Indeed, because Latinos continue to make up a large portion of the US workforce and economy, their work status and conditions are directly linked to the nation's

³ Pérez, Sonia, and Muñoz, Cecilia, "Latino Low-wage Workers: a Look at Immigrant Workers," Chapter 12, pp. 239-258, in *Low Wage Workers in the New Economy*, edited by Richard Kazis and Marc S. Miller. (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2001), p. 239

⁴ Milkman, Ruth, *LA Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the US Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), p. 188

overall economic well-being. If nothing is done to improve Latino working conditions, the condition of the US workforce may suffer.

For these reasons, I have chosen to investigate strategies and tactics of organizing Latino workers. In order to further analyze this topic, I have chosen to examine the efforts of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a grassroots-based organization which works to organize (mostly Latino) immigrant farm workers in the southwest Florida region. This small group has enjoyed significant successes using unconventional methods of organizing. Because CIW is not technically a labor union, it may not be possible, legally or otherwise, to directly apply its methods to union strategy. Nevertheless, its ability to organize immigrants and win significant wage increases against big business – two accomplishments the labor movement has struggled to achieve – merit the attention of a struggling labor movement which has, as of yet, failed to establish a solid connection with the Latino workforce.

Also, the Coalition's success as a worker center is particularly interesting. Worker centers are a relatively new development in the labor movement, springing up across the US over the last 15 to 20 years in response to changes in work organization and migration patterns. Subcontracting, sweatshops, de-unionized industries, and other condition-deteriorating changes in work organization have hurt the US workforce over the last 30 years, especially affecting immigrants. Worker centers have worked to organize these workers more than any other group.⁵ The centers focus primarily on organizing with little or no focus on contracts or institutionalized gains. Their organizing function has allowed them to act as a bridge which links Latino immigrants and other workers in the non-unionized majority to labor unions. This function alone makes the study of worker centers

⁵ Moody, Kim, *US Labor in Trouble and Transition: The Failure of Reform from Above, The Promise of Revival from Below*. (Verso Publishers, 2007), p. 216

invaluable to the labor movement in its attempt to connect with the Latino community. The case of CIW is particularly intriguing due to their ability to obtain impressive contractual gains as well as organize previously unorganized workers. The Coalition has gained major pay increases from huge fast-food companies like Taco Bell and McDonalds, something unprecedented for agricultural labor unions, much less worker centers. That this group has enjoyed the type of success normally reserved for unions raises questions about the efficacy and relevance of labor unions in today's political economy.

Social movement unionism (or just social unionism) is one way that CIW and labor unions have tried to recruit new members and expand their organization efforts outside of the workplace. As the US workforce has become more diverse and work organization more complex, conventional union practices have grown outdated and irrelevant. Labor issues are expanding beyond "business unionism," which limits its efforts to economic issues like wages and benefits in a workplace-by-workplace struggle. Organizing campaigns are no longer limited strictly to the place of work. Increasingly the labor movement is dealing with issues which affect entire communities, such as immigration rights and fair trade. Many workers have multiple jobs, meaning a community-wide struggle can be more inclusive and effective than one that is limited to one workplace or company. More and more, the labor movement is beginning to extend their struggle beyond the walls of the workplace and into the community, latching on to other social movements in an attempt to combine forces and revive the declining condition of labor in the US. Latino workers have shown themselves to be particularly receptive candidates for leading recent social unionism successes, such as the Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles, suggesting that the immigrant population may work well under this model.

Next, I will examine how scholars have debated the opportunities and obstacles posed to Latino labor mobilization. This will help establish various perspectives within the broader labor movement debate and establish a broad foundation on which analysis of the CIW can be built. Following the literature review, I will discuss the research design of this thesis. This includes formulating a hypothesis, defining concepts, and explaining the collection and analysis of data. After presenting the methodology of the thesis, discussion of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers will begin. Group history and background of CIW will be presented and analyzed. Sources of data include staff member interviews and other notes of observation. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of my findings, explaining how CIW was able to overcome the odds and achieve success, how their strategies differed from other labor union campaigns, and what their success means for the rest of the labor movement.

II. Literature Review

Obstacles to Latino Labor Mobilization:

The labor movement has struggled to mobilize the Latino workforce for a variety of reasons. Globalization and its effects are one such impediment. As noted before, previously unionized jobs have moved offshore, where they can employ cheaper labor without facing legal repercussions. Job outsourcing hurts the working class in more than one way. Fewer US jobs are available, leaving a chunk of the working class without a paycheck. Even for workers who retain their jobs, wages and working conditions have declined. In the face of wage and price competition from developing countries, US companies are exerting more and more downward pressure on wages and working conditions just to survive in the ever-

expansive globalized market, threatening union organization and encouraging the growth of underground economies.⁶

Labor subcontracting is one such way that companies have attempted to deal with increased market competition and quite possibly the biggest obstacle to labor mobilization today. This practice refers to the hiring of contractors by a manufacturer to be responsible for the employees and production within a workplace or group of workplaces. Under this framework, contractors provide a layer of legal insulation between oppressed workers and ruthless manufacturers. Because the contractors, and not the manufacturer, are the legal employer, manufacturers can delegate legal responsibility for labor conditions to this hired group. If a contractor is charged with labor law violations or becomes the site of a union election campaign, it is not the problem of the manufacturer; they can terminate services with this contractor and find another nonunion contractor to hire. The company sits at the top of the power pyramid of labor contracting, resting on the contractors, who in turn rest their weight on the workers at the bottom. Ultimately, this allows these companies access to an abundant, cheap, and reliable source of Latino immigrant labor without the economic costs and legal risks of directly employing them.⁷ Under this framework, the worker is severely marginalized, the company profits from its unaccountable racketeering, and traditional forms of unionization are outdated and irrelevant.

Traditionally, a factory unionized through a National Labor Relations Board election held within its own workplace. In these elections, voters simply voted ‘yes’ or ‘no’ regarding their desire for union representation. Within the labor-subcontracting framework,

⁶ Watts, Julie, *Immigration Policy and the Challenge of Globalization: Unions and Employers in Unlikely Alliance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 17

⁷ Zolniski, Christian, “Labor control and resistance of Mexican immigrant janitors in Silicon Valley,” *Human Organization*, Washington: Spring 2003. Vol. 62, Issue 1, p. 46

however, NLRB elections are ineffective. As noted before, a manufacturer will immediately sever ties with its contractor at even the hint of unionization and employ another contractor whose workers pose no threat of unionization. Because this move can mean shutting down an entire factory, workers are reluctant to even demand a NLRB election, much less wage increases, for fear of losing their jobs. Even if workers are able to hold and win an NLRB election, this would hold the contractor accountable, leaving the root cause of deteriorating workplace conditions – the manufacturer – unscathed. This traditional mode of unionization has become ineffective under today’s context of labor contracting which sees manufacturers place themselves above the law and refuse to take accountability for their actions.⁸

Employer and industry resistance marks another significant obstacle to Latino labor mobilization. Since the mid-1970s, employers have become more and more aggressive in their anti-union tactics. They refused to concede to union demands in strikes. They began to contest and delay NLRB elections, fire union activists, hire antiunion consulting firms on a regular basis, and stall in negotiating first contracts. Though unions faced employer resistance in the past, the corporate onslaught reached new heights due to a gradual slackening of labor regulations and enforcement in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁹ The NLRB was slow to investigate claims of legal violations and penalties for labor law violations were weak.

Also, employers have come together as a unified industry in the face of union challenges. Where one company comes under fire, many others within the same industry offer monetary and legal support to defend it for fear that union success against one will

⁸ Voss, Kim and Sherman, Rachel(b), “ ‘Organize or Die’: Labor’s New Tactics and Immigrant Workers,” Chapter 3, pp. 81-108, in *Organizing Immigrants: the Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California*, edited by Ruth Milkman. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000)

⁹ Voss and Sherman (a). p. 311

trigger a domino effect of wage increases and unionization throughout the industry. This occurred in labor's campaign against Guess, Inc., where financial endorsements from throughout the garment industry proved too immense for union resources to conquer.¹⁰ Competitors in business, these manufacturers become allies in the war against labor.

Thus, labor has found itself positioned against not one contractor, or even one manufacturer, but more commonly, against one industry. As such, labor unions find themselves grappling with yet another obstacle: lack of resources. In order to conduct an effective campaign, a labor union needs funds to mobilize the workers, to pay its own employees and organizers, and to pay legal costs that can accumulate to massive amounts in a legal system which is famous for its prolonged nature. Without sufficient financial resources, a labor union can expect to find itself short of talented organizers and labor researchers. Here we see one of the major reasons the labor movement has failed to keep up with, and adapt to, the sophistication of business anti-union activities in a today's globalized economy.

The entrenchment of labor bureaucratization has added to the decline in unionism as well. Until very recently, the same, long-standing leadership directed most major labor unions. This limited leadership turnover has restricted the labor movement by setting conservative goals and correspondingly non-confrontational tactics which do not engage its constituency and fail to pursue innovative strategies.¹¹ Scholars have argued that this “do-nothing business unionism” has prevented the movement from adapting to the complexities

¹⁰ Bonacich, Edna, “Latino Immigrant Workers in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry” pp. 141-164 in *Latino Social Movements: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives*, edited by R. Torres and G. Katsiaficas (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 154

¹¹ Voss and Sherman (*a*), p. 310

of labor subcontracting and other new economic conditions and obstacles.¹² All of these obstacles have contributed to labor's current deflated standing.

Finally, obstacles within the Latino workforce itself pose problems to the successful mobilization of this group. Because there is a constant influx of new Latino immigrants at the bottom of the economy, worker competition remains high, even at low-wage nonunion jobs. Corporations need not maintain employment with workers who call for unionization and wage increases when they can hire from a vast population of immigrants ready and willing to work under bad conditions. Thus, while I argue that Latino immigrants can contribute greatly to the labor movement, their presence can also hinder the very same movement. Unions are forced to acknowledge that many immigrants have no incentive to argue for workplace improvements. Many find themselves mostly satisfied with low American wages which mark a real wage increase from jobs in their native country. This dual frame of reference between US working conditions and those of their native country gives them less impetus to demand union jobs, particularly when doing so means facing the threat of deportation.¹³

Low levels of education also stand in the way of Latino unionization. Communication and organization between unions and workers is difficult when a small percentage of the workers speak English. Furthermore, the low levels of education prevent workplace advancement and knowledge of labor rights. While entitled to some protections, such as minimum wage, overtime pay, and the right to unionize, undocumented Latino

¹² López, Steven H., "Overcoming Legacies of Business Unionism: Why Grassroots Organizing Tactics Succeed" Chapter 4, pp. 114-132 in *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, edited by Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 116

¹³ Waldinger and Der-Martirosian, "Immigrant Workers and American Labor: Challenge...or Disaster?" Chapter 2, pp. 49-80 in *Organizing Immigrants: the Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California*, edited by Ruth Milkman. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 59

immigrants have limited access to state institutions that provide even the most minimal of protections. They lack political power and civil rights. In the Latino-concentrated city of Los Angeles, where they make up 43% of the city's population, Latinos only constitute 15% of its electorate.¹⁴ This lack of rights, in combination with their poverty and susceptibility to deportation by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), leaves them highly vulnerable and makes risk-taking and effective organizing difficult.

Scholars vary in the significance they lend to the aforementioned obstacles facing Latino labor mobilization. In turn, this perspectival difference leads to a difference in opinion concerning which strategic approach(es) should be employed in order to overcome Latino labor's problems. Where some perceive employer resistance, globalization, labor subcontracting, and other industry factors to be the biggest obstacle to labor unionism, they might argue that unions must employ tactics that affect these employer and industry components. Similarly, those who argue that unions, and not globalization or other factors, have been responsible for the demise of labor may see opportunities in a renovation of union structure and practices. That is to say, scholars are divided in how they view the obstacles to Latino labor mobilization and this is affecting the strategies and opportunities they propose to overcome the broader problems of the movement.

SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT: OPPORTUNITIES

Strategies aimed towards the Industry, NLRB, and the Employer:

Edna Bonacich, Héctor Delgado, Ruth Milkman, and Kent Wong are among a group of scholars who argue that the industry, NLRB elections, and employer resistance in a

¹⁴ Bonacich, p. 157

globalized economy represent the greatest challenges to unionization. As such, they argue that the labor movement cannot expect progress without overcoming these obstacles.

NLRB elections have become an outdated and irrelevant mode to unionization, a fact that has increasingly benefited employers. Furthermore, under the framework of labor subcontracting, these elections conducted against isolated contractors have proven to be completely ineffective. Thus, labor unions have increasingly attempted to effect change by means outside the NLRB election process. Guerrilla legal tactics, argue Milkman and Wong, are one such way to achieving this goal. This involves filing complaints through the National Labor Relations Board without official union status, as well as seeking legal redress through government agencies. This way of “acting union without a contract” can impose legal costs and economic pressure on a contractor.¹⁵ As such, the contractor is often forced to negotiate with and, ultimately, recognize the union.

Edna Bonacich is one of many scholars who advocate the use of corporate campaigns, a tactic employed outside the NLRB election process. In this strategy, labor unions acknowledge and accept the great financial and resource advantages major companies hold over them, choosing instead to focus their energy on their weaknesses. They conduct research on the power structure of an industry to identify non-production pressure points. Then the union exploits these pressure points in order to gain leverage and employer recognition without going through the NLRB process. This means interfering in the employer’s relations with lenders, clients, shareholders, and subsidiaries.¹⁶ Because unions are restricted from direct access to these private employer-subsidary channels, corporate campaigns work to influence these relationships in other ways. Such campaigns

¹⁵ Milkman and Wong, p. 111

¹⁶ Voss and Sherman (*a*), p. 312

usually assume the form of public protest which aims to gain the attention of the media and the sympathy of the public. For instance, the Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles was able to win substantial wage gains after janitors protested working conditions in front of corporate office buildings.¹⁷ Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers perfected this practice during the 1960s and 1970s, using marches on the California state capitol and nation-wide boycott campaigns to attract media attention and public sympathy, and gain leverage over their employers.¹⁸ Pushing its grievances into the public arena gives these campaigns a way to share their problems and concerns with shareholders and consumers in a way that negotiations behind closed doors cannot. By transferring the dispute from the conference room and the courtroom – where the political and economic capital of corporations rule – to the streets – where the sympathy of the public presides, corporate campaigns effectively shift the balance of power towards the workers. While successful corporate campaigns do not necessarily result in unionization, notes Bonacich, they do represent a significant pressure tactic on the path to unionization. For instance, the damage done to a company's reputation can follow them offshore even after they have outsourced their manufacturing.

