On May 1, 1886 hundreds of thousands of workers, many of them immigrants, struck across the USA for the eight-hour day, thereby setting the stage for what would become International Workers’ Day almost everywhere in the world – except, ironically, in North America. One hundred and twenty years later on May 1, 2006, millions of immigrant workers struck and demonstrated for the right to work without harassment in the United States. It was called ‘A Day Without Immigrants’, and many of the nation’s worst paying jobs would go unperformed for all or part of the day. If the estimates of five or six million participants are right, then perhaps as many as a quarter of the country’s 21 million foreign-born workers took action of some sort. Unlike May 1, 1886, unions did not call this action and played only a supportive role in it. Along with a series of ad hoc coalitions that called each of the demonstrations leading up to May 1 in March and April, the organizational backbone for May 1 was a network of some 600 advocacy and community organizations with strong backing from the Catholic Church. The turnout was all the more impressive because the organizers in different cities had different approaches. Some called for a boycott or stay-at-home, but others, like Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, warned potential demonstrators not to risk their jobs. Still, they turned out by the tens and hundreds of thousands in cities across the country.

Unions played a supporting role in these events. In Los Angeles, for example, they put up more than $80,000 and handled much of the logistics. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) leaders acted as liaison to the immigrant organizations and the Teamsters provided two 18-wheelers to lead off the march. Labour support was aided by a dramatic change of policy by the AFL-CIO in 2000 when they embraced the call for an amnesty.
for undocumented workers. This in turn had been preceded by a demonstration of 15,000 in Washington, DC called by the National Coalition for Dignity and Amnesty. Indeed, this Coalition had been holding demonstrations on May 1 since 1999. The growing interaction between immigrant groups and unions reached a new level when several unions went on to play a key role in the 2003 ‘Immigrant Workers’ Freedom Ride’, a caravan that crossed the country and ended in a mass demonstration in New York. This high visibility event helped to build confidence about going public with the issue of immigrants’ rights.

The actions on May 1, 2006 also revealed the often overlooked strategic position that immigrant workers have in many industries. The Mexican and Central American waterfront truckers in the nation’s largest port, Los Angeles/Long Beach, brought 90 per cent of that port’s activities to a standstill on May 1. The meat and poultry processing industry reported that 50 per cent of its operations across the country had been halted. The American Nursery and Landscaping Association said that 90 per cent of its workers struck, as did a similar percentage of workers in garden supply warehouses. Construction was also heavily hit in many areas as immigrant workers, like the California drywall hangers, walked out for the day. Thus May 1, 2006 showed not only the willingness and ability of immigrant workers to act on their own despite the high risk of job loss or even deportation, but also the strength of the immigrant workforce in significant parts of the US economy.

HARVEST OF EMPIRE

In the United States, where the immigrant population had declined in the 1950s and remained stagnant in the 1960s, the foreign-born population rose from 9.7 million in 1970 to 34.2 million in 2004, 21 million of whom were not yet citizens. By 2004, the employed foreign-born workforce had risen to over 20 million, composing 14.5 per cent of those employed in the US. Of these, 12 million were not citizens. By 2004 there were 11.6 million legal permanent resident immigrants (those with ‘green cards’) in the US. Of these 3.1 million were of Mexican origin, by far the largest group. The next largest groups were from the Philippines and India with half-a-million each; followed by China, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam, each at about 400,000. In addition, according to estimates by the Department of Homeland Security, which has replaced the Immigration and Naturalization Service in tracking and regulating immigration since 2002, there were 10.5 million ‘unauthorized’ or undocumented immigrants in the US as of January 2005. Over 80 per cent of these undocumented immigrants had arrived
since 1990. Some, however, put this ‘unauthorized’ immigration as high as 20 million by 2007.

The list of major countries of origin is suggestive of the most basic causes of such growth in immigration in recent years. With the exception of India, all of these countries have established trails of immigration that go back to US economic and/or military involvement in these nations. Mexico, China, Cuba and the Philippines go back to the initial period of US empire-building just over a hundred years ago, but also reflect, with the exception of Cuba, the deep contemporary involvement of US business in these areas. Korea, of course, entered the US orbit during the Korean War in the early 1950s. Vietnam and the Dominican Republic trace back to US military interventions, albeit on a very different scale, in the 1960s. El Salvador, Korea, and Cuba with 300,000 each, are all sites of US intervention within the last half century. In the cases of Mexico, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador, the correlation between the impact of globalization, US foreign policy, and accelerated emigration from those countries to the US is all too clear.

