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# The Development of Sectoral Worker Center Networks

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In this article, we argue that understanding the impact of economic structures on low-wage workers requires the study of emerging worker centers and networks and that individual labor market outcomes and experiences are mediated and impacted by the work of these institutions. We focus on the formation of sectoral worker center networks and address three key issues: (1) What are some of the reasons why worker centers and worker center networks have developed? (2) How do these organizations manage their roles as labor market institutions and social movement organizations? and (3) Why did worker center networks focus on employment and in particular sectors of the low-wage labor market? We find that sector-based organizing (1) facilitates the development of worker- and sector-targeted service strategies, thereby enabling low-wage worker groups and organizations to better achieve their service and policy goals; (2) maximizes opportunities for the organizations to obtain national resources; and (3) expands the reach of organizational networks by bringing organizations together to share resources and best practices. By providing a range of worker-, employment-, and labor market-centered services in specific labor market sectors, worker centers and their networks solidify their role as labor market institutions and become more effective advocacy and social movement organizations.

*Keywords:* organizations; low-wage workers; social movements; labor markets; immigration

While recent scholarship has described worker centers as severely undernetworked (Fine 2006, 240) and has suggested that connections among centers are generally not well articulated, with the possible exception of worker centers in Los Angeles (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010, 2), significant growth, collaboration, expansion, and development in the past few years warrants a reexamination of the evolution of these organizations and an assessment of their quickly growing and evolving interorganizational networks. In this article, we build on this existing literature and explain

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the recent development and expansion of sectoral worker center networks that work collaboratively to (1) identify needs, provide social services, and organize low-wage workers; (2) develop employer and labor market strategies; (3) advocate for policies that improve working conditions and raise labor standards; (4) develop public communications, media strategies, and financial resources to support low-wage workers; and (5) connect low-wage workers to other organizational networks, allies, and social movements. We seek to provide insight into the emergence and development of sector-based worker center networks and discuss how these emerging organizational forms function as advocacy, organizing, policy, and service intermediaries among low-wage workers, labor markets, and employers. We suggest that these organizations have evolved as labor market intermediaries that mediate (and seek to mitigate) the localized impacts of broader economic, social, and political institutions on low-wage workers and provide a vehicle for workers to organize; receive a limited range of social services; and advocate for improvements in pay, working conditions, and public policy.

In the first section, we argue that changes in the structure and functioning of the labor market set the context within which low-wage workers and their emerging organizations operate. We then discuss a set of these emerging organizations, known as worker centers, that provide a range of advocacy, organizing, and social services to low-wage workers. The third section focuses on the formation of sectoral worker center networks, and we present descriptive data from four case studies that help to illustrate how and why networks were organized around specific sectors of the low-wage labor market. We conclude with a discussion of the research, policy, and practical implications of the development of sectoral worker center networks. In the article, we address three key issues in the literature on labor markets, organizations, and low-wage work (Fine 2006; Gordon 2007; Bernhardt et al. 2008; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010; Ness 2005; Osterman and Shulman 2011): (1) whether to view worker centers as labor market institutions or social movement organizations—which suggests a tension between social service provision and advocacy functions; (2) the main reasons behind the development of worker center networks and the kinds of networks

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that have emerged; and (3) the comparative advantage of organizing around employment and labor market sectors.

We find that sector-based organizing is an effective strategy that worker centers adopted from labor unions and workforce development organizations. This enabled low-wage worker groups and organizations to engage in both service provision and advocacy by focusing organizational energies and resources on targeted service strategies; maximize opportunities to aggregate their work and project national relevance, access philanthropic resources for their services and programs, and connect individual organizations and programs into broader inter-organizational networks and advocacy structures. By providing a range of worker- and employment-centered services in specific sectors of the labor market, worker centers and their networks solidified their role as labor market institutions and developed a set of organizational structures and mechanisms to build, manage, and sustain relations with other labor market stakeholders and become more effective social movement organizations.

## The Changing Economic Context and Dynamics in Local Labor Markets

The past two decades, particularly since the start of the Great Recession in 2007, have been very challenging for low-wage workers, especially those concentrated in urban centers (Bernhardt et al. 2008; Osterman and Shulman 2011). The key institutional changes highlighted by authors who focus on understanding the evolving and shifting nature of the low-wage labor market (Bernhardt et al. 2008; Holzer et al. 2011; Osterman and Shulman 2011) include (1) low investments in worker training, (2) uneven distribution (by geography, race/ethnicity, and sector of the labor market) of the existing investments in training, (3) proliferation of low-end jobs without a range of health and other benefits, and (4) increasing stratification in the workforce and labor market. The impacts of these trends are felt unevenly by different types of workers, and this raises questions about fairness, the uneven distribution of social resources and investments, and equal opportunity in different cities and regions (Bernhardt et al. 2008; Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008; Holzer et al. 2011; Osterman and Shulman 2011; McQuarrie and Smith 2012).

Urban labor markets have evolved in ways that have led to increases in, and a concentration of, low-wage workers in particular sectors of the economy (Bernhardt et al. 2008; Osterman and Shulman 2011). Numbers vary depending on how the different labor market sectors are defined and the types of sources used (see Osterman and Shulman 2011), but an analysis of recent U.S. Department of Labor data<sup>1</sup> suggests that there are approximately 38 million workers in about 98 occupations earning less than \$13 dollars per hour on average, and they represent close to 30.4 percent of the workforce. There are 38 occupations, with around 18,308,100 workers, earning, on average, less than \$11.00 dollars per hour.