In order to deal with the obstacles posed by labor subcontracting, scholars have advocated jobbers' agreements. Where manufacturers have the power to stop work with a contractor under the threat of unionization, and contract with a non-unionized group, these agreements would bind the manufacturer, as well as all of its contractors, into the same union contract. Under such conditions, these manufacturers are forced to work only, or

¹⁷ Milkman, p. 153

¹⁸ "UFW Chronology," United Farm Workers website, accessed on 4/12/08, <http://www.ufw.org/page.php?menu=research&inc=page.php?menu=research&inc=history/01.html>

predominantly, with union shops that guarantee a certain level of wages and benefits.¹⁹ The Coalition of Immokalee Workers have obtained jobbers agreements in their deals with Taco Bell and McDonalds, which say that these companies cannot purchase tomatoes from contractors who do not take part in a pre-determined wage increase for tomato-pickers. Still, jobbers' agreements are very difficult to obtain. Companies may reluctantly accept unionization in a small group of workplace locations. But to agree to unionization throughout an entire industry can mean a considerable increase in production costs that few companies are able to pay or willing to accept. As such, such deals are rarely accomplished. When successful, however, they are a major victory for labor in the face of labor contracting.

Acknowledging that the struggle goes beyond just one manufacturer, Héctor Delgado notes the importance of a multi-union, industry-wide campaign, as was done by the unsuccessful but inspirational Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project (LAMAP) of the 1990s.²⁰ In today's labor context, no one union is big enough or has enough resources by itself to go out and organize an industry. They must work together with other unions and all be willing to invest resources, financial and otherwise, to the campaign. Furthermore, in this cooperation they must be willing to relinquish some control, something very difficult for organizations known for their narrow perspectives and resistance to change.

Strategies aimed at community and worker mobilization:

¹⁹ Bonacich, p. 159

²⁰ Delgado, Héctor L., "The Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project: An Opportunity Squandered?" Chapter 9, pp. 225-238 in *Organizing Immigrants: the Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California*, edited by Ruth Milkman. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 225-238

As the presence of labor unions has decreased continually over the last 30-40 years, a divide has formed between workers and labor unions. Today, scholars are arguing that a renewed mobilization of the workers and their communities is essential for the revitalization of the labor movement. Limited leadership turnover has led to a growing conservatism and a lack of worker involvement. The movement became enveloped by a culture of business unionism, in which members paid dues and union business agents serviced the workers, resolving shop-floor and other problems for them. For a period, both union staff and membership found this servicing model to be convenient. The workers were satisfied with the hands-off approach of paying dues and letting the union solve their problems for them, and the union staff members had grown accustomed to performing these basic tasks.²¹ However, as unions lost power and contracts became more concessionary, workers grew dissatisfied with this model. Their dues seemed to be producing ever-decreasing benefits and wages and they blamed this on bureaucratic rigidity and inactivity in the ranks of the labor unions. As a result, unionized workers began voting to end union representation and union density dropped about 60 percent over the next 30-40 years.²² Labor scholars and staff members alike saw the need for change in strategy to regain lost union members, unionize the non-unionized majority, and revitalize the movement.

Arguing in the name of union democracy, Vanessa Tait and other scholars insist that grassroots activism and rank-and-file control are necessary to revitalize the labor movement and disengage the grip leadership maintains over the workers. After all, what is the union without the worker? Professional leadership is a threat to workers' control over their own organizations, and dense bureaucracy (and the conservatism it breeds) is exactly the reason

²¹ Voss and Sherman (*a*), p. 321

²² *Ibid.*, p. 311

unions have struggled, argue these scholars. Cities like Los Angeles have seen recent surges of union activity and success principally because minimal labor bureaucracy was established and there was high worker participation. “The reason LA is the shining star of the union...we’ve had highest percentage of workers’ participation...at heart and soul, there has to be mobilized workforce.”²³

The practice of social unionism, or the construction of social justice around issues broader than just labor, has proven to be an effective and successful means to labor unionization. In their study on labor in the greater Miami area, Bruce Nissen and Monica Russo discovered that labor can ride the wave of something with wide appeal, such as the living wage issue or immigrants rights. While labor issues may not gain widespread public support on their own, as part of a progressive social justice infrastructure Nissen and Russo claim they stand a better chance of success. SEIU Local 11, a Florida-based building services union, won a major victory at the University of Miami in 2006 due in large part to the help of a local, progressive social justice infrastructure that supported their organizing.²⁴ Framing a campaign broadly can attract and unite a variety of disparate and otherwise divided groups. Where divisions of race, class, gender, and nationality prevail within a community, social movement unionism can act as a bridge that allies these divided communities.²⁵ When the labor movement helps support a campaign for immigrant rights for example, Latino immigrant workers of all nationalities will be more inclined to unite in their support of labor unions. Furthermore, demonstrating a community full of active social justice-oriented organizations in cooperation with one another can also attract national

²³ Milkman and Wong, p. 110

²⁴ Nissen and Russo, “Strategies for Labor Revitalization: The Case of Miami”, Chapter 8, pp. 147-177, in *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*, edited by Lowell Turner and Daniel B Cornfield (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 147

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150

resources, leading to the possibility of further success.²⁶ In short, Nissen and Russo argue that revitalization requires that the labor movement be grounded in the community.

Ronald Peters and Theresa Merrill agree that community-based organizing is an effective strategy for Latino labor mobilization, and they say that religious groups are a major reason for this. “As business and middle-classes move to the suburbs, churches are often the only private institutions left behind to aid inner-city poor, working-class, minority and immigrant groups.”²⁷ Latinos are known for their devotion to Catholicism, and as such, the Church has found itself in an advantageous position to build bridges between union leaders and Latino immigrant workers. Linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and immigrant unfamiliarity with US labor organizations have hindered union leaders’ recruiting efforts of this group. Faced with these obstacles, labor unions have turned to local religious organizations for approaching immigrants, usually with successful results.²⁸

Immanuel Ness, Tait and others have been major supporters of worker centers as a means to worker empowerment outside of the formal union structure. In the traditional model of union organizing, efforts are concentrated in only one industry or within one skill. However, this practice is not applicable to today’s immigrants, who hold multiple jobs in multiple industries.²⁹ Worker centers account for this development and do not specify by skill or industry like unions. In a way, these centers are surrogate unions, providing many of the same benefits that unions offer to their members. They offer a variety of services, from classes in English, labor skills, and labor rights to leadership development. Ultimately, they

²⁶ Nissen and Russo, p. 153

²⁷ Peters and Merrill, p. 177

²⁸ Cornfield and Canak, “Immigrants and Labor in a Globalizing City: Prospects for Coalition Building in Nashville,” Chapter 9, pp. 163-177 in *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*, edited by Lowell Turner and Daniel B Cornfield, p. 173

²⁹ Clawson, Dan, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 106-110

aim to create networks among workers with the ultimate goal of developing ideological and political consciousness toward unionization. Ness adds that these centers are especially important in today's context because they work to shore up the increasingly large non-unionized majority that unions have either not attempted to organize or been unable to organize, such as undocumented workers. That is to say, they make a concerted effort to assist those non-union workers who need help the most – the disenfranchised. Due to their close work with laborers, in a very short time these centers have already established “perhaps ironically, a closer and broader relationship with both their members and their nonmembers than do unions with the rank and file.”³⁰

Despite the important niche worker centers fill by including the un-included, Dan Clawson argues that they make few and little institutional gains in the way that unions do.³¹ These centers focus on organizing and not contracts. While their tactics may empower the downtrodden worker, they do little to actualize concrete benefits such as wage increases.

Kate Bronfenbrenner and Robert Hickey advocate an intensive and strategic rank-and-file organization strategy by labor unions. Unions do this in a variety of ways, including worker participation through committee structures, house calls, rank-and-file volunteers, solidarity actions, and creating community-labor coalitions.³² In this way, the organizational aspects of the centers – working to include and empower the un-included – are combined with the contracts and institutional gains of labor unions. As the workforce has become more and more diverse with the influx of Latino and other immigrants, labor

³⁰ Ness, Immanuel, “Organizing Immigrant Communities: UNITE’s Workers Center Strategy” Chapter 5, pp. 87-101 in *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies*, edited by Kate Bronfenbrenner, Sheldon Friedman, Richard W. Hurd, Rudolph A. Oswald, Ronald L. Seeber (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 100

³¹ Clawson, p. 106-110

³² Bronfenbrenner, Kate and Hickey, Robert, “Changing to Organize: A National Assessment of Union Strategies,” Chapter 1, pp. 17-57 in *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, edited by Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004)

organization has become increasingly difficult, though crucial to the labor movement. Where manufacturers are well-organized, well-financed and largely unified in their anti-union defenses, the progressively more diverse workforce finds itself divided along lines of race, gender, nationality, legal status, and other identity markers, unable to effect a cohesive campaign. As a result, the Labor Movement has watched union density fall from nearly 40% to just above 10% in the last 50 years.³³ Thus, labor unions, more than ever, must reprioritize intensive worker organization as a key component of their strategy; this is the responsibility of unions. “Who are they pissed at? What do they want? These things come up for all workers regardless of their backgrounds. These are the things we help them discover they have in common.”³⁴

Strategies affecting union structure and strategy:

Steven López, Marco Hauptmeier, and Lowell Turner are among a group of scholars who argue that labor stagnation is the fault of no one but the union itself. Labor subcontracting, job outsourcing, and employer opposition are indeed factors in labor’s decline. However, it has been labor’s failure to adapt to these changes and challenges which has led to its decline. From about 1950 until the 1970s, most unions focused on expanding their union membership through conventional tactics, which included focusing primarily on economic issues, conducting top-down campaigns from union headquarters with minimal worker participation, and reaching out to workers through leaflets and other kinds of

³³ Voss and Sherman (*a*), p. 311

³⁴ Wells, Miriam, “Immigration and Unionization in the San Francisco Hotel Industry”, Chapter 4, pp. 109-129 in *Organizing Immigrants: the Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California*, edited by Ruth Milkman. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 122

nonpersonal contact.³⁵ Unions did little to engage or establish a strong relationship with the rank-and-file, but this seemed to be of little importance in light of the success they were enjoying at the time. However, as conditions worsened and the labor movement began to struggle, it became more and more apparent that the pro-labor conditions of the time, and not labor leadership, was the main cause of its success. The service model, which focuses more on developing relations with employers than with engaging its own membership, became the norm for the labor movement. Confrontation of any kind was avoided for fear of disrupting their good relationship with the employer. Legal advice, training, and other services are provided to the rank-and-file, but little is done to establish any sense of worker-union relationship. Workers felt used by, and disconnected from these unions with their top-down practices. As such, López has coined a term to describe labor's lethargic leadership – “do-nothing business unionism.”³⁶ Under this framework, workers became reluctant to continue paying dues or unionize in the first place, seeing union leaders as ‘old fat white guys’ who fraternize with the employer more than they aid the worker.³⁷ Corrupt labor leaders like Jimmy Hoffa had become the face of a movement which was slowly declining.

As a result, López argues that labor needs to work to change the way unions are perceived. This begins with the workers. Many workers fear that the union was only interesting in collecting their dues money and nothing more. They were accustomed to being exploited by their employers, and many assumed the union would be no different.³⁸ Unions must meet with workers to dispel their negatives sentiments of the movement. They must get workers involved in the process, showing them that action is being taken, advances

³⁵ Voss and Sherman(a), p. 310

³⁶ López, p. 115

³⁷ Wells, pp. 119-120

³⁸ López, p. 124

are being made, and that unions are doing more than just collecting dues. “This creation of new and positive union experiences for the rank-and-file is more important to the success of the labor movement than any other thing.”³⁹ Only when this happens does labor stand any chance of closing the gap between movement and membership and putting the labor back in the labor movement.

Marco Hauptmeier and Lowell Turner agree with the call for a renovation of union structure and strategy, arguing for community-based mobilization. They argue that social coalitions – which have experienced recent success in Los Angeles and other Latino-concentrated areas – are more effective today than the more traditional model of political coalitions. Social coalitions include labor and “other social factors such as community, religious, environmental, and immigrant rights groups, focused on a range of political, economic, and social campaigns.”⁴⁰ Successful in years past, political coalitions – which focus largely on elections and the policy-making processes – have been highly ineffective in recent years. This is partly because the labor movement is politically fragmented; not all unions can agree on endorsing one candidate. Known for its ability to mobilize voters in mass numbers, the labor movement has not been able to deliver a powerful, unified voting presence in recent years and has watched its political capital slowly dry up. In near consensus on supporting a democratic Presidential nominee, the current Presidential race has seen unions sharply divided in their support of a particular candidate, and these unions are expending a great deal of resources battling each other. According to the Federal Election

³⁹ López, p. 131

⁴⁰ Hauptmeier and Turner, “Political Insiders and Social Activists: Coalition Building in New York and Los Angeles”, Chapter 7, pp. 129-143, in *Labor in the New Urban Battlegrounds: Local Solidarity in a Global Economy*, edited by Lowell Turner and Daniel B Cornfield (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 134

Commission, Unions backing Hillary Clinton have made more than \$3.6 million in expenditures, while unions backing Obama have spent more than \$3.7 million.⁴¹

Labor laws are weaker now more than ever and labor is now only a face in the large Washington crowd of lobbyists. Critics of political coalitions argue that this tactic shifts too many union resources away from servicing and organizing membership to fruitless top-down dealings between unions and politicians. Limited resources are wasted and the rank-and-file is now abandoned both by its employer and its union. Thus, Hauptmeier and Turner see this is a strong indication that unions must reconsider the traditional political methods in favor of a new social unionism which involves the workers.⁴²

While these scholars do not deny that the traditional strategy of investing in political capital is an important means to success, they suggest that it is less effective now than it has been and may even be inhibiting successful unionization. Scholars point to labor's weak position in Los Angeles politics as a reason for the area's recent labor successes. Having no real establishment in the historically pro-business town "gave a new generation of labor leaders space to experiment with innovative strategies based on new social conditions."⁴³ Labor has benefited from this new group of leaders who entered the union in the 1970s, bringing to the labor movement a mindset of social activism and inclusiveness. Whether the Los Angeles Janitors for Justice campaign of the early 1990s or the Drywallers' strike of 1993, marches, strikes, and other forms of worker-led public protest (with community support) have given new hope and cohesion to a labor movement desperate for both.

