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WIN THE LOTTERY OR ORGANIZE

Traditional and Non-Traditional Labor Organizing in Silicon Valley

Chris Benner

The growth and change in high-tech industries in Silicon Valley over the last 20 years has produced a highly bifurcated society, with little social mobility between low and high strata of the society. The highly unequal occupational structure of high-tech industries, combined with the rise in out-sourcing of related service occupations, has contributed to the growing inequality in the region. In this environment, traditional models of labor organizing in the electronics sectors have been ineffective in improving wages and working conditions for low-wage workers. Other, more innovative organizing efforts, however, have had more success. These newer efforts link organizing in the community with organizing in the workplace, build links between environmental justice concerns and workplace safety and health issues, help break down divisions between the public and private sphere, and bring greater public oversight of private sector employment practices. While these efforts have yet to have a major impact in improving employment prospects for low-wage workers in high-tech industries, they do provide some important insights into potential new forms of labor organizing.

Introduction

When I think about it, we don't really dream of fortunes or kingdoms or things like that very often...We dream that when we work hard, we'll be able to clothe our children decently, and still have a little time and money left for ourselves. And we dream that when we do as good a job as other people, we get treated the same, and that nobody puts us down because we're not like them. We dream that our jobs are safe, and secure, and when we're really on a roll — we even imagine that they're interesting and enjoyable!...Then we ask ourselves, "How could we make these things come true?" And so far we've come up with only two possible answers: win the lottery, or organize. What can I say, except I have never been lucky with numbers. So tell them this...:

tell them it may take time that people don't think they have, but they have to organize! It doesn't have to be through a union, because God knows unions have problems. So you can do it anywhere, but organize! Because the only way to get a little measure of power over your own life is to do it collectively, with the support of other people who share your needs.

These words are from Irma, a Filipina immigrant production worker in a high-tech assembly plant in Santa Clara County.¹ Her impassioned plea contains a disturbing contradiction. On the one hand is a clear sense of the need for marginalized workers to act collectively if they are ever to gain a measure of power and control over their own lives. On the other hand, it reflects an absence of clear models of effective forms for that collective mobilization to take. Historically, workers have primarily focused on union organizing as the dominant form for collective organization. But union membership in the United States has declined to its lowest post war level, with only 10.4 percent of the private sector work force unionized in 1996 (Hirsch and Macpherson 1996). Economic restructuring, increasing globalization of production, diffusion of information technology, and new forms of work organization have all contributed to a weakening of labor's power *vis-a-vis* capital, and traditional forms of union organization have been ineffective in confronting this reality.

Yet the urgency of Irma's words remains, raising an important question. Marginalized workers need effective collective mobilization, and if not traditional unions, then what? This article attempts to address this question through an examination of labor mobilization in the electronics industry in Santa Clara County, known as Silicon Valley because of the concentration of high-technology industries in the area. I will argue that while traditional labor organizing in the electronics sector has been ineffective, other forms of labor organizing have taken place in the Valley that provide promising rays of hope for marginalized workers in the new economic structure. These forms of labor organizing build on four important arenas:

1. struggles that link **community and workplace** organizing, thus breaking down divisions between production and reproduction activities and providing links between workplace and identity (e.g. gender, ethnicity) based organizing;

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2. organizing efforts that break down divisions between the *private and public sphere* by developing media campaigns to solicit support of sympathetic public officials and public agencies for worker's conditions;
3. campaigns that link *workplace safety and health* issues with broader environmental concerns, providing a link with the growing environmental justice movement; and
4. strategies that target *secondary employers* to take responsibility for working conditions at subcontractors, which addresses problems of labor in the new "flexible" work organization.

The first section of the article provides background on Santa Clara County, highlighting the growing structural inequality and the links between class, race, and gender divisions of labor. The following section provides a brief review of traditional labor organizing strategies that have occurred in the high-technology industries of Silicon Valley. This is followed by an examination of more creative forms of labor organizing in the region. The final section discusses the significance of these efforts and the problems and prospects for effective labor mobilization they highlight.