Like the Caribbean, Central America became part of the US ‘backyard’ after the Spanish–American War. By the 1920s, US business had more invested in all of Latin America, mostly in Central America and the Caribbean, than in Europe. It was mainly of US military intervention in this region that it could be said that ‘there was never a day from 1919 to 1933 when American marines did not intervene in or occupy the sovereign territory of another country’. After the Second World War this practice was resumed with interventions in the Western Hemisphere, sometimes covert, in Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1960), Brazil (1964), the Dominican Republic (1965), Chile (1973), Grenada (1983), and Panama (1989). In all but one case, Cuba, they were directed against elected officials or governments.

It wasn’t just military intervention, overt or covert, that pushed millions of Latin Americans from their homelands. It was that other favourite policy of Corporate America and virtually every administration of the last half century or more – free trade. ‘Free Trade’, as a policy, isn’t just about trade, it’s about opening all nations to investment by the big corporations. Because many nations developed their domestic industry by protecting it from imports and foreign ownership, free trade required that these nations abandon that development strategy. An opening was first found by US capital through the development of free trade zones (FTZs), in which government labour and safety regulations were largely suspended and corporations given a free hand. Next came the border development program in northern Mexico, with its maquiladora plants, in principle similar to a FTZ. In 1985, the Reagan Administration negotiated the Caribbean Basin Initiative, which opened
countries in the region to this type of investment. By 1992, there were 200 FTZs in Mexico and the Caribbean, housing more than 3,000 plants employing 735,000 workers. All of this was only a rehearsal for NAFTA, which did more of the same.15

This, however, was only one side of ‘free trade’. The other was investment by the banks in New York, London, etc, in the Third World. In Latin America this meant, above all, the New York City banks – Wall Street. When oil money poured into these banks in the early and mid-1970s they promoted low-interest loans to Third World countries. But then inflation and high interest rates took hold and by the early 1980s, countries throughout Latin America were increasingly unable to pay even the annual interest. What became known as the Debt Crisis became the lever by which the US and other industrial powers, with the help of the International Monetary Fund, not only ended barriers to their investment, but literally forced the redesign of many Third World economies.

Mexico was the prime example, and as a result of the neoliberal restructuring of the Mexican economy, average real wages dropped by 67 per cent from 1982 to 1991 and those of Mexico’s slightly better-paid industrial workers by 48 per cent. Before NAFTA was implemented four dollars a day became the wage along the Mexican border.16 Foreign investment in agriculture and plantation farming, another side of ‘free trade’, also served to drive millions off the land in Mexico (as well as across Central America and the Caribbean) with no hope of work in their own lands. So, Mexican legal immigration into the US rose from 640,294 in the 1970s to 1,655,843 in the 1980s, 3,541,700 in the 1990s, and 876,823 from 2001 through 2005.17

ECONOMIC IMPACT

The economic importance of immigrant labour to the US economy is beyond doubt. Former Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall recently wrote:

Immigrants are particularly important to the US economy, accounting for over half of the workforce growth during the 1990s and 86 per cent of the increase in employment between 2000 and 2005. Because there will be no net increase in the number of prime-working-age natives (aged 25 to 54) for the next 20 years, the strength of the American economy could depend heavily on how the nation relates immigration to economic and social policy.18

Immigrant workers in the official economy are more heavily concentrated in services, construction, transportation and factory work than native-born
workers and on average they make 76 per cent of what the latter make.19

Millions work on the edges of recorded employment and in the growing informal economy for much less. So it is likely that wage levels in these industries were lower than if there had been a severe labour shortage pushing up the wages of native-born workers. While there is no way to measure this, the cost savings in industries such as food processing, consumer services and construction probably lowered the relative cost of living to some degree and rendered some industries more globally competitive than might otherwise have been the case. As in the last great wave of immigration from 1870 through 1920, the recent wave has no doubt contributed to the accumulation process within the US.

The question is raised, then, did this immigration have a negative impact on the wages of employed native-born workers? In any overall sense, the answer has to be no because the timing is wrong. Real weekly wages of production and non-supervisory workers began their descent in 1973, well before the major upswing in immigration numbers that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. The causes of that fall in wages were the recession of 1974-75, the ‘stagflation’ that followed into the 1980s, and the wage concessions that began nationally with the 1979 Chrysler bailout and spread throughout industry from the early 1980s onward. Furthermore, if there was to be an overall negative impact on wages, one would expect it to come in the wake of the enormous increase of immigration from the mid-1980s through the 1990s and beyond. This would presumably raise unemployment and depress wages. But, in fact, real weekly wages rose after 1995 through 2003. After that they did fall somewhat but then rose to a new high in early 2007.20 The pattern follows the contours of the economy rather than that of immigration. It is possible, nonetheless, that the huge proportion of immigrant workers in the growth of the workforce after 2000 had the statistical effect of flattening the overall average wage level even if it did not impact the wages of already employed workers.