⁴¹Hershey, William, "Unions Divided Between Clinton, Obama," Dayton Daily News, accessed 4/12/08, <http://globalgrind.com/globalview/Depart.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2fcontent%2f12509%2fOhio-unions-divided-between-Clinton-Obama&cid=12509>

⁴² Hauptmeier and Turner, pp. 129-143

⁴³ Ibid., p. 130

Though hard to imagine, labor would be even worse off today if it were not for the emergence of this social movement unionism.

Contract provisions, argue Christian Zlolniski and Miriam Wells, are one major component of union strategy which can foster the inclusion of Latino immigrants and nonunion members into unions. Many undocumented Latino immigrants are unreceptive to unionization because they fear that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE, formerly known as Immigration and Naturalization Service) will discover and deport them. Thus, these workers may only be receptive to unionization if they are ensured of some sort of protection. Contract provisions can accommodate this need when shaped to incorporate special clauses which both defend undocumented workers from ICE and respond to social needs and practices.⁴⁴ For example, many labor unions have successfully unionized in Latino-concentrated areas by including childcare and education funds, in addition to immigrant assistance (as part of a legal benefit plan).⁴⁵ That the immigrant assistance benefit is the most utilized of these benefits is a testament not only to the great proportion of undocumented workers working in this part of the economy, but also to the significance of immigrant protection as a condition of their unionizing. For many, unions may be their only protection.

According to Wells, mobilization of Latino immigrants must become a cornerstone of the labor movement which has historically neglected immigrants. Even more than white native-borns, Latino immigrants are especially receptive and militant union members when provided with protective contract provisions and other opportunities to unionize.⁴⁶ Many of these immigrants come from countries with strong and legitimate labor movements, of

⁴⁴ Zlolniski, p. 48

⁴⁵ Wells, p. 126

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 119-120

which many were leaders. Though ICE deportation is a vulnerability of all undocumented immigrants, many were involved in dangerous authority-challenging struggles in their home countries and have proven themselves not afraid to fight for their rights. Furthermore, the financial improvements Latinos obtain through unionization are proportionately greater than any other unionizing demographic – they receive a 54.3% higher wage than non-union Latinos⁴⁷ - giving them economic incentive to unionize. Thus, the Latino workforce, between their pre-existing psychological and economic motivation to organize, seem obvious recruits for the labor movement.

Unlike Peters, Merrill, and other scholars who see the conjunction of Latinos and Labor as mediated by religious groups and other community organizations, Wells argues for direct and proactive recruitment of Latinos as part of Labor's new inclusive strategy process. It should not be the responsibility of churches to organize Latino workers for the labor movement. Labor unions have long resisted renovating their structure and strategies to fit their constantly evolving workforce, but now it must do so, argues Wells. Where linguistic barriers present a problem, bilingual organizers and field workers must be hired. Rank-and-file committees should be developed within each skill in order to make sure that workers have a voice within the union. Natural leaders, who all workers respect, should be identified and used as an effective mode of communication between the union and the constituencies.⁴⁸ In this way, Labor includes and empowers a historically neglected Latino workforce and Latinos help revive a floundering labor movement, giving both forces a new sense of purpose and hope in what can be a strongly symbiotic relationship.

⁴⁷ Trumbour, Jon and Bernard, Elaine, "Unions and Latinos: Mutual Transformation", Chapter 6, pp. 126-145 in *Latinos: Remaking America*, edited by Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Páez (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 128

⁴⁸ Wells, p. 123

Clawson and Rachel Sherman and Kim Voss⁴⁹ find themselves in opposition to Tait and other bottom-up strategists, arguing that leadership, and not strictly rank-and-file action is largely determinant of a movement's success. Union leaders must apply pressure from above to catalyze workers and improve conditions that facilitate mobilization. These scholars agree with Tait in emphasizing the importance of militant tactics and forging community alliances (as opposed to cutting political deals with employers or politicians). However, they recognize that insurgency from the masses does not magically appear, especially at the present time with employer anti-union tactics as strong and sophisticated as they are. Although the "strength of the movement, rather than the effectiveness of legal processes, becomes the key," success is ultimately determined by whether labor leadership can "position itself either to create an upsurge or to take advantage of favorable external conditions."⁵⁰

Contrary to the claims of bottom-up proponents, Sherman and Voss argue that conservatism is not always linked to bureaucracy. Labor leadership, when progressive, is actually the key to innovation in many unions. Where internal political crises arise and leadership positions open in union Locals, International union pressure has the ability to usher in new, innovative leaders. These new outsider-leaders have been a major contributor to union innovation and revitalization. Their experience as activists in other social movements has helped give Labor a "broader perspective on social injustice and helped them see beyond the universe of unionized workers."⁵¹ As such, they are able to bring alternative models of mobilization to a movement which has been caught up in its traditional and outdated ways.

⁴⁹ see Voss and Sherman(*b*), " 'Organize or Die': Labor's New Tactics and Immigrant Workers"

⁵⁰ Clawson, p. 125

⁵¹ Voss and Sherman (*a*), p. 329

Progressive International unions have also used their political and economic capital to mandate increasing levels of organizing and other innovative changes in their locals. The Service Employees' International Union (SEIU), for instance, refuses to give resources to locals who do not maintain a certain level of organizing.⁵² With centralized pressure of this nature, union locals may not need internal crises, worker uprisings, or innovative individuals to spur change. Thus, Sherman and Voss challenge the view that democratic movements from below eliminate bureaucratic rigidity. Rather, they argue that the "breakdown of bureaucratic conservatism paves the way for greater democracy and participation."⁵³

III. Research Design

Hypothesis: Effective employment of a bottom-up strategy of social unionism determines the success of Latino immigrant labor mobilization in today's workforce.

In order to clarify this hypothesis, key terms will be defined and explained. Latino immigrants have proven themselves especially receptive and militant union members when given the opportunity to unionize and the understanding of how to do so. According to the model of union democracy, greater membership control strengthens unions and better positions them to advance the rights and interests of workers. Within this framework, union officials encourage open debate and discussion among members. Regular meetings are held both to give workers a channel to express their thoughts and concerns and to keep them informed of issues concerning the union. That is to say, communication and contact between worker and union officials is open and regular, and seen as a vital component of union democracy. Also, worker participation through committee structures and leadership

⁵² Voss and Sherman (*a*), p. 338

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 344

development is encouraged as a means to empowering what this model views as the core of the movement – the workers. Union democracy and ‘bottom-up’ campaigns are an effective means to utilizing worker energy and I argue that this is especially pertinent in the context of Latino migrant farm workers.

Within the model of union democracy exist two basic subtypes of union democracy, the organizing model and the rank-and-file model. Under the organizing model, the more widely used of the two, confrontational campaign tactics which engage the workers are practiced. This includes public demonstrations, media stunts, and strikes. Personal contact in organizing and recruitment is established through visits to workers’ homes and one-on-one discussions. In general, the organizing model upholds an attitude geared towards engaging the worker.

Despite its focus on worker participation, the organizing model is criticized by bottom-up proponents for denying workers any real influence within the union structure. As wage gains and workplace improvements have become harder to come by, membership engagement is seen more as a means to silence worker fears of union complacency than as an actual empowerment tool. Although the organizing model may be associated with union democracy, it has always remained faithful to top-down, centralized bureaucracy.

SEIU has become one of the largest and fastest-growing unions in the US due to its emphasis on organizing. Bottom-up proponents argue that they have centralized union functions and relied on paid staff organizers in a way that takes away from real union democracy. In a number of cases, SEIU has compelled union locals to merge and placed others under centrally appointed trusteeship instead of the customary elected management. As they have grown in size, managerial consolidation and convenience has increasingly

trumped local democracy. Also, SEIU membership has complained that white college graduates and other professionalized staff, rather than workers who have spent years in low-paid jobs, have unfairly assumed disproportionate power within the union structures. In some SEIU locals, worker dissatisfaction over union democracy has caused them to organize campaigns against union appointees or set up alternative unions.⁵⁴

Critics of the organizing model advocate the use of the rank-and-file model, which maintains a higher level of union democracy. Confrontational tactics used to engage the workers and pressure employers are complemented by constant efforts to empower workers on a broad scale. Under this model and the ideal form of union democracy, the workers maintain a higher level of control over the direction and strategies of the union and union locals maintain a greater level of autonomy from the overarching international unions.

In top-down organizing, on the other hand, the union leadership controls the direction of the organization and makes key decisions without the input of the workers (i.e. where resources are allocated, which sites to attempt unionization, which tactics to utilize, etc.). Because this trend has corresponded with the gradual decline of labor unions in the United States, many argue that lack of union democracy has been a parasite in the slow demise of the labor movement.

As can be seen by the aforementioned models, labor unions rarely follow a strictly bottom-up model or a strictly 'top-down' model, but rather some combination of the two (i.e. organizing model). That is to say, both terms are fluid, and any logical approach to discussing union structure cannot be done under a strictly dichotomous framework. Nearly all labor unions practice both strategies to some degree; to practice only one or the other is

⁵⁴ Johnson, William, "Frustrated by Forced Mergers, SEIU Members Go Independent," *Labor Notes*, October 2004, pp. 5-6

nearly impossible. Where a completely bottom-up union would experience a shortage of financial and intellectual resources, a completely top-down union would abandon the very rank-and-file that it claims to represent. Thus, when discussing union democracy, the question is not an ‘either/or’ one. Rather, more appropriate questions to raise are: ‘to what degree does a labor leadership shift power to the worker?’, ‘how much power does professional leadership exercise over worker action’ and ‘to what types of union practices are the most financial resources allocated?’ Answering such helps to understand where a union lies in the spectrum of “democracy” to “bureaucracy.”

Traditional tactics and models of organizing have been dismissed by scholars as outdated and irrelevant as the Labor Movement has floundered in the last 30 years. New approaches such as ‘social movement unionism’ (or ‘social unionism’) have been adopted by unions with the hope of posing a renewed challenge to anti-union employers. Social unionism refers to the construction of social justice activism based around broad issues with wide appeal. Under this model, the labor movement attempts to align itself with broader social movements (such as immigration, fair food, and anti-slavery movements) and to local community organizations (such as religious groups and student activist groups). Though this approach risks shifting public attention and precious union resources away from labor-specific issues, unions have nevertheless had recent success with social unionism where other tactics have failed. Furthermore, successful social unionism can result in large community-based mobilization which attracts national attention and resources to its campaign from a variety of sources. Thus, there is real hope that Labor can ride the wave of popular issues like immigration and social unionism can be an effective strategy for a labor movement that has few other solutions.

Scholars have juxtaposed social movement unionism with ‘business unionism’ within the Labor debate. Business unionism emphasizes workplace improvements above all. Wages, hours, and working conditions are the primary focus of efforts, with community issues, the election of sympathetic politicians, and other non-economic issues considered of lesser importance. Labor practitioners of business unionism have been seen by their own members as crooked dues-collecting union bosses whose constant dealings with employers are seen as suspect. As the labor movement has continued to decline over the last few decades and unionized workers have less and less to show for the dues they pay, this gap between union leadership and membership has only widened. Workers feel disconnected and abandoned from their top-down unions which spend time, energy, and resources on business negotiations whose efforts are fruitless and contracts concessionary.⁵⁵ Throughout this thesis, social unionism will be considered in opposition to this form of labor practice.

Though not explicitly stated in the hypothesis, consciousness-raising will be considered as an integral part of both bottom-up organizing and social movement unionism. In regards to union democracy, raising the consciousness of workers lies at the core of worker engagement and empowerment. This involves educating them about the forces and politics behind oppressive workplace practices in a way that makes them aware of their own power to fight these forces. Ultimately, this education seeks to inform, empower, and inspire workers to act against these forces as a cohesive movement. More than just another tactic in winning a contract, raising worker consciousness will also be considered as a core strategy to achieving deep, long-lasting change.

⁵⁵ Johnson, William, “Frustrated by Forced Mergers, SEIU Members Go Independent,” *Labor Notes*, October 2004, pp. 5-6

In regards to social movement unionism, consciousness-raising applies to the public. Typically, labor unions organize in the community and implement media-oriented campaigns as a means to raising public awareness and sympathy of their struggle. As with workers, raising the consciousness of the public hopes to inspire all types of people and organizations outside of the labor movement to join in the struggle for workers' rights.

Investigations of the hypothesis include interviews with labor staff members, former Latino migrant farm workers, and other non-labor groups who assisted in the organization process. These accounts, as well as observation of worker meetings, provide a personal, insider perspective which nicely complements analysis of graduate and undergraduate theses, books, newspapers, magazines, and organization documents. Because labor mobilization efforts get relatively little media attention (high-profile national cases being the exception) and labor unions are hesitant to openly share their strategies for fear of scheming employers, it can be very difficult to learn internal union practices and tactics. For this reason, interviews and observation of union meetings can be vital to gaining insights otherwise unavailable to the public. However, for the same reasons that unions are hesitant to publicly share tactical strategies, it may be difficult for a thesis student to gain the trust (and candid responses) of a union to whom they have demonstrated no prior commitment or connection. This exact problem caused me to terminate further investigation of a labor union which I had planned to compare with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. In the case of CIW, their work has received a great deal of national publicity and they openly share strategy and tactics on their website. Thus, where it was nearly impossible to even get an interview with the one union, CIW has been very helpful to me throughout the investigative process.

As noted before, organization documents are an important part of this study. More specifically, the leaflets and other material distributed by CIW to its rank-and-file reveal how they communicate with a mostly illiterate membership which speaks a variety of Mayan languages, and sometimes Spanish (but almost never English). Also, such documents and the explanation of these documents in worker meetings can make visible how they are able to educate and organize what is a culturally- and linguistically-disconnected workforce.

As already noted, this thesis investigates the organization efforts of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a community-based worker organization in Immokalee, Florida. Analysis of CIW provides insights into strategic approaches of organizing Latino immigrants within the agricultural industry today and potentially

CIW is a particularly significant case study. The group is a small, people-powered organization which works to protect the workers' rights of tomato-pickers in southwestern Florida. Despite being a small worker organization (not technically a labor union) with limited resources, CIW has managed to conduct two very successful campaigns against national giant companies Taco Bell and McDonalds. This is especially noteworthy in light of the many obstacles they faced throughout the campaigns. Communication is difficult among the group and its workers, who are a Latino and indigenous immigrant migratory workforce. Not only are most of these workers unable to speak English, but oftentimes, they are unable to speak Spanish, instead speaking their indigenous or native tongue. Also, because these workers are migratory, it is very difficult to get them invested in a job and a worker organization that they may only be a part of for one season. In addition to all these organizational obstacles, CIW faces major resource shortcomings – legally and financially –

in comparison with giants like Taco Bell and McDonalds. Also, because CIW does not have the status or political and financial capital of a labor union, businesses still do not view it with the same legitimacy they lend to unions. Nevertheless, they have obtained substantial contractual improvements against major corporations, and they have done so while upholding a people-powered, nonhierarchical structure to their organization, something almost nonexistent in labor groups who have experienced success on a national level. How has a small group like CIW beat the odds and overcome Goliaths like Taco Bell and McDonalds? What do their successes, and the means they used to succeed, tell us in the broader scheme of organizing Latino immigrants in 21st century America? Is this example merely an aberration? Or is CIW a legitimate pioneer and exemplary model to follow for organizing Latino agricultural workers today? This thesis hopes to explore these and other such questions in order to better understand Latino labor mobilization in the US today.