TABLE 1  
 Top Twenty-Five Low-Wage Occupations in 2010  
 (Average Hourly Earnings Less than \$11.00 per Hour)

Occupation	Total Employment	Average Hourly Wage (\$)
Cashiers	3,354,170	9.52
Combined food preparation and serving workers, including fast food	2,692,170	8.95
Waiters and waitresses	2,244,480	9.99
Home health aides	982,840	10.46
Maids and housekeepers	865,960	10.17
Food preparation workers	802,650	9.93
Personal care aides	686,030	9.82
Packers and packagers, hand	676,870	10.63
Childcare workers	611,280	10.15
Cooks, fast food	525,350	8.91
Dishwashers	505,950	8.98
Bartenders	495,350	10.25
Counter attendants: cafeteria, food concession, and coffee shop	446,660	9.27
Dining room and cafeteria attendants and bartender helpers	390,920	9.29
Hosts and hostesses: restaurant, lounge, and coffee shop	329,020	9.43
Cleaners of vehicles and equipment	288,110	10.74
Amusement and recreation attendants	254,630	9.50
Farmworkers and laborers: crop, nursery, and greenhouse	228,600	9.64
Hotel, motel, and resort desk clerks	222,540	10.30
Food servers, nonrestaurant	205,330	10.40
Laundry and dry-cleaning workers	204,820	10.21
Cooks, short order	171,780	10.11
Sewing machine operators	147,030	10.88
Nonfarm animal caretakers	135,070	10.61
Parking lot attendants	124,590	10.21

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2010. Occupational Employment Survey. Available from [http://www.bls.gov/oes/oes\\_dl.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/oes_dl.htm).

NOTE: Employment figures exclude self-employed.

Table 1 includes data on the 25 largest low-wage occupations in the United States<sup>2</sup> in which 17,592,200 workers earn an average of \$11.00 or less per hour. Some of the occupations are quite large, and there is significant concentration in the largest occupations, with close to 13,441,800 of the listed workers, or 76 percent, in the top 10 occupations on the list.

Low-wage workers face significant challenges in securing stable employment, in managing difficult working conditions, and in securing decent pay and benefits. A recent study published by Bernhardt et al. (2009) found that close to one in four workers had been paid below minimum wage, and close to two-thirds of survey respondents who worked more than 40 hours were not paid overtime—a phenomenon called “wage theft” by workers and advocates. Strategies developed to address this growing problem across a range of low-wage occupations and industries have been central to the development of worker centers (Fine 2006, 250). The industries that had the highest incidence of wage theft in the Bernhardt et al. (2009) study were apparel and textile manufacturing, personal and repair services, and work in private households. The study also found several occupations where workers reported a high incidence of violations of wage laws, including childcare; beauty, dry cleaning, and general repair work; and sewing and garment work (Bernhardt et al. 2009). The findings in this study suggest that sector-based worker organizing has the potential to help identify specific occupation- and industry-based challenges and highlight the need to develop worker-focused strategies to improve wages and working conditions are needed.

### Emerging Organizations That Support Low-Wage Workers

Existing literature suggests that worker centers emerged in response to the deterioration of wages and working conditions that are a result of public policies, globalization, de-unionization, shifting immigration patterns and policies, and the growing informalization of the labor force (Fine 2006; Bernhardt et al. 2009; Narro 2009). As a direct response to the increasing challenges faced by marginalized low-wage workers over the past decade—including deteriorating wages, difficult working conditions, and a number of occupational safety and health hazards—immigrant workers have increasingly organized and brought their challenges to worker centers and related nonprofit organizations. These efforts have shaped an emerging set of strategies, campaigns, organizations, and networks that have sought to assist in the development of comprehensive organizational and civil society infrastructures that can more effectively articulate worker concerns, address labor law violations, and directly provide the kinds of services and programs that are needed to increase economic opportunities for low-wage workers (Cordero-Guzmán 2005; Bloemraad 2006; Fine 2006; Ness 2005; Gleeson 2010; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010).

In her path-breaking work, Janice Fine (2006) defines worker centers as “community-based and community-led organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy, and organizing to provide support to low-wage workers” (p. 2). Worker centers in the United States include close to 176 organizations around the country that provide a range of direct services and advocacy for low-wage workers, immigrant workers, and other marginalized segments of the labor

force. In our work, we have found various types of worker centers, including centers organized around a particular area or community; centers based on managing and supporting workers in particular places where workers are hired; centers that are part of multiservice labor-focused organizations; centers that are part of multiservice social service organizations; centers that are connected to organized labor; centers that are part of faith organizations or interfaith groups; centers that are started by coalitions of organizations; centers that are publicly supported and organized between municipalities and community-based organizations (CBOs); a wide range of centers based on ethnic or national origin affiliations; and an emerging set of industry/occupation (sector)-based centers. The growth and early successes of worker centers and their networks can be explained by a variety of factors, including the political opportunity structure that the movement faced, particularly an opening of support within organized labor (Fine 2006; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010); the social service and human rights needs created by a toughening of immigration policy; the weakening of labor law and lax enforcement of employment policy; their ability to develop both informal resources and more formal relationships with philanthropic institutions and other social support structures; their effectiveness in crafting a coherent message around worker and immigrant rights and in mobilizing and using various forms of media to communicate their message; and the elaboration of critical and compelling advocacy and communications infrastructure to support the development of the organizational capacity needed to sustain national networks.

### Worker Centers as Social Movement Organizations or Social Service Providers

Early attempts to understand worker centers and their work have focused on describing and categorizing them in terms of their relations with and similarities to existing and better-known coalitions, such as trade unions or broader social movements. Milkman, Bloom, and Narro (2010), for example, argue that “although they emphatically define themselves as part of a larger progressive movement dedicated to long term social change, the centers themselves bear little resemblance to either trade unions or ‘social movements’ in the conventional sense of the term” (p. 11). Worker centers are quite different from unions in terms of their primary mission, goals, programs, and structure and more closely resemble the kinds of “movement organizations” that are central to the immigrant and worker rights movements.