Economic Growth and Inequality in Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County is the heart of Silicon Valley, the diversified core of innovation in the global electronics industry. The dynamic growth and development of the region has made it one of the wealthiest counties in the country, and made it a model for economic development policies around the world. Yet the industrial structure of Silicon Valley has also produced striking inequalities, a strongly bifurcated workforce, and blatant ethnic and gender discrimination. Corporate down-sizing, streamlining and subcontracting in the 1980s and 1990s have reinforced the trends of structural inequality established from the origins of the county's growth.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

The growth of Santa Clara County since World War II has been dramatic. The County has served as an economic growth engine for the entire San Francisco Bay Area. Employment in Santa Clara County grew at a 4 percent annual rate, from 251,000 in 1964 to 884,000 in 1996. Seventeen of the 44

California-based firms on the Fortune 500 are headquartered in Silicon Valley. Ten of the top 30 information technology companies in North America are based in the Valley. Some 1,500 of the nation's 2,500 largest electronics businesses are located here (Siegel 1994). The San Jose metropolitan area is now the single largest exporting region of the United States, having surpassed New York and Detroit (U.S. Census Bureau, Exporter Location Series, 1997). The growth of the Valley has resulted in rapid income growth for large sectors of the population. Personal and family incomes grew rapidly in the 1970s and 80s, surpassing both state and national averages. Median family income grew in real terms from \$42,086 in 1969 to \$53,670 in 1989 (in constant 1989 dollars). In 1989, Santa Clara County had the 7th highest median family income of any county in the country (Walker 1990; California Employment Development Department 1992).

The bright side of Silicon Valley's development, however, also has a dark side which is revealed far less often. This dark side is intimately tied with the highly unequal structure of employment in high-technology industries (Siegel and Markoff 1985; Hayes 1989). On the one side, the industry is top-heavy, with engineers, programmers, technicians and professional staff, reflecting the scientific and knowledge intensive nature of production and the high level of research and development in the field. On the other side, however, is a large portion of relatively unskilled production work, with relatively few middle-level positions in-between.

Some observers have argued that the low-skill production work in the Valley has largely disappeared in the last decade. However, it would be inaccurate to say that all low-skilled production work has left the Valley. In 1990, there were still 25,000 out of 137,000 employees in high-tech manufacturing who were classified as production workers, 75 percent of them in either semi-skilled or unskilled positions (Siegel 1994). Some companies are even expanding production facilities in the region (see Table 1). For instance, Intel began construction in October 1994 of a \$500 million expansion of its Santa Clara semiconductor facility. Similarly 3Com also decided in 1994 to build a new manufacturing plant in Silicon Valley, a \$43 million expansion. Solectron, one of the largest circuit-board assembly subcontractors in the area has expanded dramatically in recent years, employing over 3,000 production workers in low-skilled assembly jobs in 1994. It has continued to expand in the area (Gomes 1994).

Table 1

*Sample of Silicon Valley Firms Who Have Increased
Manufacturing Jobs Since 1989*

<i>Firm</i>	<i>Employment</i>	
	<i>1989</i>	<i>1994</i>
Cisco	27	375
Electrogas Inc.	145	213
Intel Corp.	50	750
Silicon Graphics Inc.	200	825
Solectron Corp.	1,000	3,000
Synoptics Comm, Inc.	85	424
3Com Corp.	243	353

Source: Gomes 1994.

The labor market in Silicon Valley has not only bifurcated because of the dichotomized employment structure within high-technology industries themselves. The expansion of high-technology firms, with the accompanying expansion of low-lying office and manufacturing buildings, has also led to a rapid expansion in related service industries, including clerical staff, building services (janitorial, landscaping), cafeteria, laundry, security guards, and so forth. Many of these jobs in the janitorial, food and office work industries, all of which support the material infrastructure of the high-tech industry complexes, are low-skilled and low paid, yet they constitute some of the largest growth in jobs in the county. For example, the ten occupations with the greatest absolute job growth in Santa Clara county include jobs at both the upper end -- general managers, computer engineers, and electrical engineers -- and an equal or greater number of low-end jobs--retail salespersons, general clerks, janitors and cashiers (see Table 2).