IV. Case

Farm working conditions

The sun-baked tomato fields of southwest Florida mark the first stop for many migrant workers in the US. Farm work, picking tomatoes or oranges in the countless fields which fill the large pocket of space between the Everglades of the south and the retirement communities that dot the periphery of the Sunshine state, marks the bottom of the workforce totem pole, where immigrants begin what they hope will be the first stop on the way to better things. Wages and working conditions for tomato pickers are among the worst of any profession in the US. These workers are legally entitled to the minimum wage, but very few earn such wages. According to the US Department of Labor, farm workers make about

\$7,500 a year,⁵⁶ while the median income of undocumented farm laborers falls between a measly \$2,500 and \$5,000 per year.⁵⁷ Additionally, many immigrant laborers are faced with verbal and physical abuse from their contractors. This is truly made visible by several cases of modern-day slavery which have been discovered in Florida fields in recent years. In January of this year, federal authorities indicted six Immokalee people on slavery charges of keeping, beating, and stealing from migrant farm workers.⁵⁸ Turnover in the tomato fields of southwestern Florida is unparalleled because these workers never turn down an opportunity to leave the fields for a construction or landscaping job that guarantees better working conditions and wages. *Any* job outside the fields is a job worth taking.

As Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Haitians arrive to the tomato fields of Florida hopeful to earn money for their families in their home country, they routinely find themselves doing more dangerous work for less wages than the work they performed in their native land. “The average migrant has a life expectancy of just forty-nine years. Twenty thousand farm workers require medical treatment for acute pesticide poisoning each year; at least that many more cases go unreported.”⁵⁹ These workers perform extremely physically demanding work on a daily basis exposed to toxic pesticides with little sympathy or protection from their growers. In particular, Latino migrant farm workers in Florida have

⁵⁶ Leary, Elly, “Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell,” *Monthly Review*, October 2005, <http://www.monthlyreview.org/1005leary.htm>

⁵⁷ according to the National Agricultural Workers Survey, Oxfam Research Report, “Like Machines in the Fields: Workers Without Rights in American Agriculture,” March 2004, Oxfam America, p. 18

⁵⁸ Gillespie, Pat, “Sixth Immokalee Slavery Case Suspect Arrested,” *The News Press*, obtained from the home website of Senator Bernie Sanders on 4/10/08 at <http://www.sanders.senate.gov/news/record.cfm?id=290881>

⁵⁹ Bowe, John, *Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy*. (Random House, 2007), p. 8

found themselves in an especially precarious position, dying in workplace accidents at a rate three times higher than other ethnic groups.⁶⁰

Farm workers are paid based on a piece rate, meaning they are paid based on the number of tomatoes they pick. This system of pay is extremely favorable to agribusiness because it naturally filters out the old and weak and makes it very difficult for the government to track and enforce what has become notorious underpayment of farm workers. These workers earn 45 cents per 32 pound bucket of tomatoes they pick, a rate which has remained nearly stagnant for the last thirty years.⁶¹ On a good day of picking – when tomatoes are plentiful and dry (workers must stop picking if tomatoes are wet from rain or dew and do not get paid for this downtime) – the best pickers may earn from \$40 to \$60 while women and older workers may earn less than \$30 on a day which lasts from 8 to 12 hours.⁶²

Government has turned its back on farm workers and the miserable conditions they work through every day, often exacerbating these conditions through agribusiness-friendly legislation. Farm workers are exempt from the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) overtime provision, despite the widely known fact that long hours of work are a common condition of farm work during harvest seasons. This provision states that workers earn at least time and a half for each hour worked over forty hours in a given week.⁶³ In most instances, the explanations for the denial of protection under the FLSA and other labor laws has stemmed from the political powerlessness of agricultural workers rather than from any sound

⁶⁰ “Taking Care of Migrant Workers,” *Bradenton Herald*, 2005, <http://www.bradenton.com/mld/bradenton/business/11814037.htm>

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

⁶² Oxfam Research Report, p. 13

⁶³ “Fair Labor Standards Act Advisor Exemptions,” US Department of Labor, <http://www.dol.gov/elaws/esa/flsa/screen75.asp>, accessed 2/21/08

economic rationale. Historically composed of minority workers, the agricultural sector is the only industry that is totally exempt from the overtime provision of the FLSA.⁶⁴ This means that growers can legally pay their workers, who perform extremely physically demanding work, the same wage whether they work 30 hours a week or 60 hours a week. This exemption clearly takes advantage of a hardworking, and largely undocumented migrant population willing to work as many hours as possible at almost any wage, and accurately summarizes the stance government (local, state, and national) has taken towards migrant farm workers in the US.

The Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Protection Act (MSPA) of 1983 remains one of the few governmental protections for migrant farm workers. This law requires that housing-providers for farm workers meet local and federal housing standards, among other provisions. Still, because this law only applies to documented farm workers – who now make up *less* than half of the estimated 1.8 million immigrant farm workers in 1997-1998⁶⁵ - the MSPA fails to address the well-being of even a majority of the migrant workforce. Observations by labor researcher John Bowe show that this law, administered by the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division, has serious enforcement problems as well:

As recently as 2007, the primary public interface of the Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division in Fort Myers, Florida – serving an area with perhaps a hundred thousand Spanish-speaking migrant workers – consisted of an answering machine. The outgoing message enumerates in bland, English bureaucratese the few types of complaints the office does handle (and the many more that it does not). The recording further explains that the office has no full-time staff and that it's open only once a week, on Wednesdays, for half a day. There is no option to hear the recording in Spanish.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Vernon M. Briggs Jr., "Agricultural Exemptions from the Fair Labor Standards Act" Briggs Volume II, 1981, available at: http://works.bepress.com/vernon_briggs/89

⁶⁵ Oxfam Research Report, p. 8

⁶⁶ Bowe, p. 55

Thus, we see that farm labor law is weak and its enforcement is an embarrassment. Labor inspections are very rare as officials do not want growers or scare off undocumented workers in a sector so vital to the state's economy.⁶⁷

It is almost unheard of for a migrant crop worker to receive benefits despite the highly dangerous nature of their work. Paid sick leave, holidays, health insurance, and other benefits are rarities for workers in this sector despite a dire need for such protections. Faced with a hostile attitude of employers to the reporting of workplace injuries and illnesses, and their own limited income to pay for uninsured health care, these workers often work through sickness rather than attempt obtaining treatment. Whether the poor wages, the terrible working conditions, or the government's apathy towards these workers which serves to maintain these conditions, Latino migrant farm workers arrive to the US faced with something that hardly represents their idea of the American dream.

Immokalee, Florida marks the first stop in the US for many newly-arrived immigrants. Situated in southwest Florida, not far from the mostly white, retirement communities of Naples and Fort Myers and the newly established Catholic town, Ave Maria, the town sticks out like a sore thumb. Because its farm working population is so transient, moving in accordance with the harvest seasons, the town's population may swell from 15,000-20,000 to 30,000-35,000 and back down again in just one year. It is a "crossroads between the rural poverty of the global South and the promise of a modern job paying a minor fortune in American dollars."⁶⁸ It is here where Latino immigrants come eager to

⁶⁷ The Florida agricultural industry adds \$101.9 billion to the state's economy annually, generates the second largest number of jobs, and is one of the few sectors in Florida which continues to thrive in the face of the oncoming national recession. from "Florida's Ag Economy Thriving," by Chuck Woods, University of Florida, 3/21/08, <http://southeastfarmpress.com/vegetables-tobacco/florida-agriculture-0321/>

⁶⁸ Solnit, David, editor, *Globalize Liberation*. (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2004), p. 349

earn American money and here where they quickly learn that migrant farm workers receive minimal wages and even less respect.

History of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Immokalee also acts as home to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a community-based worker organization that works to protect the rights and interests of these workers. Almost the entire tomato-picker population (85%-90%) of Immokalee is made up of young males who, by themselves, have left their native countries of Guatemala and Mexico to earn money for their families back home.⁶⁹ CIW began to form in the early 1990s with various workers meeting in local churches to discuss community and work issues negatively affecting their and other tomato pickers' lives. Initially these meetings served as a time and space for discussion between workers and little more. However, when farm growers threatened to lower wages in 1995, this group acted as the foundation and catalyst for the first ever general strike by farm workers in Immokalee's history.⁷⁰ During this strike, workers mobilized against their growers, removing themselves from the fields for one week and ultimately preventing a decrease in wages.⁷¹ Florida farmers have taken advantage of migrant farm workers for many years, and this is still happening today, but the 1995 general strike and the official establishment of the Coalition showed that this group would no longer willingly accept the conditions they lived and worked in.

CIW organized and encouraged another strike in 1997 which saw 3,000 farm workers mobilize against working conditions and violent behavior by their immigrant-

⁶⁹ Solnit, p. 348

⁷⁰ Walsh, Jane, "Migrant Mobilization: Factors Contributing to the Success of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers", Graduate Thesis, Duquesne University, November 14, 2005, p. 49

unfriendly growers. No wages or concrete benefits were gained, but that hardly meant the public protests were ineffective, says one CIW staff member. After the strikes of 1995, 1997, and another in 1999, “a lot of the crew leaders no longer treated the workers however the hell they felt like it without thinking that there wasn’t going to be a consequence. A lot of the violence has been eliminated. The power in the community has been changed.”⁷² For the first time workers felt empowered, both individually and collectively, as they saw their actions gain momentum. Where the initial strike of 1995 was defensive in nature, working to prevent a wage decline, CIW acts of protest which followed – including a month-long hunger strike by six of its members in 1998, and an historic 230-mile march from Ft. Myers to Orlando organized by CIW and its allies - attacked the growers, winning industry-wide raises of 13-25%.⁷³ Slowly, the Coalition was changing the dynamics of farm labor in southwest Florida.

But major problems still existed, one such problem being modern-day slavery. Latinos migrating from Mexico or Guatemala to the United States must pay what is called a ‘coyote’ to lead them safely across the border to a pre-arranged work location. Coyotes ruthlessly take advantage of this situation, claiming to these immigrants that the fee was four *thousand* dollars, not four *hundred* dollars. Already arrived in the US with no way to turn back and with no contract to prove the coyote wrong, these workers are forced to work off their debts to their migration guides. Coyotes coordinate efforts with farm labor contractors to jointly exploit these workers. The guide provides the workers, the contractor provides the work, and both profit by imposing extra charges for food, rent, transportation and tools at

⁷² Personal Interview with Student Farmworker Alliance (SFA) staff member Marc Rodriguez at the CIW office, Immokalee, Florida, 3/12/08

⁷³ “About CIW,” Coalition of Immokalee Workers website, <http://www.ciw-online.org/about.html>, accessed 3/1/08

inflated prices on these workers. Even if these workers do somehow manage to work off their debt, their bosses do not hesitate to use violence to keep these workers under their unrelenting control. And so, over 150 years after the 13th amendment was declared and slavery was abolished in the United States, we see that this terrible practice still lives on today.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, quite aware of rampant debt bondage throughout Florida and the agricultural southeast, worked to uncover some of these slave rings in the last 1990s. The Department of Justice (DOJ) was investigating these slave rings but lacked sufficient concrete evidence to incriminate. Aware of CIW's work and composition, the DOJ sought their help. The Coalition is composed almost entirely of Latino, former farm workers, meaning its staff members could go undercover working in these slave rings to help uncover evidence. They knew the work, they knew the language, and they fit the part, something impossible to replicate using undercover FBI agents. In a US judicial system which makes conviction very difficult without concrete evidence and witness testimony, the undercover work of CIW was absolutely vital to the cases' success. And their success has been quite remarkable. In the last 10-15 years, CIW has helped uncover six slavery rings in the rural Southeast and free over 1000 workers from debt bondage.⁷⁴ This work, even more so than their local success, helped CIW gain national and international recognition and legitimacy as a worker organization and made it possible for them to expand their efforts to the national level.

In 2001, the Coalition launched the first-ever boycott of a major fast-food company, calling on Taco Bell to take responsibility for human rights abuses in the fields where its

⁷⁴“ About the Coalition of Immokalee Workers,” Anti-slavery International, http://www.antislavery.org/homepage/antislavery/award/coalition_of_immokalee_workersr2007.htm, accessed 3/13/2008

produce is grown and picked.⁷⁵ The centerpiece of this boycott was the Taco Bell Truth Tour, which gained broad support – of students, churches, communities, and unions – by touring the US and informing the public of the abuses farm workers were withstanding in the tomato fields of Florida. Marches, hunger strikes, and other acts of public protest were practiced in front of Taco Bell and Yum! Brands⁷⁶ headquarters, among other US locations, gaining the attention of the media and sympathy of the public. The national boycott ended on March 8, 2005 with Yum! Brands agreeing to all the demands of the Coalition. Taco Bell agreed to become part of a three-way dialogue with CIW and Immokalee tomato suppliers to discuss solutions to the problems that Immokalee farm workers face. They also agreed to join the CIW and tomato industry representatives in drafting a Code of Conduct for Taco Bell tomato suppliers that would define wage and working condition standards. If tomato suppliers did not follow this Code, then Taco Bell agreed to cut off business until working conditions improved. Most significantly, the Taco Bell deal earned an immediate wage increase of a penny-per-pound of tomatoes picked that would go directly from Taco Bell to the farm workers. This wage increase nearly doubled wages for these workers from 40 cents per 32-pound bucket of tomatoes to 72 cents per bucket. Also, its direct passage from Taco Bell to workers safeguards against the farm grower keeping the extra penny-per-pound without passing it on to the picker, as many do with undocumented workers’ social security.⁷⁷

Following the success of the Taco Bell deal, CIW strategically directed its attention to McDonalds. Though McDonalds purchased only 1.5 percent of Florida’s tomato crop,

⁷⁵ “About CIW,” <http://www.ciw-online.org/about.html>

⁷⁶ Owner of Taco Bell and other fast-food restaurants, such as Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, A & W, and Long John Silvers. Yum’s headquarters are based in Louisville, Kentucky and Taco Bell is based in Irvine, California.