The “worker center movement” emanates from worker organizing and advocacy around marginalized segments of the low-wage labor force and recognition that low-wage and immigrant workers face a multitude of individual and structural barriers that make them uniquely vulnerable to severe exploitation and discrimination in the labor market and encumber their individual ability to organize or access the justice system (Gleeson 2010). Worker centers are organized to



respond to abuses; help workers improve their economic opportunities; and engage in collective pressure and action to change the social and labor market structures that sustain vulnerability, exploitation, and marginalization. As they develop, worker centers have maintained both formal and informal networks and have engaged in collaborative efforts to address the immediate and long-term needs of low-wage workers by focusing on strategies to improve the quality of low-wage jobs through a combination of worker training, industry- and employer-based initiatives, research, and public policy development. Given its work and focus, the worker center movement can be said to constitute a key part of a broader social movement, defined as “a set of opinions and beliefs in a population which represents preferences for changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society” (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1217–18). As worker centers and their networks dedicate themselves to advocating for worker and immigrant rights (Fine 2006; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010), they constitute a set of social movement organizations, or “a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals” (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1218).

Individual worker centers, and their emerging networks, are not social movements unto themselves, but they collectively constitute the worker center movement, which is connected to and intersects with broader movements such as the low-wage worker movement, the immigrant rights movement, the social justice movement, and the labor movement (Fine 2006; Tarrow 1994; Diani 1992). Worker centers and their networks not only represent, but also shape and help define, the substance and direction of the worker center, economic justice, and immigrant rights movements (McCarthy and Zald 1994; Fine 2006). Although each worker center and worker center network has distinct goals specific to its labor market sector, geographic location, and particular mission, they share a number of goals, approaches, and practices that give them a shared identity that helps link worker centers and worker center networks to one another as part of a wide-ranging set of social movement organizations.

Many worker centers engage in some form of direct service provision (Fine 2006, 73–99). Direct services are the main way in which organizations come into contact with workers and provide support to them; build a base of support; build a track record of concrete social service delivery; demonstrate their direct impact; try to secure governmental, philanthropic, and other resources; and increase their credibility with their key constituencies, communities, and stakeholders. Whether providing language classes, employment and training programs, adult education, transportation supports, soft skills workshops, “know your rights” workshops, or a range of legal services, organizations devote a significant amount of their time and resources to understanding the direct service needs of their members and constituents, developing service strategies and programs, and securing resources and partnerships to deliver them.

Providing direct services, however, can also be a challenge for small, underfunded, understaffed, and overstretched organizations (Milkman, Bloom, and



Narro 2010, 11). Many find that they do not have the steady flow of resources, the technical staff and expertise, or the organizational scope and scale to provide all the needed services. Thus, they seek to partner with other groups, organizations, and service providers to make referrals for their members. The core set of direct services that most worker centers provide involve labor market support, support with contract negotiation and labor market navigation, some form of language classes or popular education, and a modest set of legal services focusing mostly on combatting wage theft and other labor, employment, and employer abuses. Noticing some of the challenges of direct multiservice provision by worker centers, Milkman, Bloom, and Narro (2010) note that “most have found that they can deploy those resources to maximum effect by focusing on staff-driven research, media outreach, and legal and political campaigns to win concessions from employers and governments” (p. 11).

In addition to some form of direct service, most worker centers are involved in advocacy efforts on behalf of their stakeholders, organizations, or communities on a range of labor market, economic security, immigration, and human rights issues. In fact, advocacy becomes more intense and accentuated, as could be seen in the large immigrant and worker rights demonstrations of 2006 (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008), when there are direct threats to the ability of nonprofit groups to provide social services (Nicholson-Crotty 2007, 8).

As the legal employment and immigrant worker rights policy framework has become more restrictive and punitive against immigrant and low-wage workers, organizations have activated and expanded their advocacy repertoire. Rather than cower at more restrictive legal developments and the growing anti-immigrant sentiment, low-wage worker organizers, worker centers, and their networks have seized these moments and used them to highlight the challenges and marginalization faced by low-wage and immigrant workers, mobilize support, build solid organizations and networks, and cement relationships with key movement allies (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008). The challenging policy climate and the unique needs and conditions of low-wage immigrants forced some existing organizations to develop new approaches to serve these emerging populations, while it also created the conditions for new organizations to develop in areas where nonprofit infrastructure was not present or where it was present but not able to develop effective strategies to connect to particular groups of immigrant low-wage workers.

Many immigrants—along with individuals with an affinity for social justice, human rights, and immigrant rights—were increasingly mobilized in the wake of successive immigration policy reforms, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986; the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996; and the Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (also known as the Sensenbrenner Bill), and the increasingly restrictive anti-immigrant local and state ordinances that have been put in place since the collapse of comprehensive immigration reform (CIR) in 2006–2007 (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008). These events served as “transformative crisis events” (Alimi, Gamson, and Ryan 2006), which caused “the cultural

and social structures that were already in operation before the event” to be redefined. These events became “turning points in structural change, concentrated moments of political and cultural creativity” (McAdam and Sewell 2001, 102), which highlighted the importance of worker centers in educating, activating, and mobilizing marginalized populations and expanded the connections between worker centers (and worker center networks) and the immigrant rights movement.