The divisions in employment in Santa Clara County are strong along ethnic and gender lines. According to data from the 1990 census, white men make up 62.8 percent of the officials and managers, while women of all races make up 79.1 percent of the clerical workers, and 60.7 percent of the operatives. Non-white women account for 45.0 percent of the operatives,

Table 2

*Top Ten Occupations with the Greatest
Projected Absolute Job Growth*

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Employment</i>		<i>Absolute Change</i>	<i>Percent Change</i>
	<i>1990</i>	<i>1997</i>		
Salespersons-Retail (Non-Vehicle)	24,100	26,480	2,380	9.9%
General Office Clerks	21,690	23,740	2,050	9.6%
Secretaries, General	20,550	22,510	1,960	9.5%
General Managers, Top Executives	21,900	23,760	1,860	8.6%
Registered Nurses	9,990	11,780	1,790	17.9%
Computer Engineers	13,930	15,330	1,400	10.1%
Receptionists, Information Clerks	7,780	9,180	1,400	18.0%
Janitors, Cleaners-- Except Maids	11,500	12,830	1,330	11.6%
Cashiers	13,720	14,930	1,210	8.8%
Electrical and Electronic Engineers	17,760	18,910	1,150	6.5%

Source: California EDD 1992.

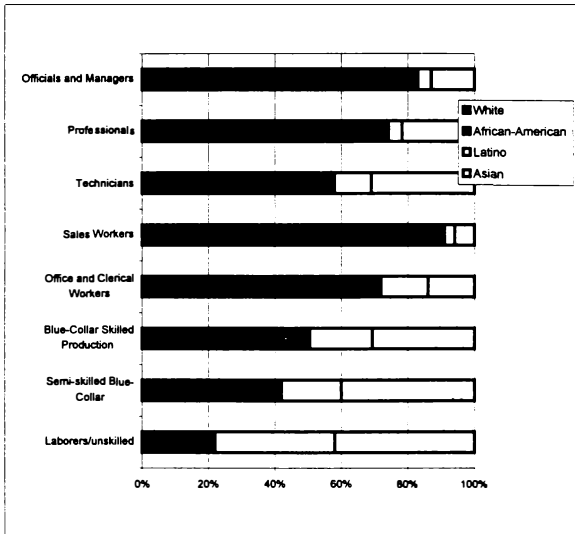
although they represent only 16.3 percent of the total workforce (see Figures 1 and 2).

This bifurcated work force shows very clearly in the income distribution figures. While 33 percent of the workforce earned over \$35,000 a year, 31 percent of the workforce, nearly 362,000 people, had annual earned incomes under \$15,000. Income levels are also severely structured by ethnic and gender stratification. For instance, only 19.4 percent of white men in the Valley earned less than \$15,000 in 1989, while 55.6 percent of the Mexican women and 45.3 percent of Filipina women reported earnings at that level.

Thus, overall the region is characterized not only by rapid

Figure 1

*Occupation by Race in Silicon Valley
High-Tech Manufacturing, 1990*



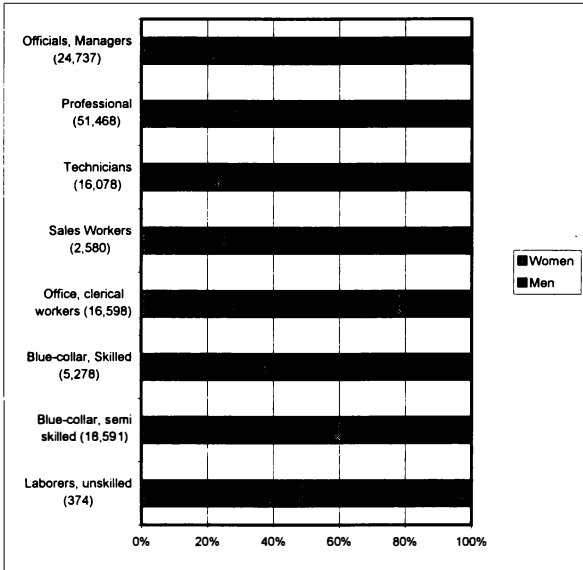
Source: Siegel 1994.

economic growth and prosperity for some, but also by the following:

- Inequality which is rooted both in the occupational structure of high-technology industries themselves, and in the structural character of the division of labor within the region, e.g. service sectors that support the production infrastructure and labor force of the high-tech industries receiving relatively little benefit from the vibrant industry; and
- Income stratification that is largely structured along race and gender lines, i.e. white and Japanese men dominate in technical and managerial positions, while Vietnamese,

Figure 2

Occupation by Gender in Silicon Valley High-Tech Manufacturing, 1990



Source: Siegel 1994.

Filipino and Chinese women dominate in the low-wage production jobs and hispanics dominate in low-paid service and maintenance positions.