⁷⁷ “About CIW,” <http://www.ciw-online.org/about.html>

striking a deal with the world's largest fast-food chain would be a major symbolic victory for CIW on its path to changing the entire fast food industry. Furthermore, because the deal would affect such few businesses and workers, the Coalition recognized that McDonalds might not resist the idea for fear of profit losses. In April of 2007, CIW and McDonalds reached a deal which saw the same changes as the Taco Bell deal. As hoped for, this symbolic success gave momentum to the Coalition's efforts, leading to the expansion of the Yum! Brands deal to include two of its other restaurants, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut in 2007.⁷⁸

The Coalition is currently working to expand its efforts to include Burger King, but has thus far been unsuccessful. Burger King has refused to even negotiate with CIW, arguing that working conditions and wages are sufficient for Florida farm workers. Burger King and Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (FTGE) – which encompasses about 90 percent of tomato growers in Florida – have paired up in their efforts to resist the penny-per-pound deal, claiming that farm workers earn \$12.46 an hour.⁷⁹ The FTGE has even gone as far as to interrupt the established deals between CIW, McDonalds, and Yum Brands. They have threatened to impose a \$100,000 fine on any Florida tomato growers who participate in the penny-per-pound deals. McDonalds, Taco Bell, and the others continue to pay the penny-per-pound, but this money is currently being deposited in an escrow account until some settlement is reached between CIW and the FTGE. It is not clear how soon, if at all, these payments will be released to the workers, and moreover, if there will be any easy way to distribute these earnings to a population so transient.

⁷⁸ “Breaking News: Burger King Response,” CIW website, http://www.ciw-online.org/BK_response.html, accessed 3/24/2008

⁷⁹ Walker, Elaine, “Coalition presses growers, chains for better wages,” *Miami Herald*, 2/28/2008, on the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange website, <http://www.floridatomatogrowers.org/news/newsdetails.aspx?id=18>, accessed 3/12/2008

The penny-per-pound deals struck by CIW should be seen as major achievements when one considers that fast-food companies have grown exponentially in the last 50 years and agricultural working conditions have slowly deteriorated. CIW admits openly that the number of Florida farm workers covered by these agreements is small. Combined, the Taco Bell and McDonalds deals only affect 2.5% of Florida tomato production and 2,500 of the 1.8 million farm workers in the US.⁸⁰ However, it sees these deals as the beginning of what may ultimately be a corporate response of widespread acceptance that farm labor conditions in America are embarrassing and unacceptable.

Before this happens, it must overcome the financial and political power of agribusiness. This is made visible in the latest developments between the Coalition and the FTGE, whose fine threats alone have been enough to temporarily nullify the contractual advances made by CIW. It is towards these obstacles which I now my attention.

Obstacles

CIW is a worker center, and not a labor union. Worker centers act as surrogate unions, working to organize and protect those workers which unions have been unable or unwilling to recruit. This struggle to organize the unorganized is the top priority of worker centers, more so than obtaining contracts or gaining wage increases. But like other worker centers, the Coalition lacks the political and economic capital enjoyed by major unions like the AFL-CIO and SEIU. CIW has its only office in Immokalee and no more than 10 people on staff, all of whom receive forty hours of minimum wage pay each workweek, regardless of whether they work overtime. They depend on private donations and grants for funding, but even this receives very little of their attention.

⁸⁰ Leary, Elly, “Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell”

We don't really have anyone who dedicates his or her time to fundraising and grant writing. Technically, they say that organizations should have a person like that but we just barely do that stuff whenever we can, when we're not busy organizing. We've really just brought in enough funding to keep ourselves alive. It's definitely something we need to devote a little more time to.⁸¹

With their small size, lack of professional leadership and financial resources, CIW lacks legitimacy in the eyes of business, especially compared with major labor unions. Most businesses and farm growers refused to even sit down with the Coalition prior to their national victory against Taco Bell. Still, where its worker center status has hindered its legitimacy in the eyes of business, it has ultimately given CIW more freedom to use direct political actions which have been vital to its success. If the Coalition were a union, its actions would be restricted by governmental regulations in a way that they are not as a worker center. For instance, their national boycott against the fast-food company would not have been legally possible if they were a union.

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), more than any other labor law, has restricted the actions of farm worker labor groups, contributing substantially to farm workers' poverty, poor working conditions, and political weakness. Enacted in 1935 during the New Deal era, the NLRA legally protected the right to organize labor unions and engage in collective bargaining for most workers. Farm workers, however, were excluded from this protection because collective bargaining would have been too burdensome for the typical farm, which was small and family-run during this period.⁸² In other words, farm workers are unable to bargain with employers regarding wages, hours, or and other workplace conditions. Over time, however, family farms have declined and 'factory farms' have become the norm, rendering the Act's reason for agricultural exclusion irrelevant and

⁸¹ Personal interview with SFA staff member, Marc Rodrigues, 3/11/08

⁸² Leroy, Michael, "Should 'Agricultural Laborers' Continue to be Excluded from the National Labor Relations Act?" *Emory Law Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 1999

outdated. Thus, argues Michael Leroy, these large-scale farms are “similar to industrial firms in their scale and organizational mode and therefore, should not be exempted from the national collective bargaining law.”⁸³ But this exemption has not been revoked, and farm workers have suffered as a result. Farm workers have traditionally earned poor wages, always trailing non-farm workers in pay gains. At the heart of this problem lies the NLRA and its neglect of farm workers since its inception. This Act has created the very type of workers – impoverished and unorganized – that it sought to protect, and remains one of the largest obstacles to organizing Latino migrant farm workers.

As made visible by the NLRA case, the political and economic climate in the US as a whole is very unfavorable towards agricultural workers. Farm labor laws are weak and will continue to stay that way because agribusiness has established itself as a major lobbying force both in Washington, D.C. and in farming states like Florida. For this reason, CIW long ago dismissed the idea that the government has any intention of caring for farm workers on American soil and focused its efforts elsewhere, namely on companies like Taco Bell. As Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, said, “the failure of government to protect the weakest and most impoverished workers in the United States has left the job to corporations and consumers.”⁸⁴

Globalization and the subsidization of American agriculture have also posed major problems for CIW. Where NAFTA and CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) have opened up channels for US farmers to sell their crops to Latino countries and compete with local farmers in these countries, government subsidies have made it possible for them to sell these products at incredibly low prices and dominate the foreign market at the

⁸³ Leroy, “Should ‘Agricultural Laborers’ Continue to be Excluded from the National Labor Relations Act?”

⁸⁴ Bowe, p. 74 (Eric Schlosser, *New York Times* editorial)

expense of local farmers.⁸⁵ Unable to compete with American crop prices, these Latino farmers have been forced to migrate in massive numbers to the US for work. It is these trade agreements and their mass dislocation of farm workers which have increased worker competition and made organizing difficult for the CIW. If some workers threaten to strike, for example, there are always other immigrants willing to work in their place.

As noted earlier, globalization and work structure reorganization have led to a rise in labor subcontracting. This holds true for the agricultural sector as well. Farm labor contractors have all but ensured the demise of the farm worker at the hands of the big grower companies. For one, contracts almost never exist between contractors and workers, who meet in designated locations around Immokalee each morning to catch whatever grower bus they can to fields for the day. In any given week, they may work for four or five different growers. Without a contract, it becomes nearly impossible for workers to claim their rights. Even in the rare case that a contract exists, and wrongdoing is evident, the contracting system acts to shield the large farming companies from any responsibility of the workers who pick their crops. “Farm labor contracting exists for the growers’ benefit...by using a contractor, a grower avoids having to deal with the labor laws. If I don’t do the job the way he wants, he’ll just call another contractor.”⁸⁶ When these growers raise costs on the labor contractors or threaten to call a different contractor, these contractors deal with this by bearing down even harder on the workers. This may mean forcing the laborers to work longer days for less pay, or threatening them with violence. According to Manuel Gomez, a contractor, “Ninety-nine percent of all contractors work outside of the law. Not one, not two

⁸⁵ Bowe, p. 11

⁸⁶ Oxfam Research Report, p. 20

– all of us. You have to break the law. Breaking the law is the only way you can make decent money...everyone knows we're doing this.”⁸⁷

In the grand scheme of things, though, unfair pay and poor working conditions in agriculture stems from attitudinal, not economic, causes. The US government gives billions in agricultural subsidies every year and yet somehow farm workers are earning \$3200 less than minimum wage each year. John Bowe points out that minimum wage rates could be achieved for these marginalized workers by raising the cost of food by about \$50 per year per American household.⁸⁸ The demand for food is there, and the money to pay the workers is there, but the respect for these hard working immigrants is not. More than just structural and procedural obstacles, CIW has had to work to overcome a culturally entrenched attitude unkind to immigrants and farm workers.

Within the town of Immokalee alone, a sharp divide pervades between migrant workers and the rest of the community and the police force. While visiting I saw more police cars concentrated in one area than I have ever seen before, at one point passing three in the span of 15 seconds, each of which was driving on its own route through town. These cops are ICE trained – meaning they have the ability to detain and deport undocumented workers – though most do not speak either Spanish or Creole. They constantly cruise the immigrant-concentrated areas of Immokalee to remind these workers of their precarious place in the US. Between the plethora of police and contractors who threaten deportation to keep workers from organizing, the threat, alone, of deportation is enough to keep workers in line. Oftentimes, immigrants borrow money to travel north from loan sharks at home with high interest rates. If they are deported, the loan is foreclosed. Sometimes homes are put up

⁸⁷ Oxfam Research Report, p. 48

⁸⁸ Bowe, p. 52

as collateral for these loans, so deportation can affect entire families.⁸⁹ And with more than half (52%) of the estimated 1.8 million immigrant farm workers in 1997-1998 undocumented and only increasing in size, the threat of deportation can pose a major obstacle to organizing these workers.⁹⁰

CIW as a Worker Center

Worker centers are community-based organizations that focus mainly (but not exclusively) on workplace issues, like pay and failure to pay, health and safety, immigration status, and other employment rights. These centers are a relatively new development within the labor movement, coming to fruition in the last 30 years in response to work reorganization and increased immigration. Subcontracting, sweatshops, de-unionized industries and other condition-deteriorating changes in work organization have especially affected immigrants. Worker centers like the Coalition have worked to organize these workers more than any other group: by 2005, 122 of the 137 worker centers in the US dealt specifically with immigrant workers.⁹¹ That is to say, they are organizing a group of workers which labor unions have been unwilling or unable to organize historically; they are organizing the unorganized. In this regard, the role of worker centers has great implications on the rest of the US workforce.

People who are rising up from the bottom, trying to improve their situation can have a big impact on other sectors and jobs. If you let the bottom keep on falling, it drags everybody else down. You think about the agricultural industry as just about the bottom. In our work, we try to help keep the standards from falling for other types of workers. And one day, its not going to happen in 5 or 10 years, but if one day we get to the situation where working in the fields is a decent paying job that's going to make all the construction work pay a little bit better and make landscaping pay a

⁸⁹ Bowe, p. 13

⁹⁰ Oxfam Research Report, p. 8

⁹¹ Moody, p. 216

little bit better because otherwise they will start to lose workers to the agricultural sector. It could have an impact that ripples beyond the immediate effects.⁹²

Labor has hurt its own cause by failing to organize the bottom of the workforce. In the face of many obstacles, unions have adopted a very defensive approach to collective bargaining and organizing, agreeing to concessionary contracts and not attempting to organize the poorest workers. As a result, conditions have worsened for these workers in the lowest brackets of the economy which, in turn, have had a butterfly effect on the entire economy. They have lowered standards for all workers in the US and corporations have taken advantage of this. By neglecting the bottom of the workforce, Labor has hurt the entire workforce.

Worker centers perform a variety of functions, from service delivery to advocacy and organizing, but it is this last function which gives CIW and other centers the potential to play an important role in the development of unionization and a broader social and political movement.⁹³ The traditional method of organizing in one factory, or in one company is not applicable to today's immigrants, who often work multiple jobs in different industries. Thus, worker centers have begun to organize in the community, notes Kim Moody. "By organize, we don't just mean joining the union. We see the union as a means to organize something greater...we organize where we live and work."⁹⁴ This form of organizing works to create a labor movement which breaks down the boundaries between 'community' and 'union' in order to broaden movements and empower all workers, something the CIW has been very successful at.

I think what unions can learn from CIW is organizing more on a community basis as opposed to a workplace-by-workplace basis. Even in Immokalee there are farm

⁹² Personal interview with SFA staff member Marc Rodrigues, 3/11/08

⁹³ Moody, p. 216

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 217

workers and that's about it. Its hard to divides workers by a shop or an employer because people are moving around, so the organizing takes place more on a community basis. The CIW is organizing 'workers in Immokalee' as opposed to 'workers at Pacific' or 'workers at Six L's,' (both major tomato growers in Florida) and I think some unions have started to look at a more community-based approach.⁹⁵

Consciousness-raising lies at the core of CIW's community-based organizing strategy, which has not only educated and empowered farm laborers, but also created good experiences for workers previously reluctant to trust Labor. "Consciousness + Commitment = Change" say CIW staff members to the countless farm workers who walk through their office doors. Most unions are focused on winnable, concrete contractual improvements. For a labor movement that has been backpedaling for the last 40 years, major long-term goals are hardly a consideration. Their focus is on the short-term, winning back power contract by contract. They seek whichever strategies are necessary to achieve these goals with little concern for the form these tactics take. Often, this means agreeing to concessionary contracts solely for the sake of signing a contract and appeasing a disgruntled rank-and-file. Unfortunately, such practices have become a common occurrence as unions have tried to compensate for the countless obstacles that face Labor in the 21st century – labor's diminishing political influence, weak labor law, job outsourcing, and labor contracting.