Highlighting or “putting a face” to the shifts in the material conditions and in the policy environment for low-wage and immigrant workers was a central element in the advocacy repertoire of worker centers. A number of communication and public education campaigns were designed to inform and educate the broader public about immigrant and worker rights, not only in public forums, but also within the halls of national and local government, within the institutions of organized labor, and within other nonprofit and community organizations focused on social justice (Alimi, Gamson, and Ryan 2006; Fine 2006; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010). Moghaddam and Breckenridge (2011) refer to these moments as “opportunity bubbles,” which they define as “promising, yet fleeting, opportunit[ies] to shape the course of subsequent events” (p. 1).

The advocacy activities of worker centers and their networks have also benefited from a relatively open institutionalized political system (Hilson 2002). Such a system has boasted a growing base of supporters who are critical of the recent developments in immigration and labor law (Okamoto and Ebert 2010; Narro 2008); allies that fortified immigrant workers’ claims, strengthening their force and securing their legitimacy (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010; Fine 2006); and a public that has become increasingly conscious of the structural inequalities facing immigrant and low-wage workers (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008). Public education and communications, the identification and activation of a base of supporters, and the additive capacity of growing interorganizational networks have been central to the emergence of worker centers and their development.

Fine (2006, 247) argues that “it is not clear whether immigrant worker centers will follow a trajectory toward social movement organization, labor market institution, or a new organizational form altogether” and that the need to define their core work is important because it gives focus and direction to organizational efforts and development. Our research here supports Fine’s (2006, 11–14) argument that a distinguishing feature of worker centers is that they have focused on integrating three broad sets of activities: social services, advocacy, and organizing. This combination makes worker centers a hybrid and unique form of social service agency, labor market intermediary, and social movement organization. Like unions, worker centers are increasingly networked and federated, provide a combination of direct services and advocacy, organize low-wage workers in particular sectors, engage with employers, and can negotiate agreements. But they differ from unions in a number of significant ways: they do not engage in collective bargaining, only rarely collect membership fees or dues (Fine 2006, 219–23), and often have fluctuating memberships.

Worker centers include elements of, and borrow from, the experiences of nonprofit social service providers, community-based organizations, labor unions, advocacy organizations, and public interest legal defense and education groups. Their effectiveness and unique value resides in their hybridity, flexibility, and adaptability—their ability to develop a set of organizational activities based on the evolving needs of their members, clients, and constituents; their ability to develop networks and partnerships with organized labor, specialized training providers, and community colleges and other education and workforce organizations; their effectiveness in acquiring economic and other financial resources from existing funding sources; and their success in managing an evolving policy environment (Gamson and Meyer 1996) and articulating a clear set of policies to support low-wage and immigrant workers.

## The Development of Worker Center Networks

In her seminal analysis of worker centers, Fine (2006, 240) argues that “at present, worker centers are under-networked at every level” and suggests that while some national networks were emerging, local connections among centers were not well articulated, with the possible exception of Los Angeles. Milkman, Bloom, and Narro (2010) expanded on some of the unique features of the Los Angeles economic and organizational landscape and argue that worker centers in Los Angeles “interact regularly and have developed, over time, a shared strategic repertoire” (p. 2). This repertoire includes the sharing of information, material resources, best practices, social service models, advocacy and organizing strategies, and specific campaigns on a range of regional and national policy issues and initiatives.

Fine (2006, 240–43) suggests that the absence of comprehensive worker center networks created three key challenges for the field. First, there was a lack of national projection because individual worker centers focused mostly on a range of local-level issues; and while their key issues have national relevance, individual groups were unable to project a national presence in policy debates and national forums. Second, there was difficulty in securing resources since national funders hesitate to fund at the local level because they do not have the capacity and expertise to make funding decisions at a localized level. Third, Fine (2006, 241) argues that national networks were needed to facilitate the sharing and learning of experiences among worker centers. Fine’s interviews and analysis suggest that issues related to staffing, human and other organizational resources, and, to some extent, trust and organizational history made the development of regional worker center networks more challenging. Fine (2006) argues that at the time of her study the “potential positive effects of a network, such as enhancing the work through staffed technical assistance, sharing of strategies, multiplying power through coordinated campaigns on common employers or public policy, or helping with fundraising, were largely absent from consideration” (p. 241).

Fine (2006, 242) posits that it was not clear what the best approach was to support the formation of worker center networks and suggested three possibilities: (1) supporting the development of a national organization of worker centers, (2) strengthening the capacities of a cluster of existing organizations, or (3) supporting the development of regional- or place-based organizational networks. Milkman, Bloom, and Narro (2010) focus on the unique development of local networks in Los Angeles and suggest that “both types of organizations [worker centers and unions] are more tightly networked in Los Angeles than are their counterparts elsewhere in the country” (p. 3).

As the labor force and worker protection activities of worker centers have developed over the past decade, the focus for the worker centers has become the development of broad national coalitions—sectoral worker center networks—and strategies to develop resources for the networks and organizations. Motivated by the large immigrant rights mobilizations in 2006 (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008) and the continuing evolution of relations with organized labor and other labor market organizations (Fine 2006), worker centers began to come together to develop strategies that focused on specific segments of the low-wage labor force and sectors of the labor market. Individual worker centers have continued to develop their own work, programs, strategies, and policies; but they have also increasingly come together, and many have joined existing sector-based worker center networks. Interorganizational networks are essential to the development of the mission, goals, and programs of nonprofit organizations (Cordero-Guzmán 2004; Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2008).

A scan of worker centers suggests that the main worker center networks in existence around 2007 included Enlace,<sup>3</sup> a campaign-based network with members throughout the United States and Mexico; and Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ),<sup>4</sup> which includes a range of faith-based worker centers (Fine 2006). Enlace was probably the first national network focused on campaigns in specific economic and labor market sectors, such as garment work, food manufacturing, and farming/fishing. The organizational members of the network focused on a range of low-wage sectors. IWJ also developed an emerging network of worker centers that were focused on identifying and combating wage theft in a range of low-wage industries, but it was not organized strictly by occupation/industry sectors. The work of these two pioneering national networks concentrated on low-wage workers and focused on a range of labor market sectors that depended on the location of the partner organization and the dominant low-wage industries in the particular area where the groups worked.