Traditional Labor Organizing in the Electronic Industry²

Organizing workers in the electronics industry in general has been extremely difficult. Nationwide, in 1988, only 2.7 percent of the workforce in electronic computing equipment, for instance, was unionized, making it one of the least unionized manufacturing sectors in the country. In contrast, 56.2 percent

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of the workforce in basic steel and 54.6 percent in motor vehicles were unionized (Eisenscher 1993).

Silicon Valley provides a useful case study of the difficulties of organizing in the electronics industry. There have been a series of union organizing efforts that have followed traditional strategies, focused on getting union recognition through standard elections under the process supervised by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) process. Most of these efforts have been unsuccessful:

- One of the earliest organizing efforts in the electronics industry in Santa Clara County was in 1973 at Tomco Electronics, a small electronics firm in Mountain View. The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) secured enough support to petition the NLRB for a recognition election, which was conducted in April 1973. UE won 24 of 25 votes. The company immediately hired a leading union-busting law firm to pursue bargaining, and after two months the company locked out its employees. After two more months of employee picketing, Tomco terminated all operations. The UE charged the company with bad faith bargaining. The NLRB upheld the charges. Management appealed the decision through the NLRB and then through the courts to the Supreme Court. In a precedent-setting decision the Supreme Court overturned the NLRB and excused Tomco's tactics as no more than "hard bargaining" (Eisenscher 1993).
- In 1974, a majority of the 160 workers at Siltec Corporation, another small high-tech firm, signed with UE. Management acted swiftly to stave off the effort by firing fifteen key leaders. The union filed charges with the NLRB but did not prevail (Eisenscher 1993).
- In 1975-76, UE signed 65 percent of the 200 workers at Semi-Metals and petitioned for an election. Under intense management pressure, UE narrowly lost the vote (Eisenscher 1993).
- In 1982, the Glazier's Union tried to organize Atari workers and collected enough signature cards to call an election. The company fought back in full force, circulating anti-union petitions which supervisors pressured workers to sign, and began inviting workers to unprecedented company-sponsored parties in an effort to woo workers away from the union. The union lost some

support, and canceled its petition for election with the NLRB, but continued its organizing drive. In February 1983, while the Glaziers were gearing up for another election bid, Atari announced that it was laying off 1700 employees and relocating production to Taiwan and Hong Kong (Hossfeld 1988).

- In October 1992, a worker at Versatronex (a small circuit board manufacturer which supplied other larger electronic firms) confronted the employers with complaints of low salaries, no raises, a hazardous work environment and emotional abuse. The worker was fired, and 50 out of 86 Versatronex employees walked off their jobs to protest the company's actions. This was the first strike at a microelectronics firm in 40 years in the Valley. The low-wage immigrant workers developed creative protest strategies, including a hunger strike directed at Digital Microwave, one of the major customers of Versatronex. Versatronex eventually caved in and recognized the union, but at the same time announced it would close its Silicon Valley facility and terminate all operations (Kadetsky 1993).
- Union campaigns at Siliconix and National Semiconductors in the 1980s never reached elections. Other campaigns at Xidex and Raytheon failed to win a majority of worker votes (Hossfeld 1988).

Clearly traditional union organizing tactics in the electronics industry were largely ineffective. Company strong-arm tactics and the threat of moving overseas have been major factors in limiting union success. Before turning to a more complete analysis of the reasons why high-tech workers are not organized, the next section looks at some of the other more creative strategies for organizing workers in the industry.

Non-Traditional Labor Organizing

There have been a number of other labor organizing efforts in the Valley that have not followed a traditional approach to organizing. The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) had a strong organizing campaign in the early 1980s that did not limit itself to traditional strategies. Instead, workers in a number of plants began organizing an Electronics Organizing Committee (EOC). The EOC established itself as a member organization and began functioning much like an

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established local union, even without formal recognition. They published a newsletter and tried to recruit members throughout the industry. Their focus was organizing struggles around day-to-day grievances and conditions, through which the EOC sought to demonstrate the power of collective action, even without a formal union recognition.

One of their major initial issues was around the need for cost-of-living wage increases. Workers in Silicon Valley plants are paid largely on the basis of 'individual merit'. Workers are generally reviewed by supervisors on a variety of subjective factors related to performance, attendance, attitude, and so forth (Eisenscher 1993; Green 1983; Katz and Kemnitzer 1983). Two campaigns were conducted at National Semiconductors in 1979 and 1981 to institute across the board wage increases tied to inflation rates in the area. The campaigns were successful in getting NSC to implement two 35 cents per hour general wage adjustments. However, the company never recognized the union and after the second campaign, increased its anti-union efforts.