Like labor unions, CIW is highly motivated to try and earn concrete changes. After all, a demand for the penny-for-pound increases has been a highlight of their fast-food victories. However, they view these victories as only a small part of a larger struggle and little more than a testimony to gradual underlying advances for all farm workers. "Most US organizing is only tangentially about consciousness...and sees any change of consciousness as the by-product of organizing action, while the primary focus of the organizers and

⁹⁵ Personal interview with SFA staff member Marc Rodrigues, 3/11/08

members of any organization is fixed on concrete, winnable change.”⁹⁶ Under the auspices of CIW, raising worker consciousness is not perceived to be just another tactic in winning a contract, but rather the core strategy to achieving deep, long-lasting change in farm working conditions. In a conversation between the co-founder of CIW, Lucas Benitez and author John Bowe, Benitez aptly expresses the Coalition’s unique stance on consciousness:

“If you want true change,” he told me one day at coalition headquarters, leaning back in his chair with his feet up on his desk, “it won’t come from Washington, or from the lawyers.” Even if lawsuits are won and laws are passed, he said, you’ve only won the battle. The war against overall poor treatment of farm workers will continue. However, he told me, “if you change people’s consciousnesses – and by ‘people,’ he means ‘workers,’ – ‘the people themselves take care of it.’” Change from the top down is a nice thing to dream about, he said with a shrug, leaving behind decades of liberal pieties, but really, “who cares what happens to a bunch of *pelagatos* – a bunch of nobodies?”⁹⁷

The Coalition has done an exceptional job at organizing and educating this transient group of nobodies within an agricultural sector so discombobulated. Unlike unions, which can delimit their organizing efforts to the employees at one factory or hospital, CIW is faced with organizing undocumented immigrants with no set contracts, no set employer, and no set address of residence.

One reason for this organizing success is their radio station, 107.9, *La Radio Conciencia* or *La Radio Tuya* (“Consciousness Radio” or “Your Radio”). For those workers unaware of CIW or unable to attend its weekly meetings, the station updates workers on the organization and its campaigns, goals, tactics, and gains in addition to providing music and entertainment. The Coalition broadcasts programs in different languages and dialects aside from just Spanish, in an attempt to reach out to all immigrants in the community. For something as simple as speaking one’s native language, this has been effective at gaining the

⁹⁶ Gonzalez, Melody, “Awakening the Consciousness of the Labor Movement: The Case of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers,” Senior Honors Thesis, Notre Dame University, April 2005, p. 15

⁹⁷ Bowe, p. 26

interest, confidence, and commitment of farm workers who are lonely and distant from their native countries. Cruz, a current CIW staff member recalls his first experience with *La*

Radio Conciencia as a tomato-picker in Immokalee:

When I first got here to Immokalee, I would just go to work and go home and I didn't really think about things. One day I came across *La Radio Conciencia* on the radio and they were speaking in a Mayan language which is spoken pretty widely in Guatemala, and that really surprised me. I was like "Whoa! Where am I? In Guatemala or something?" and then from there, I got more interested in what the radio station was about. I started asking people about it, and found out that it was part of the Coalition. I started to talk to the people at the radio and started to listen to it a lot more. I noticed they were talking about things like our rights our workers and the wage we should be earning. From there, I went to Coalition itself and started participating in the weekly meetings. That really encouraged me to know that people were trying to do something about the situation that I was familiar with, being a working myself. From there, little by little, I kept getting more and more involved.⁹⁸

Worker centers also provide services, such as classes on English, labor rights, and citizenship and social activities like fiestas. CIW has been lacking in this regard. Aside from English classes which are offered only to a woman's group once a week, no other classes or training of any kind is offered aside from the weekly Wednesday night meetings. For an Immokalee farm worker population which is nearly 90% male and mostly uneducated, this marks a fundamental shortcoming. In a recent meeting, one worker asked why English classes are not offered for the male farm workers.⁹⁹ While these workers may appreciate the long-term aspirations of CIW, they also have more pressing personal concerns to worry about, such as finding a job which pays decent wages. Without English proficiency and other basic skills, escaping farm labor and the lowest brackets of the economy remains nothing more than a hope.

⁹⁸ Personal interview with CIW staff member Cruz, 3/10/08

⁹⁹ Personal observation, Weekly Wednesday night meeting, 3/11/08

In addition, its focus on winning wage increases from national corporations has led to a neglect of other local issues. Housing prices in Immokalee are exorbitantly expensive due to a family's monopolized possession of property. The Blocker family owns approximately 75% of local property, including the CIW office building, and the majority of the shacks and trailer houses rented by farm workers. Because most workers have no transportation or money to pay for a ride to laborer pick-up locations, they are forced to live in the Blocker-owned housing that surrounds these areas. These properties are often in "poor condition and charge extravagantly high rent, upward of two hundred dollars a week, a square-footage rate approaching Manhattan's,"¹⁰⁰ meaning up to a dozen workers will live together in a small trailer so that they can afford the rent. Working towards more affordable housing for these workers may realistically be more achievable and more beneficial than winning wage increases from the entire fast-food industry. Lowering rent prices not only acts as a wage increase, because laborers would have more of their paycheck to spend, but also as a means to anchoring a transient population. If these workers are able to comfortably afford housing, they may be willing to stay in Immokalee longer, making it easier for CIW to build up a broader base of constant support. However, CIW has never even attempted to pressure the family into lowering prices, because they operate out of a Blocker-owned building and fear a housing campaign might mean losing such privileges. The Coalition is currently in the process of moving into a new office not owned by the Blockers and stands to gain bargaining leverage, but it is not clear that they will turn their focus towards housing issues.¹⁰¹ It maintains that wages are central to the many socioeconomic problems facing

¹⁰⁰ Bowe, p. 11

¹⁰¹ Personal observation, visit to CIW office during week of 3/8/08

farm workers, and as such, continues to focus on earning penny-per-pound deals against fast-food companies.

Still, they provide other services to the worker community. Movie night on Tuesdays, which project movies onto the back wall of CIW's building, are popular for these lonely farm workers who are far away from their loved ones back home. Every Thursday night *La Radio Tuya* hosts a healthcare provider who takes health care calls from sick workers unable to afford a visit to the doctor. The Coalition also maintains its own small cooperative store which strategically has the town's lowest prices, putting pressure on price gouging local stores to lower prices.¹⁰² Maybe most important of all, the CIW office acts as a second home to many workers, providing a comfortable atmosphere for workers to use the internet or just relax in the worker-hostile environment of Immokalee. The Coalition's service delivery makes visible the strong personal connection they maintain with the farm workers, in what has developed into a very nonhierarchical, almost familial relationship.

Worker centers aim to create networks among workers with the ultimate goal of developing ideological and political consciousness toward organizing and unionization. Their focus is organizing, not signing contracts or institutionalizing gains. Worker centers have enjoyed a close relationship with their workers as a result of their intensive organizing and constant personal contact. Conversely, labor unions are known for focusing on things like contracts and worker membership numbers, without making a strong effort to establish a close relationship to their workers. Union organizers may make phone calls to workers' homes, but few work for face-to-face conversations with their membership. In other words, where worker centers focus on organizing and educating the unorganized, the labor movement has tried to resuscitate itself through contract signings and business dealings.

¹⁰² Bowe, p. 24

Quite impressively, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has managed to do both these things – not only successfully organizing more than 2,500 migrant farm laborers,¹⁰³ but also winning contractually binding wage increases from multiple major fast-food corporations.

CIW Strategies

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers employs three main tactics in all of the work it performs: popular education, political actions, and leadership development. Next, I will discuss each of these strategies and explain how all three, although different in their own respect, work to engage their membership and raise the workers' awareness of their own power.

I. Popular Education

Popular education, or education of the common people, is an educational theory developed by Brazilian Paulo Freire which was originally designed to “bring complex political problems to the attention of impoverished, usually illiterate peasants.”¹⁰⁴ The CIW has effectively applied this technique as a means to educating, unifying, and inspiring its worker to act against the political, social, and economic forces which stand in the way of their well-being.

About 40% of south Florida's laborers are new each season, arriving to the United States unsure of their rights, or of the idea of rights in general.¹⁰⁵ Early in its existence, CIW realized that these workers needed to understand the political and economic forces that surrounded them before they could be expected to organize against these forces. Thus, the

¹⁰³ Leary, Elly, “Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell”

¹⁰⁴ Bowe, p. 25

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 12

Coalition began holding weekly Wednesday night meetings as a way to educate the uneducated workers. These meetings invite workers to learn about the Coalition, their own work as tomato pickers, and how both fit into the pecking order of farm labor in United States. These meetings typically attract at least 40 to 50 workers every week, but see a noticeable absence of Haitian workers, who make up a sizable portion of the immigrant community. At one gathering, there was only one Haitian in attendance, who was there because he was able to speak Spanish and felt comfortable participating in the meeting.¹⁰⁶ While the Coalition recognizes the Haitian population as part of its Coalition, including Creole language on its posters and flyers, it has done very little to actively recruit and engage this community. CIW has only one Haitian on staff, and his role is relegated to cashier at the Coalition's cooperative store. Clearly, this marks a deficiency in CIW's organizing efforts.

Nevertheless, it has done a commendable job at educating a farm working population known for its lack of formal education. Recognizing that most of these workers are illiterate, the Coalition uses techniques such as theater, songs, videos, drawings, and stories to provoke discussions on sensitive subjects and communicate the community situation of Immokalee to the worker-members of CIW.¹⁰⁷ In this way, the uneducated are not deterred from these meetings, but rather embraced and taught to understand the link between their own real-life conditions and the complex political issues which contribute to these very conditions.

In these meetings, democracy is used as an educational method and not just seen as a goal of education. These meetings open up discussion between workers and CIW staff

¹⁰⁶ Personal observation, Wednesday night meeting, CIW office, Immokalee, Florida, 3/11/08

¹⁰⁷ Solnit, p. 354

members in an attempt to erase any teacher-student dichotomy. All attendees take turns speaking to the rest of the group (sharing personal experiences, asking questions, etc.) and listening to others interchangeably, assuming roles as both teacher and student throughout. CIW staff members do not impose themselves on these farm workers, but rather encourage their participation and leadership in these discussions. For these disenfranchised immigrants, whose work has all but been relegated to undignified status in the US, these democratic interactions make them feel appreciated and important, something unheard of before finding CIW. But these meetings are more than just feel-good sessions for the downtrodden immigrant.

Popular education is education for action. In other words, each person is educated with the hope that he or she will be inspired to act on the lessons they have learned. As these workers become more and more involved in these meetings, they learn about the larger political and economic forces which shape their lives. They begin to understand how the tomatoes they pick are connected to the contractors above them, and the growers above them, and the fast food companies above them, and finally the consumers who eat these tomatoes. Also, CIW presents newspaper articles and pictures of past successes and current advances against giants like Taco Bell to build confidence and trust of workers in CIW's work and to create an awareness of the workers' own power. By understanding the link between themselves and larger political forces, the workers learn how to act against those forces and ready themselves for direct political actions. The political education of these meetings and the work of CIW in general aim to inform and empower these workers in a way that prepares them to organize themselves to fight against the socio-economic powers stacked against them as Latino migrant farm workers in the US.

Finally, education for the common people has been used effectively by CIW to tie together disparate groups of farm workers. Almost the entire tomato-picker population (85%-90%) of Immokalee is made up of young males who, by themselves, have left their native countries of Guatemala and Mexico to earn money for their families back home.¹⁰⁸ This life is lonely and difficult for these workers out there on their own, but the CIW understands this and has used these shared sentiments of despair to unify these workers. During one Wednesday night meeting, a CIW staff member asked the workers how many workers were working to earn money for their families back home and the entire room quickly raised their hands, saying things like ‘Yes, of course’ and ‘All of us!’ In lessons like this, the Coalition has worked to erase the lines of difference between the workers and emphasize their similarities and shared identity as oppressed migrant farm workers. For these migrant workers who are literally in a constant state of flux – leaving their families and their native country, moving with the harvests of the seasons, never settling down – popular education has been an effective way to deepen emotional bonds between workers and create a collective sense of unity and stability.

II. Political Actions

As one enters CIW’s office, wall coverings overwhelm their eyes. Pictures of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez look down on the room, situated next to a tomato

¹⁰⁸ Solnit, p. 348

cardboard cutout with the words “*Sí se puede*”¹⁰⁹ painted on the front. On another wall, a huge poster says “The Coalition of Immokalee Workers/*La Coalición de Trabajadores Agrícolas*” and depicts workers of all different colors with raised hands interlocked as one. Pictures of past Coalition marches and protests dot another wall. It does not take long to recognize a certain social movement element about the room.

A corporate campaign of direct political actions has been a major part of CIW’s social movement unionism. These campaigns work to identify and influence members of a company's board of directors, or the company lenders, customers and/or suppliers. The goal is to uncover conflicts of interest and unethical management and use this information (usually publicly) to win leverage over an employer and achieve the union's goals.¹¹⁰ The corporate campaign has helped CIW build awareness and leadership among its workers, unite a large network of third-party supporters, as well as put pressure on the agricultural industry in the absence of traditional organizing tools. The Coalition looks to the Civil Rights Movement as inspiration for action and proof that social movements can effect change. But it also understands that today’s context is much different from that of years past, and strategy must account for this.

There was a backlash against the New Deal and many of the gains made by workers in the post-war period, and a lot of the laws and regulations starting shifting in favor of corporations. We’re dealing with a significantly different terrain today than maybe with what the Civil Rights campaign was dealing with at that time. Which is one of the reasons why we see the corporate campaign, attacking where the real power lies, as a more appropriate tool to use today.¹¹¹

Food corporations have directly contributed to all of the bad wages and conditions that exist in farm labor today, exerting pressure on the industry to keep wages low for farm workers

¹⁰⁹ Famous Chavez line, “Yes, it can be done”

¹¹⁰ Estlund, “The Ossification of American Labor Law,” *Columbia Law Review*, Vol. 102, p. 1527, 2002.

¹¹¹ Personal interview with SFA staff member Marc Rodrigues, 3/11/08

and profits high. Over the past twenty years, prices paid to growers for their tomatoes have dropped 21% while the consumer price index for tomatoes has increased 50% since 1992.¹¹² Where they have had the most direct and immediate ability to destroy farm-working conditions, they also have the power to do something to ameliorate these conditions. Effecting change through the government is an arduous process, which more often than not is brought to a halt by the powerful agri-business lobby in D.C. Thus, the expectation that a historically disenfranchised group like farm workers can win change through governmental mediums has long been abandoned by CIW. Instead, the Coalition has relied on direct political actions directed towards the corporations, the same type of confrontational campaign practiced by César Chávez and the United Farm Workers (UFW) during the 1960s and 1970s.

Through its use of marches, general strikes, boycotts, and hunger strikes UFW attracted media attention and public support for its campaign. Chávez's groups had effectively become both a union and a civil rights movement. It won numerous union contracts throughout the California agricultural industry and achieved a membership of 70,000 workers by 1971.¹¹³ But this struggle also attracted outsider supporters like church, student, and civil rights activists by framing their struggle as a social movement. Like UFW, the Coalition relies on direct political actions – marches across Florida, worker-led hunger strikes, a national boycott against Taco Bell, and other forms of public protest – to build a social movement and win workplace improvements. Though smaller in size and magnitude

¹¹² Oxfam Research Report, p. 2

¹¹³ UFW Chronology,
<http://www.ufw.org/page.php?menu=research&inc=page.php?menu=research&inc=history/01.html>

of success,¹¹⁴ CIW's successful national campaigns against Yum Brands and McDonalds mark the first organization since the UFW-of-old which has effected notable change in the agricultural industry.