Competition for jobs between immigrants and natives is blunted by the ‘ethnic niche’ or ‘queue’ phenomenon.21 That is, immigrant and other low-wage workers are entering jobs abandoned by other groups, often as a result of industrial or occupational restructuring, so that ‘significant African American labour market niches in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, and Chicago in 1970 and 1990 showed an overall pattern of succession, as opposed to competition between African Americans and Immigrants… there is no direct evidence to show competition between African American and immigrant workers’.22
It would be naïve, however, to deny that there is some level of competition between newer immigrant groups and other working-class people. Like jobs, space in cities is finite and the transition from one group to another in a given neighbourhood is full of friction. An organizer for the worker center Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment (CAFÉ) said of his mainly African American members, ‘What I kept hearing was that Hispanics are taking over the neighborhood’. While he stated that they exaggerated, there was a problem of friction. While employment levels are more flexible, there can be friction here too. Yet what appears to be the case is that there is a strong tendency today, as there was over a hundred years ago, for the various ethnic immigrant groups to concentrate in particular occupations or industries in a given geographic region where jobs were being or had been abandoned by native-born workers. So in Los Angeles, for example, building maintenance workers are heavily Mexican and Central American, as are dry wall installers, and truckers on the waterfront. In New York, Latino immigrants are found in greengrocer stores and restaurant kitchens, but also in construction, while Indians and Pakistanis are found driving cabs, Chinese and Latino women in garage sweat shops in New York and Los Angeles, etc. In these cases, there is little evidence of competition with other groups of workers.

IMMIGRANT WORKERS AND TRADE UNIONS

According to the Migration Policy Institute’s estimate, 1.8 million foreign-born workers belonged to unions in 2003, up from 1.4 million in 1996, increasing as a proportion of union membership from 8.9 per cent to 11.5 per cent in that period. The rapid increase in the proportion of foreign-born union members was due in part to the decline in membership among native-born workers. Ruth Milkman has shown that ‘recent immigrants (those arriving in 1990 or later) are the least likely to be unionized, whereas those who have been in the United States the longest (arriving before 1980) have unionization levels roughly double those of newcomers, and in California over four times as great’. She goes on to say, ‘In fact, for the nation’s most settled immigrants, union membership is as likely – and for most subgroups more likely – as for native workers’. In other words, as time goes on and immigrants become more accustomed to their new home, establish documented status, or become citizens, they are as or more likely to join or organize a union than native-born Americans. The outpouring of millions of immigrant workers on May 1, 2006 was certainly a signal that they will fight for a better life even in the face of repression and possible job-loss. These signs are extremely important as they can lay the basis for current and future organizing. Although US unions have a history of anti-foreign attitudes and
practices, that has begun to change. In addition, immigrants are already attempting to organize in a variety of ways. The question is, are the strategies and structures of today’s unions fit for the job? Are they even looking at some of the immigrant groups with the most potential bargaining power?

If the carefully planned and centrally directed 1990 Justice with Janitors strike was one of the first strikes by non-agricultural immigrant workers to capture public attention, the 1992 strikes by some 4,000 drywall hangers in Southern California pointed to something new. That strike was initiated and sustained by the immigrant workers themselves. While they would receive support from the Carpenters and eventually join that union, the immigrant construction workers organized and led the strike on their own terms, closing down the residential construction industry in much of southern California for five months. This was a piece of the residential construction industry that had gone non-union, like that in the rest of the country. In 1992, striking on their own, these drywallers would bring back the union – a union that had given up organizing this industry years before and was at first reluctant to bring the drywallers under contract. The organization of the strike initially came from immigrants from the town of El Maguey, Mexico, several hundred of whom worked in the industry. This pattern would be repeated in countless other strikes and organizing drives.

The uniting of workers from the same place in new communities and in the same work had re-established links long broken for many native-born workers. The connection of common origin, shared neighbourhood or community, and work provides a source of strength for immigrant organization in many cases. It had been a factor in the 1990s Justice for Janitors campaign. It also helps explain much of the self-organization that has taken place among immigrant workers. This was seen, for instance, in southern California where waterfront trucking, like building services and construction, had gone through a major restructuring in which Teamster members had been replaced by independent owner-operators in declining conditions in the 1980s. Once again, Latino immigrants filled the void. In 1988 and again in 1993, the Latino truckers had struck with only informal organization. Though further organization was largely initiated by the workers themselves, Communications Workers of America Local 9400 offered to help. As owner-operators and independent contractors, the truckers had no statutory rights to unionize or strike. Together, however, they planned a complex strategy that involved the creation of an ‘employer’ and, in 1996, a strike. Unlike the drywallers strike, the truckers efforts failed, largely due to the massive efforts of the truck contractors and extensive legal barriers, but the potential of self-organization had shown itself once again. The fight of the waterfront
truckers, however, didn’t end in the 1990s. In 2004 and 2005 they would strike again over government harassment and fuel prices. Then on May 1, 2006, the ‘Day Without Immigrants’, they struck along with millions of others, once again closing the port of Los Angeles/Long Beach.