Another major issue the EOC focused on was health and safety concerns of workers, who are often exposed to toxic chemicals in the production process. Workers cite high incidence of occupational illness, risks of acid burns, chemical poisoning, industrial cancers, and reproductive hazards. The EOC helped publicize these conditions. Working with the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (SVTC) and the Santa Clara Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, the EOC helped uncover the toxic impacts of what was, at the time, thought to be a clean industry. While the specific impacts of EOC's efforts are difficult to measure, there is no question that now there is a much wider understanding of industry contamination and its implications for workers and surrounding communities than there was in the early 1980s (Eisenscher 1993). The EOC also focused on unfair labor practices, filing numerous grievances with the NLRB, organizing public hearings about discriminatory hiring and firing practices, and conducting educational campaigns to assist workers with unemployment and workers' compensation claims.

The EOC collapsed into inactivity in 1984, after increased company harassment of committee members and sympathizers. But the EOC was able to demonstrate that an industry wide organizing effort not narrowly focused on obtaining union recognition at a single plant was a viable strategy to affect workers' conditions of employment. This was accomplished

with no full-time union support, only one part-time paid union organizer (Eisenscher 1993).

*Justice for Janitors*³

One of the more innovative organizing efforts to take place in recent years in the Valley is the Justice for Janitors Campaign of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877. This effort was significant, not only for the creative tactics pursued, but also because of the strategic point of recognizing the links between the prominent high-technology firms in the Valley and the range of service industries that provide the necessary infrastructure support for the high-tech agglomeration. Rather than focusing specifically on employers of janitors, the Justice for Janitors Campaign held that primary companies must bear some responsibility for the working conditions of subcontractors. Santa Clara County has one of the largest janitorial industries in California. It is estimated that there were 11,500 janitors in Santa Clara County in 1990, including public sector, direct employee, and private contractor janitors. In terms of absolute job growth, janitors rank in the top ten, with an estimated 11.76 percent growth between 1990 and 1997, and the addition of 1,330 additional janitors (see Table 2). There are approximately 300 janitorial contractors operating in the region, ranging from companies that employ more than 600 workers to small contracting firms that employ fewer than 10 workers. This figure probably grossly understates the true number of janitors, since it does not include the large but undetermined number of janitors informally employed by independent self-employed contractors. About 80-90 percent of janitors working in Silicon Valley are immigrants, mostly from Mexico and Central America (Zolniski 1994).

Starting in 1989, Local 1877 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) began a Justice for Janitors campaign in an effort to improve wages and working conditions for janitors in the region. The Justice for Janitors campaign followed a three-prong strategy. First, organizers worked to develop union support among janitors employed by contracting firms working in the region's major corporations. A second strategy was to organize public events, including rallies and marches through downtown San Jose, to bring media and public attention to their campaign. The intention was to focus attention on the contractors and to place some of the blame for the janitors poor working conditions on the corporate clients

who did business with union contractors. The third strategy was to pursue worker grievances and denunciations of abuses through appropriate legal channels (Martinez Saldana 1993).

One of the initial targeted contractors was Shine Building Maintenance, which had Apple Computers as one of its prime customers. Union organizers, mostly young Chicanos and Mexican immigrants, intensified organizing efforts at Apple facilities in Cupertino in 1990 and managed to recruit workers to the union cause. Media events and rallies at the corporate headquarters were carried out to pressure the corporation to end the low-bid practices and exert its formidable weight as a client of Shine to improve the contractor's treatment of the janitors. Instead, Apple successfully obtained a restraining order in an effort to contain the union's activities. The union then tried to broaden its social support by helping to bring together a coalition of organizations and liberal politicians into the Cleaning Up Silicon Valley Coalition, in April 1991. One of the major initial efforts of the coalition was to hold a public hearing on June 1, 1991, on "the work place abuse of immigrant janitors." The purpose of the hearing was to motivate sympathetic public officials into action on behalf of the janitors. The hearing included testimony of janitors employed by Shine and other contractors, as well as testimony of health care administrators and other professionals who work in some capacity with immigrants. The hearing drew an audience of some 200 people and included a wide range of prominent local, county, and state politicians.⁴ Presentations discussed job site health hazards (chemicals, etc.), economic barriers to Latinos in the regional economy, housing problems faced by janitors and other low income workers, the impact of janitors low wages and lack of health insurance coverage on public services.