Still, its penny-per-pound victories were not easily achieved. The absence of traditional organizing tools limits tactical options for CIW. Most unions gain political influence by donating campaign contributions to a political candidate running for office and vouching to get out their rank-and-file vote for this candidate. However, because CIW has neither the financial resources to donate to campaigns, nor a membership legally entitled to vote, their access to the political arena is very limited. Also, as noted earlier, farm workers are excluded from the NLRA's collective bargaining protection, preventing CIW from enjoying the political and legal benefits of being a union.

Still, the Coalition has turned this political obstacle into an opportunity. The NLRA prohibits the use of secondary boycotts, which are attempts by labor to convince others to stop doing business with a particular firm because that firm does business with another firm that is the subject of a strike. Because farm workers are excluded from the NLRA, this means they are also excluded from its prohibition on secondary boycotts, something which CIW has used effectively against higher profile and more vulnerable corporate targets. Without this exemption, the Coalition's national boycott against Taco Bell would never have been possible.

Labor unions are restrained by their structure and by US labor law, and restrained from doing some more creative things that would give workers a little more power and influence, like a secondary boycott for example. The CIW would not legally have been permitted to be at the forefront of their Taco Bell boycott if they were a union.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ The Taco Bell and McDonalds penny-per-pound deals affected 2,500 out of about 1,500,000 migrant farm workers in the US (see Bowe, p. 74)

¹¹⁵ Personal interview with SFA staff member Marc Rodrigues, 3/11/08

Also, it is very likely that Yum Brands would never have agreed to the deal if CIW were a union. In all likelihood, the fast-food company accepted the deal thinking that it would contain the call for workers' rights and worker organizing in the fast-food industry.¹¹⁶ Instead, CIW has again turned an obstacle – lack of union status – into an opportunity and only become more motivated to expand its call for fair farm labor practices throughout the entire fast-food industry.

The Taco Bell boycott and other forms of direct political action like popular education, work to empower the workers – who take on leadership roles in these marches, speeches, and hunger strikes – and raise the consciousness of the tomato consumers and the general public to the miserable farm working conditions. As noted earlier, CIW held an annual Truth Tour as part of its Taco Bell boycott, which stopped in major cities across the country to protest and educate the public. At all these locations, on city streets, in Taco Bell restaurants, in front of churches, the workers converged with the consumers and shared with them their own personal stories, describing both the terrible things they go through as farm workers in the 21st century and the important things they have learned as CIW members. The national boycott allowed workers “to tell why Mexicans and other immigrants had come to the fields of Immokalee, and this strengthened their ties to the global justice and fair trade movements. Over the last several years, farm workers have developed into effective speakers about the cycle of dislocation in which globalization and treaties like NAFTA have savaged peasants and small farmers.”¹¹⁷ Just as the weekly Wednesday night meetings in Immokalee are used to raise the consciousness of the workers and make them aware of their

¹¹⁶ Leary, Elly, “Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell”

¹¹⁷ Leary, Elly, “Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell”

own power, public protest serves the same function for the Immokalee workers and the consumers of fast food all over America.

In these consciousness-raising campaigns, CIW focuses on alerting the public to the workers' struggles to create a climate sympathetic to their struggle, develop a network of support, and create bad publicity for the fast food companies. Despite their lack of size and resources, CIW recognized that even it stood a chance against a giant corporation like Yum Brands by exploiting their one major weakness: the fierce competition of consumers.

The wealth and power of the major chains make them seem impossible to defeat. And yet those companies must obey the demands of one group – consumers – whom they eagerly flatter and pursue... The slightest drop in a chain's market share can cause a large decline in the value of its stock."¹¹⁸

The Coalition was very effective in reaching out to a wide variety of groups through their practice of social movement unionism. CIW framed its campaign in broad social justice-oriented terms and using what they call the “boomerang effect.” The Coalition spun its campaign alternately as a struggle for labor and workers' rights, human rights, or fair food,¹¹⁹ as well as one against corporate power. Ultimately, the goal was to get the maximum number of allies from as many different sectors as possible to build a large campaign which attacked Yum Brands from multiple angles.¹²⁰ For instance, painting their campaign as one for “fair food” allowed CIW to make links with organic farmers, fair trade groups, coffee growers, environmentalists, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA).¹²¹ By presenting their struggle as one of social justice and not a specifically labor one, CIW appealed to all different types of people: church members, unions, social justice

¹¹⁸ Schlosser, Eric, *Fast Food Nation*. (Houghton Mills, 2001), p. 267

¹¹⁹ This calls for socially responsible purchasing in the corporate food industry that ensure the human rights of farm workers at the bottom of corporate supply chains.

¹²⁰ Leary, Elly, “Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell,” *Monthly Review*, October 2005, <http://www.monthlyreview.org/1005leary.htm>

¹²¹ Leary, Elly, “Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell”

advocates, anarchists, writers like Eric Schlosser (author of Fast Food Nation), actors like Martin Sheen, educators like Noam Chomsky, politicians like Ted Kennedy and Bernie Sanders, famous musicians like Bonnie Rait, and even former President Jimmy Carter.

These third-party supporters have been a key factor in the success of CIW's political actions, not only in helping to mobilize support and create bad publicity for the fast food companies, but also in providing logistical support and lowering costs for the Coalition. Unions have helped mobilize some of the largest individual marches in support of CIW. SEIU and the Hotel and Restaurant Employees (HERE) helped to mobilize over 5,000 Latino workers in Los Angeles in two different California marches.¹²²

Student activists have also been major backers of the Coalition's cause. Student supporters of the Taco Bell national boycott started the 'Boot the Bell' campaign, which sought to kick Taco Bell restaurants off high school and college campuses around the US and prevent Taco Bell contracts with schools. These efforts turned out to be a major success, with over 350 universities and high schools organizing around the boycott, over 30 schools running "Boot the Bell" campaigns and over 20 schools either removing a Taco Bell restaurant or preventing a contract.¹²³ Furthermore, because student allies publicized for the cause within their own regions using their own materials or materials provided by their schools, this helped to lower CIW costs. The Coalition did not have the resources to protest in all major US cities. Its funding was minimal and the farm workers could not afford to go on a lengthy Truth Tour if it meant not working for any length of time. Thus, the reach of CIW's direct actions was limited. A large network of student support enabled the movement to reach all areas of the country and put serious consumer pressure on the upper echelons of

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ "Student Farmworker Alliance," SFA website, www.sfalliance.org

Taco Bell for the first real time. Taco Bell's target market is young people, ages 16 to 24, and when it saw a swell of support forming in this age group, it took notice. Winning the penny-per-pound deal likely would not have been possible without this student movement and the consumer pressure it put on Taco Bell.

Faith-based organizations and churches have also played major supporting roles in the work of the Coalition, taking part in marches, strikes, and protests and utilizing their religious presence to remind the public that the struggle of CIW is not an economic or even an immigration struggle, but an ethical one. During one 30-day hunger strike in which six CIW members publicly displayed the struggle and oppression of Latino immigrant farm workers, religious leaders intervened to stop the strike. With the media present and the cameras rolling, one church leader broke a loaf of bread as a symbol of the end of the strike, clearly alluding to themes of starvation and salvation resonant to the Christian-American community.¹²⁴ In such actions and support of farm worker human rights, faith-based organizations (typically Christian) bring legitimacy to CIW's efforts and direct political actions. American culture holds religion, and particularly Christianity, in high regard, but has little respect or sympathy for undocumented immigrants on American soil. Religious organizations have recognized these truths and the important role they can play in the struggle for these farm workers, using their place of reverence and the sympathy they show for the laborers as means to legitimizing public sympathy for an otherwise ostracized group. In this regard, churches and religious groups have been crucial to bridging public support with the Coalition's efforts and drawing a wider public following.

Furthermore, the cross-country tours would not have been possible without the logistical support of the churches that fed and housed workers and their allies in every city.

¹²⁴ *Immokalee: a story of slavery and freedom*, a documentary film by Jeff Imig, Pan-Left Productions, 2004

The workers clearly did not have the financial resources to take time off from work and travel across the country, and the Coalition was not sufficiently funded to cover these costs.¹²⁵ Thus, the assistance of religious groups like the Presbyterian Church of the USA, which represents over 2.5 million Presbyterians nationally, was key to the Truth Tour's success and to the penny-per-pound victory against Taco Bell. In addition to feeding and housing workers, the Presbyterian Church, with its national headquarters located in Louisville, Kentucky, acted as a surrogate command center for CIW in front of Yum Brands headquarters.¹²⁶

Also, churches led the charge at Yum Brands stockholder meetings. In a level of support almost unprecedented for a resolution of its kind, in May 2003, 39% of Yum Brands shareholders voted in favor of a resolution asking the company to take responsibility for working conditions and wages of its suppliers' workers.¹²⁷ Though the victory was still two years away, CIW's corporate campaign and coalition-building tactics were beginning to infiltrate the inner workings of Taco Bell in a way that was quickly moving the campaign towards success.

In the absence of traditional organizing tools, the Coalition has effectively employed a strategy of social movement unionism, using different forms of public protest and consciousness-raising to unite different groups. If not for its exclusion from the National Labor Relations Act and the secondary boycott this exclusion allows worker centers like the Coalition to use, CIW would never have gained the supporters it did, nor expanded to all corners of the US, nor achieved the success it has had thus far. In this regard, what the Coalition has done stretches beyond conventional labor union organizing practices. While

¹²⁵ Leary, Elly, "Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell"

¹²⁶ Yum Brands headquarters is also located in Louisville, KY

¹²⁷ Oxfam Research Report, p. 56

unions have taken to the streets to protest wages and working conditions, few have understood how to build up a strong community-based mobilization campaign in the way that CIW has done across the nation. Even the Coalition seemed to be taken aback by the success of their social unionism campaign. “Our networks of allies who supported the boycott in some ways formed themselves. When we announced a national boycott of Taco Bell on April 1, 2001, we had no idea that this movement would grow as fast or as far and as wide as it would.”¹²⁸ One CIW staff member suggests that unions have taken notice of the Coalition’s success and even attempted to replicate these practices in their own campaigns.

I think a lot of unions are starting to think about how to organize on a community basis. I don’t know if a lot of them have really figured it out yet, but I know they are looking at it. SEIU sent a couple of people down here to talk to people at CIW about that.¹²⁹

That a major labor union like the Service Employees International Union, whose 1.9 million members dwarf the Coalition’s 2,500 members,¹³⁰ has sent researchers down to Immokalee, Florida is quite telling of the significance of the Coalition’s work in today’s labor context. Labor has been floundering for the last few decades looking for solutions to deal with the weak labor laws, increasingly powerful and overbearing corporations, and a constant immigrant influx into the lowest ranks of the economy. By all appearances, it seems as if a small group of migrant farm workers from Florida may have stumbled upon a way to solve this puzzle.

III. Leadership Development and Union Democracy

¹²⁸ Interview of CIW by David Solnit, “Taco Bell Boycott Victory – A Model of Strategic Organizing: An Interview with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers,” <http://www.leftturn.org/?q=node/335>

¹²⁹ Interview with SFA staff member Marc Rodrigues, Immokalee, FL, 3/11/08

¹³⁰ “About SEIU,” Service Employees International Union website, <http://www.seiu.org/about/index.cfm>, accessed 3/25/2008

One of CIW's mottos is "*Somos todos lideres*" or "We are all leaders." This motto captures the group's strong belief in both worker empowerment and union democracy, which differs from the more top-down approaches historically associated with farm labor organizing.¹³¹

The Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), like the UFW, was built around the charisma and aura of their principal leaders – Baldemar Velasquez and the late César Chávez. Generally, in FLOC and the UFW, strategy and tactics flow from top to bottom, even as rank and filers are promoted. The CIW, in contrast, can be described as an organization with group-centered leaders where strategies are fully developed at the base. The shortcomings of the FLOC and the UFW have a familiar ring – a number of labor activists have identified them as endemic to the trade union movement.¹³²

Aware of the historic bureaucratization of labor organizations and the danger this poses a movement's unity, CIW has done everything in its power to maintain its democratic structure. According to Brian Payne, co-founder of the Student/Farmworker Alliance, "there is no one individual that symbolizes the Coalition either to its members or the outside world. CIW has produced more than one individual who could probably be the next César Chávez."¹³³ Yet, this statement clearly downplays the leadership of CIW co-founder, Lucas Benitez. Deemed the "César Chávez for the new millennium,"¹³⁴ Benitez has already received several prestigious national awards for his leadership, including the Robert F Kennedy Human Rights Award and the Rolling Stone/Brick award as America's best young

¹³¹ Though CIW is not a union, as mentioned earlier, I will nevertheless use the term 'union democracy' when talking about the group's democratic structure and functions, if for no other reason than because this term is used to describe the same ideas and practices in the majority of other labor groups (i.e. unions).

¹³² Leary, Elly, "Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell"

¹³³ Interview between Marc Rodrigues and Brian Payne, Immokalee, Florida, November 2005, p. 11 in Rodrigues, Marc, "The Farmworker is Our Hope: Organizing and Victory in Immokalee," Graduate Thesis at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst, 2006

¹³⁴ Moffet, Dan, "Slavery? In Florida? In 2003? Yes." Palm Beach Post, 11/23/03, <http://www.racematters.org/slaveryinfloridain2003yes.htm>

leader.¹³⁵ Yet Benitez shies away from this praise, preferring to maintain the common worker as the focal point of CIW's struggle: "We workers are the charismatic figures... a worker speaking of his own reality, that's the charisma."¹³⁶

The idea of developing worker leadership revolves around the desire to uphold union democracy as much as the need to create and maintain a wide and strong worker-led base. Migrant farm workers are naturally a transient group, something that makes organizing very difficult for groups like CIW. Maintaining constant worker leadership is one way to deal with this high level of worker transience. At the beginning of each new harvest season, the CIW uses its first weekly Wednesday night meetings to introduce new workers to the community and the organization. Without a constant group of farm worker leaders, CIW would not be able to perform even the most basic functions, like introducing these new members, membership would fall, and CIW would ultimately fail. Unlike labor unions who recruit college graduates, seasoned labor professionals, and other outsiders to direct organizing, CIW relies strictly on the workers to direct their campaign. One female CIW member reiterates this point:

As a community organization and not a union, the Coalition is different from unions in that unions are always looking for professionals. At the Coalition, every person has the opportunity to put their own thoughts to work and we are all organizing together.¹³⁷

Under this framework, farm workers are involved in key decision-making processes, making them feel involved and important in CIW. However, the lack of educated researchers and professionalized leadership seems to have hurt CIW. Without full-time strategic researchers to guide their actions, CIW essentially ran a trial-and-error campaign in the earlier years of

¹³⁵ W.K. Kellogg Foundation: Speakers – Food and Society, <http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=90&CID=19&ItemID=5000184&NID=5010184&LanguageID=0>

¹³⁶ McConahay, Mary Jo, "The Coalition of Immokalee Workers," Marguerite Casey Foundation Grantee Profiles, 2005, http://www.caseygrants.org/pages/stories/stories_popup_immokalee.asp

¹³⁷ Gonzalez Thesis, pp. 24-25, interview with Francisca Cortez

its existence, sampling various tactics with the hope that one might work. In this way, the Coalition was forced to learn from their mistakes, rather than anticipate them in a way that would allow it to counter obstacles before they develop. CIW spent eight years of mostly fruitless organizing within the Immokalee area before it realized the importance of expanding its efforts and developing a network of support under a national boycott.¹³⁸

Hiring outsider, professionalized staff may hurt a labor group's sense of unity, but refusing it wastes precious time, energy, and resources. The Coalition continues to develop strategy from below, but does so in conjunction with ally research support.