In the key national industries with large concentrations of low-wage and immigrant workers there have also been a variety of worker centers and organizations that have done significant work in organizing workers and developing a set of training protocols and programs; understanding the various labor markets, jobs, and positions in the industry; developing a sophisticated analysis of employers in the industry; and understanding the prospects for job growth in the sector at the local and national levels. Emerging sectoral worker center networks are made up of organizations that are quite different—with different histories, staff,

and mixes of resources—but they share workers from specific sectors in the low-wage labor market. While all organizations that are members of the key sector-based networks share the main goals and strategies of each network, they are at different stages of development and need different types and kinds of resources at each of those stages. All the low-wage worker networks face the challenges of network development, resource diversification, and capacity building (Fine 2006; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010).

## Emerging Sectoral Strategies of Low-Wage Workers: Why Network by Sectors?

Affiliating with sectoral worker center networks became a key growth strategy as worker centers continued to develop tools to build the low-wage worker movement; shared organizing and advocacy strategies; supported their social service, workforce, and labor market programs; and looked for ways to increase resources and opportunities for organizational development.

Generally, sectoral workforce development approaches involve (1) targeting of specific industries or clusters of occupations; (2) working through intermediary organizations or networks; (3) focusing on improving the employment skills of workers; (4) seeking to improve industry, labor market, employment, and labor force practices; (5) increasing access to training opportunities and career ladders; (6) improving labor regulations and working conditions; and (7) developing public policies focusing on workers in each sector. Worker center networks were particularly suited to develop sectoral approaches because their work and the workers they interacted with tended to be concentrated in particular segments of the low-wage labor market (see Table 1). The prevalence and regularity of the challenges confronted by the workers around lack of pay; violations of wage and hour laws; nonpayment of overtime; lack of access to education and training opportunities; lack of job safety, security, and stability; and exposure to a range of physical and psychological abuses gave the organizations a sense of commonality of purpose, similar experiences, and common challenges they could best tackle together. These occupation and industry-specific challenges were identified, highlighted, and addressed through worker-led and organizational based collective action centered on research, advocacy, organizing, and social service strategies (Fine 2006).

The key national sectoral worker center networks that have developed over the past decade include the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON)<sup>5</sup> in the construction, landscaping, demolition, and general laborer sectors; the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC),<sup>6</sup> with workers in the large and diverse restaurant industry; the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA),<sup>7</sup> with domestic and (some) childcare workers who labor mostly in residences; and the Direct Care Alliance (DCA),<sup>8</sup> with workers in the home health care sector.

While each of these networks is unique, there have been two key forms of sectoral worker center network building. First, there are agglomeration networks

that combine groups and organizations that have had programs, or clusters of workers, in particular labor market sectors, who then affiliate their own worker center with a national network (NDLON and NDWA). Second are the replication networks, in which an existing core organization develops either new organizations or brands partnerships with existing groups in particular geographic areas and then replicates their programs, and service, organizing, and advocacy models (ROC and DCA).

### *National Day Laborer Organizing Network*

NDLON was launched in 2001 as a collaborative effort of twelve organizations and worker centers dedicated to improving the lives of day laborers and strengthening their local communities in the United States. Today, it includes more than fifty organizations. NDLON is an agglomeration network in that most of its members previously existed and joined together only after the formation of the network. The mission of NDLON is to improve the lives of day laborers in the United States by strengthening, connecting, and expanding the member organizations to become effective and strategic in building leadership, advancing low-wage worker and immigrant rights, and developing successful models for organizing immigrant contingent/temporary workers. The construction, landscaping, demolition, and home repair industries are quite large, and there is great variation and diversity in the types of employers, workplaces, and working conditions. NDLON has played a key role in segmenting and regularizing the bottom of the labor market and connecting workers to apprenticeship opportunities and career ladders, often in collaboration with organized labor. NDLON has also been central to the development of popular education materials that are particularly suited for and tailored to the adult education and training of immigrant workers, supporting training in occupational safety and health and developing worker-led campaigns to improve access to jobs, improve working conditions, and increase job quality.

The recent work of NDLON has focused on helping the network continue to develop and strengthen its workforce development activities and to help improve the capacity and effectiveness of its members and staff. Some of the key activities include offering training in English as a second language (ESL)/language skills and literacy; supporting training in soft and basic job skills; and supporting training in Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)/job safety requirements. NDLON members have also provided local training in skills related to the most common jobs in construction and landscaping. NDLON has developed codes of conduct for workers and employers and increased opportunities for skill-specific training and certification. In addition to the workshops and training, NDLON has forged strategic partnerships with employer organizations and organized labor to open up opportunities for day laborers to participate in on-the-job training programs. NDLON has worked on policy campaign efforts to raise labor standards and make training opportunities available and accessible for all day laborers.



### *Restaurant Opportunities Center*

ROC was originally founded after September 11, 2001, to support the restaurant workers displaced from the World Trade Center's restaurant Windows on the World. Over the past five years, ROC has grown to organize workers in several key cities in one of the country's fastest-growing sectors. Through worker training and workforce development activities, strategic research and policy analysis, workplace organizing and justice campaigns against "low-road" restaurant companies, and the promotion of "high-road" restaurants and business practices, ROC has attempted to bring about improvements in working conditions and influence the restaurant industry in New York City and other key cities to invest in workers and treat its largely immigrant workforce with dignity and respect. ROC is a replication network in that it is seeking to reproduce its activities in other cities mostly through developing its own local ROC organizations/chapters, sometimes in partnership with existing local groups and organizations. Some foundations have supported the expansion of the ROC model into other cities, including Chicago, Washington, D.C., New Orleans, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Miami and have supported ROC's expansion efforts into other cities with significant restaurant industry presence.