The campaign continued, with a variety of other creative tactics, including the publishing of a Janitor's Bill of Rights, a phone-in campaign to Apple's CEO John Sculley, a candle-light vigil at Sculley's residence in Woodside, a hunger strike to symbolize the suffering of families of the workers who clean Apple's buildings, and a boycott of Apple products at local retail stores. Eventually, Apple pressured Shine to begin negotiating with the union towards the end of 1991 and, in early 1992, Shine workers were allowed to sign cards declaring their interest in union representation, an historic victory.

The campaign at Apple was a high publicity campaign stretching over several years. The strategic goal was to make

central companies responsible for the subcontractors they hire. According to Union officials, other high-tech firms quickly capitulated to union organizing efforts after the victory at Apple because they did not want a repeat of "another Apple".

Campaign for Justice

The Campaign for Justice was another union organizing effort that attempted to build on the experience of the Justice for Janitors Campaign. Using the broad tactics of social-movement unionism, linking neighborhood organizing with workplace issues, and holding secondary employers responsible for working conditions in the companies they subcontract with, the campaign began a highly publicized effort which was announced in January 1994. Four unions — Service Employees International Union (SEIU), The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) — initially pledged to commit staff members and a combined \$2 million a year for the following three years (Siegel 1994). Labor organizers canvassed neighborhoods in East, South, and downtown San Jose, and in Sunnyvale, asking workers about their jobs and working conditions. These areas were targeted because census data showed those neighborhoods have a high concentration of low-wage, low-skilled workers. Campaign organizers aimed to organize an additional 50,000 workers by 1997. At the time, only 39,000 workers in Santa Clara County were members of those four unions. The campaign was intended to focus on workers in landscaping, manufacturing, laundry, food service and security businesses.

However, lack of financial support for the campaign, and lack of political support from the international unions led to three of the unions pulling out. SEIU continued with an effort to organize landscapers in the Valley. Landscapers face similar subcontracting arrangements as janitors. The goal was once again to hold clients responsible for working conditions in companies they subcontract to. The Campaign, however, was dealt a serious blow in the fall of 1994. The San Jose-based Four Seasons Landscape and Maintenance Inc. fought back against the unions' tactics, arguing that they amounted to a secondary boycott. Under U.S. labor law, union organizers cannot use secondary boycotts to threaten the business of one company in an attempt to hurt its contractor. In a hearing with

the NLRB in October, SEIU was forced to sign an agreement to cease using coercive activities against clients of targeted landscaping companies (Eng 1992). This does not prevent SEIU from trying to get third parties to put pressure on their targets, but it does limit their actions.

Workers Centers: AIWA

Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates (AIWA), is a third innovative labor organizing effort, working primarily with Korean immigrants in San Jose. AIWA is one of a number of workers centers which have grown in the last 10-15 years in response to restructuring of labor processes (Kwong 1994; Hollens 1994). Workers Centers, though varied in ideology and approach, have risen in response to rising levels of precarious employment and language and cultural barriers faced by immigrant workers. Some work closely with unions and see collective bargaining and unionization as an ultimate goal. Other centers state they are not pre-union formations, but instead an answer to what they see as a lack of concern by trade unions and the society as a whole with the concerns of marginalized workers.

A key commonality is that they are community-based forms of worker organizing. Workers need not be employed at a particular site, but retain membership even when changing jobs or unemployed. They are multi-trade, uniting workers across industry lines while working with them in their own communities. In addition to focusing on wages, benefits and working conditions (including health and safety violations), workers centers might also focus on education (English literacy, workers' legal rights), housing and work discrimination, immigration, and lobbying for labor law reform. Often the basis for collective mobilization is an ethnic or gender identity. However, the focus on workplace issues also helps bridge the gap between community and workplace organizing. And, with casualized labor conditions, a labor organization with bilingual skills and community ties is better able to deal with workers needs than many traditional unions, which began at a time when they were dealing with big industries and big businesses (Kwong 1994; Hollens 1994).