CIW works to develop worker leadership in a variety of ways. The Coalition runs leadership workshops about once a month, giving classes on leadership formation for those farm workers who aspire to do more for their cause. CIW has also created a Central Committee, composed primarily of leaders who have been voted to serve as a committee member by their fellow workers. CIW makes a huge effort to have as many workers as possible attend conferences like the Southern Human Rights Organizers Network Conference.¹³⁹ Here, we can begin to see that the Coalition is a very democratic, bottom-up organization, both in structure and function which aims to engage and empower its workers.

CIW maintains its commitment to a nonhierarchical structure in a variety of ways. Nearly all staff members were Immokalee tomato-pickers at some point in their lives, meaning they can identify with the workers' struggle. But moving from farm worker to CIW staff member does not equate to a job promotion. Rather, they receive approximately the same pay as the workers in the fields (earning minimum wage rate for 40 hours a week, though CIW staff members work far more than 40 hours every week) and receive no

¹³⁸ Leary, Elly, "Immokalee Workers Take Down Taco Bell"

¹³⁹ Ibid.

benefits. Also, they require staff to work in the fields during parts of the year to both remind them firsthand of the conditions that still exist, and remind the tomato-pickers that each worker and CIW staff member are united in their struggle and have a shared stake in the goals and outcomes of the Coalition. There is no hierarchy or aristocracy within its ranks, and the laborers are reminded of this when they see the CIW staff members walking home to the same dilapidated trailers and shacks they inhabit.¹⁴⁰

Union democracy is also upheld in a general assembly that takes place once a year in which CIW membership votes on positions of the staff, board of directors, and committees.¹⁴¹ Even the concept of a board of directors, which is primarily made up of people who been in the community longer, does not sit well with the Coalition's democratic ideals and practices. Says one CIW staff member:

This board is basically a requirement to be a non-profit organization and there is a president, secretary, so forth. This is requirement for applying for funds. This is something they ask for because they are accustomed to power structures and structures of hierarchy. For us, it is simply members that are on the board but understand all the principles of the Coalition and that there are no differences of power.¹⁴²

CIW has excelled at connecting with its workers, both gaining their trust and their commitment to help lead the group's campaign, and this is due in large part to its nonhierarchical, bottom-up structure. In this battle, everyone is a tomato-picker fighting for the same cause and everyone has the opportunity to contribute to this battle. The workers are not represented by CIW. Rather, the workers *are* CIW, and the Coalition does not exist without them.

¹⁴⁰ Bove, p. 26

¹⁴¹ Gonzalez Thesis, p. 35

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 40

V. Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The labor movement has declined for three main reasons, argues Dan Clawson. Above all, there has been a relentless employer assault, backed by governmental pro-business policies that attack workers. Second is a decline in labor's ability and willingness to mobilize workers. Third is labor's increased isolation from social movements and the consequent creation of a US culture hostile towards unions and the working class as a whole.¹⁴³

CIW has had success in the face of many organizing obstacles because they have addressed all of these issues. Farm laborers have most definitely felt the assault of employers. The agri-business lobby in DC has been the underlying reason for weak farm labor laws in this country. Farm workers are not entitled to overtime pay or the right to organize under the National Labor Relations Act, leaving their well-being up to the discretion of the domineering farm companies which employ them. The development of labor contracting has only made organizing more difficult by shielding the large corporations who benefit from cheap labor and poor farm working conditions from any legal responsibility. In short, the employers exploit the workers ruthlessly, the corporations profit, and the government endorses this activity by authorizing weak labor laws and providing minimal enforcement of the few laws that are in place.

Nevertheless, CIW has found creative ways to deal with such an onslaught. After realizing the inefficacy of working for change through the government or negotiating with individual tomato-growing companies, the Coalition the need for a new approach to organizing:

¹⁴³ Clawson, p. 15

In the time that we are living we have to do things outside of the traditional because things are not like they used to be. Unions have a lot of power, a lot of economic and political power, and their voice carries a lot of weight. But as unions have grown, one thing that didn't exist before was the existence of large corporations and the power that they have. And so now the way that we play this game has to be different – it has to be alternative and effective.¹⁴⁴

They realized they had to attack the source of power within the tomato industry, the fast-food companies. They utilized a corporate campaign, and with the help of their allies, researched the weaknesses of restaurants like Taco Bell and McDonalds – namely consumer competition – and exploited them. Living in a country which lives off fast-food, CIW recognized its grand audience of consumers; the potential for public sympathy was extraordinary. And because it is not an official collective bargaining agent (union), and excluded from the regulations of the NLRA, CIW also recognized their ability to use a secondary boycott against the fast-food magnates. Thus, they took to the streets across the US, educating the public about the injustices taking place in American fields and protesting in front of corporate fast-food buildings. Media attention and public sympathy were gained, and vast networks of third-party support formed, all of which would be crucial to the campaign's success. Had CIW accepted the notion of peaceful negotiations behind closed doors, which exclude the workers, the public, and the media, and play to the corporations' strengths, no penny-per-pounds deal would exist today.

CIW, with its worker-led democratic structure, has done a good job of addressing Clawson's complaint of declining rank-and-file involvement. As unions have grown in power throughout the years, they built up a dependence on outsider professional leadership and researchers to deal with the increasingly sophisticated political economy. Work structure and labor laws were changing, and these professionals were recruited as a means to

¹⁴⁴ Gonzalez thesis, p. 42

overcoming these newfound obstacles. Over time, union reliance on staff became a substitute for worker power and solidarity and the rank-and-file started to feel divorced from the increasingly bureaucratized labor movement. Their prioritization of professionalized strategists has only abandoned the very workers Labor intended to protect.

The Coalition, however, has done just the opposite, running a rank-and-file model campaign that uses confrontational tactics, popular education, and leadership workshops to engage and empower workers to lead a group devoid of white-collar organizers and labor professionals. Though CIW staff members may ultimately make key strategic decisions, under this model where “we are all leaders,” the workers contribute significantly to the direction and strategies of the group. CIW attempts to erase any divisions or hierarchy that might exist within the organization. All earn the same pay. All know the pain and struggle of immigrants firsthand. All are united in their struggle for farm workers.

CIW views this equality and worker empowerment as key to real, long-lasting change. Most US organizing only empowers and mobilizes their workers as a means to effecting concrete, winnable change. The workers are nothing more than pawns in the game of Labor. CIW, conversely, has focused on worker consciousness, viewing the laborer as the key to change and the core of whatever movement may form. CIW invites the support of students, churches, and other third parties, and does not deny the importance of these allies in its work. However, the Coalition views its autonomy from these groups as crucial to maintaining the democratic nature. Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers (UFW) attempted to merge with CIW early in its successful existence, but the Coalition refused, recognizing the limits it would face. Secondary boycotts would no longer be an option, union democracy would diminish, formalized bureaucracy would settle in, and the integrity

of the movement would be tarnished. Instead, they have respected UFW's desire to help and accepted their assistance, but only as a separate entity which respects their union democracy.

This raises the final reason for labor's decline – labor's increased isolation and separation from other social movements. The traditional business unionism approach to organizing no longer serves the labor movement. Focusing strictly on workplace improvements and organizing workplace-by-workplace have become increasingly ineffective as labor contracting and other changes in work organization have developed. Improving workplace conditions goes much deeper than just organizing the place of work. As more and more Latino immigrants have arrived to the US and the complexion of the working class has darkened, the issues affecting workers have expanded. Workers are no longer just asking for an increase in wages or for health insurance. Today, workers are asking for an end to modern-day slavery in American tomato fields and for immigrant rights as hard-working human beings. The issues surrounding Labor are no longer strictly economic. They are socially and ethically relevant and expand beyond the realm of traditional union organizing.

Groups like CIW have shown that social movement unionism is one way to deal with this problem facing Labor. This approach constructs a campaign of social justice activism based around broad issues with wide appeal to attract and unite disparate groups of supporters. "Unions act on a broader agenda not because workplace issues aren't political, they are, but because they cannot address the full range of issues that working-class life calls for."¹⁴⁵ It calls for the union to expand its organizing efforts beyond the space of the workplace, aligning itself with workers and community groups to create a broader and stronger movement.

¹⁴⁵ Moody, p. 237

The Coalition is a proven example of social unionism's relevance in today's labor landscape. Its ability to successfully frame its campaign as a social justice one, around issues of slavery and human rights, resulted in extensive networks of support around the US. Tapping into these networks strengthened the movement quantitatively – in its recruitment of new allies and their spread of the struggle to all corners of the nation – and qualitatively – in the legitimacy that faith-based groups, politicians, and other important public figures brought to the movement. This coalition building attracted national attention and resources to its campaign from a variety of sources and proved to be key to CIW's penny-per-pound deals against Yum Brands and McDonalds.

Furthermore, social movement unionism, when successful, can arguably effect more profound change than business unionism. This latter approach can win wage gains and other positive contractual changes, but it fails to address the underlying issues of worker mistreatment and socio-economic injustices that prevail today. By raising the consciousness of the workers and the public and addressing the political and moral issues surrounding labor through social unionism, groups like CIW are looking to change the US political culture towards the working class and towards farm workers. Nelson Lichtenstein notes that for unions to expect success and to grow again, “political culture has to change...given the right set of ideological benchmarks, it does not matter all that much what kind of organizing techniques the unions deploy. In the 1930s and in the 1960s, all sorts of maladroit, stodgy unions did quite well.”¹⁴⁶

By successfully obtaining contracts with Taco Bell, McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Pizza Hut, CIW has done what many thought to be impossible. This small, worker-led grassroots organization, with its protests and consciousness raising (of the

¹⁴⁶ Clawson, pp. 15-16

workers and the public), has prompted the beginning of what may ultimately be a corporate response of widespread acceptance that farm labor conditions in America are embarrassing and unacceptable.¹⁴⁷ This marks a considerable achievement for a such a small group who faces so many obstacles to organizing, and as such can help us better understand Latino labor mobilization in today's labor movement.

The successful work of CIW seems to support the hypothesis that effective employment of a bottom-up strategy of social unionism determines the success of Latino immigrant labor mobilization. Its non-hierarchical structure, which emphasizes worker engagement and leadership, has made it possible for them to organize a group like Latino immigrants who are very transient and have little or no established social networks in the US. Their ability to involve and empower the unorganized is quite remarkable and makes visible the need of unions to involve and concede power to the rank-and-file if it hopes to create a stronger movement. Still, it should be mentioned that complete lack of professional leadership is an approach that should never, and will never be adopted by unions. The Coalition was able to manage itself as a bottom-up organization because of its smaller size. Such an extreme form of union democracy would not be manageable for unions, which are much larger and require some degree of management and leadership.

Conversely, questions remain regarding the efficacy of CIW's model of union democracy. It openly praises social movement leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and César Chávez, and understands the connection between the charisma of these leaders and the success of their movements. Yet neither CIW nor Lucas Benitez demonstrate any desire to utilize the acclaimed leader as a rallying point for the movement. If it hopes to reach higher

¹⁴⁷ Bowe, p. 74

levels of success and improve the working conditions for all farm workers in the US, and not just those in the fields of southwest Florida, such a move may be necessary.

CIW's success also supports the idea that social unionism is key to organizing the poor working class today. As the bottom of the workforce has become more concentrated with Latino immigrants and business unionism strategies have failed, it has become increasingly important for unions to organize outside the workplace. Faith-based groups, students, and other community groups were able to band together and help legitimize the Coalition's efforts, research corporate campaign strategies, and expand the social justice movement of CIW in a way that placed pressure on the fast-food corporations. Thus, coalition building proved to be quite possibly the most important component of CIW's social unionism campaign.

While union democracy and social unionism cannot guarantee success, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has shown that these practices can be major contributors towards unifying disparate forces and creating more powerful and more cohesive campaigns, something with which labor unions have struggled. The labor movement can learn something from the example of CIW. Unions are not legally entitled to practice secondary boycotts and their sheer size makes absolute union democracy impossible. But they can start linking on to social movements and work to effectively use community organizing. At a minimum, this can better position unions to help the workers and maybe create a cohesive labor movement again, in which workers and professional leadership are once again a union.

Further Research

Because the development of worker centers is a relatively new occurrence, CIW is one of the few worker centers that has been researched extensively. These centers act as surrogate unions, working to organize the non-unionized majority. Unions need to amplify their power, which includes organizing the unorganized. Thus, worker centers can “help introduce workers to the unions, legitimate them, and hopefully, also get some support from the unions. Worker centers can be a way for unions to reach groups that are not always directly accessible, above all immigrant workers.”¹⁴⁸

Also, centers like the Coalition can play a central role in linking labor unions to community-based mobilization efforts in a way that strengthens both arenas. At a time when social movement unionism and other community organizing efforts have become so important, this role becomes crucial to the success of Labor. However, little research has been done on worker centers. It is difficult to know how applicable their tactics are to labor unions. Should they be viewed as organizations which supplement the function of unions or groups which fill the space previously occupied by unions? How have worker centers been so effective at organizing immigrants? How big of a role do they play in the future of the Labor movement? As shown in this thesis, further research on these groups can help Labor better understand its own deficiencies as much as the benefits of worker centers.

¹⁴⁸ Moody, p. 236

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