The restaurant industry is key to the economy and labor market in many cities; receives significant attention and exposure in the media; hires a nontrivial proportion of the labor force, especially new entrants into the labor market; and is considered quite risky but very rewarding for the successful restaurants. Conditions for workers in the industry, however, vary significantly, and there has been concern about the level and prevalence of health, safety, and employment law (wage and hour) violations—particularly against the most vulnerable workers. ROC is the most important worker based organization addressing the issues facing low-wage workers in this industry. ROC recently released and received media attention for a series of reports on the restaurant industry in several key cities, the role of women in the industry, and patterns of discrimination in hiring and in the occupational distribution and pay of workers in the restaurant industry.<sup>9</sup>

ROC's recent work has enabled restaurant workers to become increasingly effective in negotiating for better terms and working conditions and has increased access to training opportunities. Its work has resulted in support for the development of a strong network of stable, worker-led, multiracial organizational chapters in selected cities. ROC's increased capacity and that of its member organizations (the network known as ROC-UNITED) have produced and been seen as a source of relevant research, policy analysis, and policy development on the restaurant industry. ROC has also spearheaded efforts to successfully move noncomplying national employers into compliance and to raise employment standards, wages, and working conditions in the industry; and it has increased the presence of restaurant workers in key policy debates on low-wage work, low-wage workers, and low-incomes families.

### *Direct Care Alliance*

DCA was founded in 2006 as a national nonprofit dedicated to improving working conditions for direct care workers, professionalize the industry, develop



training standards, and provide other supports for direct care workers. The DCA has developed chapters in different states and is another example of a replication network. Direct care work is the fastest growing occupation in health care. Direct care workers are primarily women of color, including a large immigrant population who see direct care work as a pathway out of welfare and poverty. DCA tackles the growing gap between the supply and demand for direct care workers; the training and information needs of workers, employers, and consumers; the working conditions of direct care workers; and the policy and social barriers that impact this workforce. DCA has supported the development of a competency-based credential for entry-level and incumbent home care workers and a range of other network development and capacity-building activities. The DCA has brought together key stakeholders to discuss the core components of voluntary national standards/competencies for personal assistance workers, formulated a national credential based on the identified competencies, field-tested the credential, and developed a marketing plan to raise the visibility of the credentialing program. The goal is to create a credential for these workers that is highly respected in the industry, that clarifies the training protocols and regimes for workers and employers, that provides accurate information to customers, and that is fully portable from job to job. At the same time, through outreach activities, the DCA has been developing mechanisms and programs that improve access and opportunities to obtain the credential.

#### *National Domestic Workers Alliance*

NDWA was started in 2008 and consists of more than seventeen grassroots organizations across the United States that have come together to organize domestic workers, end the exclusion of domestic workers from legal recognition and protection, and support the development of training models and the professionalization of the domestic work industry. The NDWA is an agglomeration network and represents an exciting area of organizing among low-income immigrant women of color. The NDWA has received foundation support to build its national infrastructure and develop a national training institute to improve the skills of domestic workers, improve the quality of jobs, and help build organizational capacity to support the domestic workforce. It has also received support for the development of two types of training and workforce development programs.

The first program deals with job skills training, from CPR and emergency first aid for children and seniors to early childhood development. Occupational safety and health trainings have also been important for domestic workers, for example, to teach housekeepers about green and healthy cleaning products. The other form of training deals with negotiation skills related to the content and pace of work and working conditions, and NDWA has also offered certificate programs for negotiation skills training related to wages and benefits. Strong negotiation skills can make or break a worker's ability to secure a day off to see a doctor, to attend his or her child's parent-teacher conference, or to go to English classes. Such skills are also important when negotiating on-the-job conditions, such as the tools or equipment available to do the job and basic health and safety conditions

on the job. One of the NDWA's member organizations has developed a multi-week intensive training program in negotiation that provides tools, skills, and concrete practice in negotiating the terms of employment, both at the interview stage and also during the course of employment.

Recent strategies have contributed to and supported the expansion of model programs and targeted service approaches in the various organizational and individual members of the NDWA. Domestic workers, through more effective negotiation, can change their own realities, improve their skills, better their working conditions, and change the industry itself. These strategies and their outcomes have direct repercussions for job quality, job retention, human capital development, and opportunities to improve the livelihoods of domestic workers.

The work that the NDWA has done to train and support workers is beginning to show concrete positive impacts, including the development of an improved system for communication across member organizations. More recently, NDWA launched a national study of the demographic characteristics and working conditions of domestic workers. NDWA has increased capacity among its member organizations to coordinate strategies that improve worker skills and support their work, which include the development of state policies to improve conditions in the sector and growing collaborations that have resulted in an increase in the number of organized domestic workers.

## What Distinguishes Emerging Organizations and Networks?

These central and emerging low-wage worker organizations and sectoral worker center networks share a number of characteristics that have made them particularly effective in identifying and addressing the needs of low-wage, mostly immigrant, workers in the specific occupations and industries described in Table 1. There are also a number of attributes of the labor market sectors that have facilitated the development of strategies and programs aimed at improving the quality of low-wage jobs in particular segments of the low-wage labor market.