Much of AIWA's work in Silicon Valley has focused on publicizing the poor conditions immigrant workers face in the electronics assembly industry and providing education about health and safety issues and workers rights. It is too early to make a full assessment of the potential impact of AIWA and

workers centers in general on the restructuring of capital-labor relations, but the focus on organizing, bridging community-workplace ties, and linking working-class communities with workplace concerns provide some important potential developments for social movement unionism in this country.

Problems and Prospects for Labor in Silicon Valley

The organizing efforts highlighted in the previous section provide some important insights for effective worker mobilization. Yet they also highlight some of the continued obstacles to labor organizing in the context of economic restructuring in the County.

Problems for Low-Income Workers in Silicon Valley

The main obstacle to unionizing in Silicon Valley is probably the strong anti-union sentiment among corporate executives. In the rapidly changing and competitive electronics industry, corporate executives fear that unions would limit their "flexibility" and ability to adapt to changing market conditions. The late Bob Noyce, co-founder of Intel, for instance said:

Remaining non-union is an essential for survival for most of our companies.....This is a very high priority for management here. We have to retain flexibility in operating our companies. The great hope for our nation is to avoid those deep deep divisions between workers and management which can paralyze action (Eisenscher 1993).

A second major factor is the threat of relocation. The ability to shift production overseas gives corporations an extremely strong tool in its efforts to prevent unionization. U.S. labor laws are also extremely disadvantageous for labor organizing. The prohibitions against secondary employer boycotts makes it difficult to confront subcontracting arrangements that are such a central part of "flexible production". The NLRB election process also gives companies extreme ability to intimidate workers during an election drive.

Yet the problems of unionization in Silicon Valley do not only relate to economic and political structures. National trade unions have not demonstrated a major commitment to or investment in organizing high-tech workers. This is illustrated by the minimal commitment to the development of full-time organizing staff. During the 1980s UE campaign, for instance, there was only

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one full-time organizer — with split responsibilities since he was also trying to support workers in a sheet metal plant in Redwood City. Through most of the 1980s, there was not even a single, full-time paid union staff member trying to organize in high-tech industries. Similarly, the Campaign for Justice failed to reach its objectives largely because of lack of support from the national unions (Eng 1992).

There are problems for unions even at a local level. Many workers do not feel unions are an effective way of addressing their problems. A majority of workers interviewed for Hossfeld's study indicated a belief that organizing drives would threaten their jobs, and not be able to improve their conditions. A further factor is immigrant women's own beliefs that because they are immigrants "on the way up", their jobs are temporary and secondary, and thus not worth the energy needed to organize. It has also been difficult for unions to attempt to organize a workforce not only severely divided by language, race, and nationality, but also often spatially and geographically spread out between multiple plants, even within one firm.

A more fundamental problem is related to the gender division of labor and the fact that many immigrant women work a "triple shift" — not only working for paid work outside the home, and unpaid work at home, but also *paid* work at-home, through informal sector activity (Hossfeld 1988; Lozano 1989). This triple shift limits the time that women have for collective organizing, while also reducing their identification with a single formal sector job as the focus for improving their standard of living.

The patriarchy women experience also hinders union organizing in less subtle ways. In Hossfeld's study, individuals from a wide spectrum of national backgrounds, including American, reported that male family members frequently discouraged or forbade female family members from participating in unions. Some men believe unions are a male preserve and not the place for women while others were anti-union or understandably fearful of company or state retribution. Furthermore, family responsibilities are cited as barriers to union involvement by most of the women who were interested in unions. Unions have not effectively addressed the delivery of basic services that would allow women to participate in the workforce and in the unions, such as childcare, maternity leaves, and shelter for battered women and their children (Hossfeld 1988).

Prospects for Innovative Labor Organizing

Despite the significant obstacles to workers collective mobilization, some promising steps are being taken. Innovative forms of organizing are being developed. Many of these forms are not entirely new to union organizing, but the struggles in Silicon Valley highlight their importance in the new economic climate:

- (1) **Linking community and workplace** — The efforts of Justice for Janitors, Campaign for Justice, and Asian Immigrant Women's Advocates build on community organizing that focuses on workplace issues. This is significant for a number of reasons. It provides a space for workers to share experiences and discuss strategies outside of the repressive atmosphere of the workplace. In an economic context that seeks to individualize workers, the common identity that can be built in community organizing is extremely valuable. Furthermore, it provides an important link between workplace organizing and identity politics. While community identity is often centered around particular ethnic groups — Mexican, Filipino, Vietnamese, etc — linking workplace issues with these community ties both strengthens potential for labor action, and also helps to build bridges between potentially “tribalized” ethnic communities around common economic struggles. On a more theoretical level, community-labor ties bring together struggles in the spheres of production and reproduction. This is an essential step if the problems identified in the gender division of labor are ever to be effectively addressed.
- (2) **Breaking down public/private divisions** — All the innovative organizing efforts highlighted in this article depend to a large extent on public relations campaigns that tried to draw on public support, while also calling on elected officials to support fair employment practices in the industry. This is an essential struggle, and one in which traditional unions that focused on collective bargaining with a single employer were less likely to take up. When employer-employee relations are treated as a private matter, it weakens workers ability to organize. Furthermore, working conditions in the private sector have, of course, a profound impact on public sector policies. In the Justice for Janitors campaign, organizers

highlighted the social costs of employers not providing health care. The costs of poor health and safety practices in the workplace are also shouldered by society at large. It takes collective mobilization to ensure that existing regulations are enforced and that additional regulations are passed.

- (3) **Linking with a growing environmental justice movement** — Campaigns that link workplace safety and health issues with broader environmental concerns provide a link with the growing environmental justice movement. Workers in high-technology firms gained new allies by linking exposure to harmful chemicals at the workplace with toxic dumping that affects the community as a whole. The global environmental movement is probably the strongest social movement currently existing. The rise of a movement focusing specifically on the disproportionate impact of environmental pollution on poor communities and communities of color in the U.S. is also encouraging. Labor struggles that specifically link workplace issues with environmental concerns immediately gain important and strong allies.
- (4) **Targeting secondary employers** — A key focus of the Justice for Janitors campaign and the Campaign for Justice was the need to target secondary employers to take responsibility for working conditions of subcontracted employees. This will be an important strategy for confronting the problems associated with “flexible production”. Of course, the key ingredient in such a strategy is the ability to find a “lynch-pin” — a prominent company that does a lot of subcontracting and has a profile high enough and a financial base solid enough that it will not shut operations in the face of a unionization drive. On a more theoretical level, differing types of flexible production make a profound difference on the effectiveness of this strategy. In a situation where there is relatively little hierarchy of inter-connected firms, such a strategy is less effective. On the other hand, if there is a hierarchy of subcontracting, identifying the center of the subcontracting arrangements becomes easier and perhaps more effective. Silicon Valley is often talked about as an example of the former — a dense thicket of mostly small and medium-sized firms with relatively little concentration of power — as opposed to industrial relations in Japan, where industry groups are

more dominated by a financial *keiretsu* with more central control over subcontracting relations in the industry (Sayer and Walker 1992). However, Harrison argues that Silicon Valley was largely created by and remains profoundly dependent on major multinational corporations and on the fiscal and regulatory support of the national government, particularly the Department of Defense (Harrison 1994). In any case, while these typologies are over-simplifications of complex social phenomenon, they do help to think about the potential significance of targeting central secondary contractors, rather than trying to organize in separate subcontracting enterprises.

The innovative labor organizing efforts highlighted in this article are far from having a major influence on the living conditions of the major of low-wage workers in the region's high-tech workforce. They do, however, provide some encouraging signs about potential new innovations in labor organizing in the 'New Economy.'

¹ The quote forms the concluding statement in a remarkable study on immigrant women workers in Silicon Valley in the 1980s by Karen Hossfeld (1988).

² This section owes a great deal to Michael Eisenscher, both to his written paper (1993) and to a personal interview, 3/31/95. Eisenscher was a paid organizer for UE in Silicon Valley in the early 1980s

³ This section and the following section owe a great deal to interviews with two union organizers who were involved in the campaigns described: Catha Worthman and Jon Barton.

⁴ Public officials who attended included Congressman Norman Mineta, State Senator Alfred Alquist, County Supervisors Michael Honda and Zoe Lofgren, City of San Jose Councilmembers Blanca Alvarado and George Shirakawa, Sunnyvale Mayor Richard Napeir, representatives of the San Jose, Santa Clara and Cupertino city governments and Santa Clara County Supervisor Ron Gonzales, as well as representatives of the Santa Clara County Human Rights Commission and the San Jose Human Rights Commission [Martinez-Saldana 1993].

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