### *Sector characteristics*

First, these low-wage sectors have a significant number of people of color and new entrants into the workforce, which creates the need for a specific model of organizing and advocacy that is best able to reach out to and integrate these workers. Second, these sectors are service oriented, with significant and relatively stable demand, and are not exportable. Third, they involve jobs with relatively small barriers to entry but can have significant training components and potential for human capital development. Fourth, there are allegations, supplemented by

research (Bernhardt et al. 2008, 2009), of a significant number of health, wage, and hour violations in these sectors. Fifth, the work is easy to communicate to the broader public, as these sectors have a national presence, touch large segments of the public, and are relatively ubiquitous, but the work is often unseen or happens “behind the scenes” (the visible but invisible maid, or nanny, or the busboy at the restaurant). While the public may not always know all the details of these individuals’ working conditions, there is general awareness that work in these sectors is difficult and most of the public has either done, used, or is somewhat familiar with this kind of labor. This general contact and awareness creates opportunities for organizing, advocacy, and public education.

### *Organizational attributes*

First, these organizations are involved in large sectors of the low-wage workforce that have a significant proportion of low-wage workers. Second, there is significant organizational experience and network capacity in these sectors that have been accumulated after some years of experience by key organizational actors and worker centers. Third, there is the potential to make the jobs better in these sectors through a combination of worker training, industry- and employer-based engagement strategies that increase workforce development opportunities, research, and public policy development. There have been effective campaigns, many highlighted in Milkman, Bloom, and Narro (2010), which have developed replicable models and strategies that can be adapted to and adopted by other localities. Last, there is interest among organized labor and other stakeholders in improving labor market policies and conditions for workers in these sectors (Fine 2006; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010). As Bernhardt et al. (2008) suggest, the “gloves off economy” has repercussions throughout the labor market. Deteriorating conditions for the most disadvantaged workers erode working conditions for all workers and improving pay and working conditions at the bottom of the labor market improves opportunities for all workers. Worker centers and sectoral worker center networks evolved as central movement organizations, supporting low-wage workers, connecting them to needed services and programs, developing strategies and campaigns to improve the quality of low-wage jobs across metropolitan labor markets; and they have developed organizational infrastructures for communications, advocacy, policy analysis, public education, and policy development.

## Worker Rights and Protections, Sectoral Worker Center Networks, and Evolving Local Labor Markets

Changes in the structure of the economy and labor market over the past 20 years have meant that an increasing number of American workers are facing a

range of challenges and have to find ways to navigate a complex labor market that is characterized by more spells of unemployment, higher levels of inequality within and between occupations, and ever more disjointed careers with the typical worker changing jobs and employers more often than in previous decades (Holzer et al. 2011; Bernhardt et al. 2008, 2009; Maxwell 2006; Osterman and Shulman 2011). Workers have to manage more job transitions and need additional support from nonprofit organizations and educational institutions in maneuvering through the increasingly complex labor market. Educational institutions are gradually becoming more aware of the need to directly connect their students to concrete opportunities in the labor market. Community-based organizations, worker centers, and service providers have played an increasingly central and relevant role as intermediaries, case managers, advocates, researchers, and policymakers on behalf of low-wage workers and the most disadvantaged and marginalized segments of the labor force (Fine 2006; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010).

While workers have faced increasingly difficult labor market conditions, they have not been passive but have organized and developed strategies to improve their working conditions, increase their human capital, and expand labor market opportunities. In this article, we argue that understanding the impact of economic structures on low-wage workers requires the study of emerging worker organizations and networks and that individual labor market outcomes and experiences are mediated and impacted by the work of these institutions. Low-wage workers face difficult conditions and overwhelming odds, but many are developing strategies to challenge those conditions; to organize other workers and supporters; to educate the public; and to transform public opinion into meaningful policies, programs, and strategies that have a positive impact on the wages, working conditions, and lives of low-wage workers.

The concrete activities that sectoral worker center networks have developed can be divided into (1) worker support activities, (2) organizational development activities, (3) labor market support activities, and (4) labor market policy activities. Worker center networks have developed programs that help to expand the range of training, education services, and workforce-related support that worker centers provide to low-wage workers. These networks have provided support for job creation strategies and have connected workers to career ladders; they have stimulated participation among workers in worker centers, increased access to training opportunities, and provided models and support for leader identification and leadership development. The networks' organizational development activities include supporting the growth of individual worker centers and their ability to operate, to develop their human resources, to develop their programs, and to secure resources to support their operations. They have supported the sharing of information and experiences among organizations that are members of particular networks; they have connected sectoral worker center networks with one another and increased the opportunities to collaborate and learn from one another's work and experiences. The networks have also provided support for fundraising, capacity building, and the diversification of sources of support for worker centers.

Worker center networks' labor market support activities have increased the ability of worker centers to market their services and programs, increased the centers' connections to employers, and improved the centers' capacity to talk about and communicate their work to a range of stakeholders and actors in metropolitan workforce systems. They have increased partnerships with employers, developed opportunities to provide on-the-job training, and increased advocacy for better working conditions and improved job quality.

The labor market policy activities of these networks have increased collaborations among worker centers and other community-based organizations, organized labor groups, community colleges, specialized training providers, and other stakeholders in the workforce development system. They have increased collaborations among worker centers; worker center networks; and a range of local, state, and federal policymakers and have provided support for network building among low-wage worker organizations, worker centers, policy organizations, universities, and other actors that support low-wage workers. Worker center networks have increasingly coordinated efforts, campaigns, and collaborations among worker centers and other community-based organizations and labor groups and have improved connections to the Department of Labor and other relevant federal government agencies, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services. They have improved connections to think tanks and policymakers and have advocated for more effective and inclusive policies on low-wage workers and worker center development.

The concerted strategy that evolved to support worker centers and the broader low-wage worker movement focused on both supporting organizational development by helping to expand the range of workforce services that worker centers provide and expanding the engagement of worker centers with related organizations and stakeholders in the metropolitan workforce system. This strategy had three results. First, it helped to reduce the isolation and increase the policy credibility and voice of worker centers at the metropolitan and regional levels. Second, it also increased the visibility and effectiveness of centers at the local level by providing services to their worker base, and developing a base of support for broad community engagement. Third, it increased the ability of organizations to collaborate and develop field-level strategies to address the unique needs of low-wage workers. Low-wage worker organizations and worker center networks have developed a range of activities focused on workers, employers, jobs, and low-wage labor markets and have aimed to institutionalize their work and solidify their capacity to advocate for low-wage workers.

Low-wage workers are marginalized, find it difficult to get more training and move up the job ladder, are often challenged at work, and need a range of supports to help them navigate the low-wage labor market and connect to better job opportunities (Holzer et al. 2011; Osterman and Shulman 2011). To improve the potential of worker centers to provide opportunities and enhance skills and livable wages for workers, organizations began to focus on the interactions among strategies that were designed to support workers, impact working environments, and improve the conditions of low-wage jobs. Groups developed a set of

organizational and field-building strategies to help workers and employers make the jobs better, and provide opportunities for learning, advancement, human capital development, and increased pay. Breaking from traditional dichotomies, identified by authors such as Fine (2006), between institutionalization/service provision versus worker organizing/advocacy, sectoral worker center networks have increasingly focused on a range of goals, including (1) increasing the skills and human capital of workers by improving access to training and skill building opportunities, (2) making the jobs better through advocacy and high road employer campaigns, and (3) improving access to better jobs and employers through a range of labor market intermediary strategies. Service strategies involve increasing opportunities for workers to learn the skills that would allow them to stay and improve their wages in particular sectors, or to move to better opportunities in other related sectors, and to provide access to training opportunities that allow for both—deeper sector specific skills and transferable skills. Think of the nanny who, with the help of a domestic worker group, is able to negotiate with her employer for the ability to go to school or to take classes that enhance her skills and quality of life.

Sectoral worker center networks have taken the lead in developing and managing partnerships among worker centers and philanthropic institutions, which has allowed them to acquire resources to support their work and develop the field. Partnerships among philanthropic institutions and nonprofits have facilitated the emergence and development of organizations; the discussion of concrete strategies; and the emergence of a range of programs designed to improve the skills of workers, increase access to career ladders, and improve the quality of jobs.

Sectoral worker center networks evolved to support the work of individual worker centers and related organizations by acquiring funding and resources; providing strategic advice and cooperation; developing, scaling, and increasing the reach of service models and strategies; and developing a range of employer-based strategies. The networks work to understand labor market institutions at the local, regional, and national levels and try to project emerging trends in particular sectors of the labor market. They have engaged in partnerships with community colleges, labor unions, specialized service providers, researchers, and think tanks and have developed and advocated for improved policy approaches to low-wage workers, labor markets, and immigration.

Sectoral worker center networks have emanated from an amalgamation of workers and social service professionals combining their expertise to develop targeted approaches, campaigns, and programs that are designed to improve conditions at work, quality of jobs, and access to training opportunities for low-wage workers. They try to accomplish their goals by focusing on worker organizing, advocacy, research, and policy development, and they have become essential to securing better individual outcomes for low-wage workers. By institutionalizing their work; solidifying their internal networks and partnerships; seeking support from a variety of philanthropic and other sources; building partnerships with educational institutions, organized labor, and specialized training



providers; and maintaining solid connections, organizing activities, and grassroots campaigns with low-wage workers, sectoral worker center networks have been able to give a voice to low-wage workers. They have developed a set of strategies and resources that mitigate the erosion of working conditions at the bottom of the U.S. labor market and have given workers the tools, collective action support, and infrastructure they need to improve their lives.

## Notes

1. See data at [http://www.bls.gov/oes/oes\\_dl.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oes/oes_dl.htm).
2. In trying to better understand the location of low-wage work, it can be useful to think about the segmentation of industries and occupations separately and then to think about how they are linked. There are industries that include high proportions of low-wage workers (low-wage industries), but there are also low-wage workers in high-wage industries. There are high- and low-wage occupations, but even within occupations there is a distribution of earnings. We can categorize occupations as high- and low-wage occupations with an understanding that there are likely to be some high-wage workers in low-wage occupations and some low-wage workers in high-wage occupations.
3. Enlace was founded in 1998 as a strategic alliance by a group of organizations working to promote and protect human and labor rights and provide better employment opportunities for low-income residents and immigrants in both the United States and Mexico. One of Enlace's founding principles is to provide a connection among the groups that organize low-wage workers to enhance the work each group does in its particular area by providing space for mutual support, sharing experiences and models, and discussing evolving best practices. Enlace provides support and technical assistance to strengthen, stabilize, and assist low-wage worker organizations to continually change, evolve, and adapt to the needs of workers; to understand changes in the key jobs; and to develop and share information on key employers.
4. Interfaith Workers Justice was founded in 1998. Its mission is "to engage the religious community in issues and campaigns to improve wage, benefits and working conditions for workers, especially low-wage workers." It has also been committed to strengthening and building partnerships with the labor movement, engaging young people in the work, and respecting and engaging the broad diversity of the faith community. See <http://www.iwj.org/template/index.cfm>.
5. See <http://www.ndlon.org>.
6. See <http://www.rocunited.org>.
7. See <http://www.domesticworkers.org>.
8. See <http://www.directcarealliance.org>.
9. See <http://rocunited.org/research-resources/our-reports/>.

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