This transformation from formerly unionized workers to owners or drivers who leased their equipment was common to other areas of transportation as well. Across the country in New York, both the taxi and ‘Black Car’ or limousine services had been reorganized so that the fleet drivers ceased to be employees and became independent contractors who now had to lease their cars. In both cases, the immigrant drivers who filled these new contracted positions organized themselves to resist the near-poverty earnings they made and the long hours they worked to make them. Taxi drivers who had been employees earning a percentage of ‘the meter’ until the 1970s now had to lease their cab and pay for their own fuel. They literally spent the first few hours of each day working off their daily lease-fee. Most of the drivers were now Indian or Pakistani. In 1998, they transformed an older ethnically-based group into the New York Taxi Workers Alliance open to all yellow cab drivers. In May 1998, the new organization surprised the city when virtually all 24,000 working cab drivers struck for 24 hours. Although as independent contractors they have no collective bargaining rights, they have functioned as a union ever since with about 5,000 actual members. They scored an enormous victory in 2004 when they negotiated a fare increase with the city, with 70 per cent of the increase going to the drivers.

The city’s 12,000 ‘Black Car’ drivers worked for fleets that serve corporate customers who want the elegant cars for their executives and clients. But, like the taxi drivers, they were independent contractors who had to lease these cars. After paying their lease fees and other expenses they make between $4.00 and $6.00 an hour. Most are South Asians, but there are also East Asians and Central Americans. In 1995, they began organizing themselves. In this case, through an acquaintance they approached District 15 of the International Association of Machinists which allowed the drivers to organize and lead their own local, Machinists’ Lodge 340. In an unusual turn of events that does not seem to have been picked up by other unions, the Machinists won a National Labor Relations Board case in 1997 which declared the drivers employees. In 1999, Lodge 340 won its first contract with one of the major companies. Resistance from employers was intense and, because many drivers were Muslims, so was harassment by the Federal government after 9/11. Nevertheless, by 2005, Lodge 340 had 1,000 dues-paying members. The effort to organize the whole industry continues.
Unfortunately, unions are not always this attentive to those who try to organize themselves. When the mostly Mexican workers in New York’s green-grocery stores began to organize themselves in the 1990s, they were at first helped by UNITE Local 169. In a jurisdictional dispute, however, they were passed on to United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 1500 which, by most accounts, was not particularly attentive to the needs of these immigrant workers. A similar case occurred with UFCW Local 338 in New York with African grocery store delivery workers who had also organized themselves before approaching the union.  

The phenomenon of common origin, community and work doesn’t only occur in big cities. The example of the Guatemalan workers at the Case Farms poultry plant in Morganton, North Carolina shows that it can work in a semi-rural area as well. These workers, Mayas from the same areas of Guatemala, composed the majority of the 500 workers in this plant. As in most poultry plants, the conditions were horrible and unsafe and in 1993 these workers staged a brief strike. The Laborers’ International Union would help them through another strike in 1995 and on to union recognition. What was clear, however, was that the union found an organized group of workers. As one union representative put it, ‘We didn’t organize anybody. There was a union there before the union got there.’ Unfortunately, neither the workers nor the Laborers’ Union were able to force a first contract on the company. Rather than simply abandoning the Case workers, the Laborers agreed to fund the formation of a worker center that would address the problems of the many Central American workers in that part of North Carolina.  

If it is true that union organizing among immigrants is often enabled by the overlap of place of national or ethic origin, shared neighbourhood or community, as well as common work, it should come as no surprise that much of the organizing that goes on among immigrants is community-based. This includes a very broad range of organizations providing services, advocacy, legal rights, education, political mobilization and policy development. As we saw above, hundreds of such organizations were involved in the massive mobilization of May 1, 2006. Many of these organizations serve or ‘do for’ immigrants and are run by middle-class professionals focusing on broad issues of immigrant rights or social welfare. What concerns us here are those organizations that organize immigrant workers with a focus on their work.

WORKER CENTERS

Worker centers differ from other community-based organizations in that they focus mainly, though not exclusively, on workplace issues. Most of them engage in a combination of service-delivery, advocacy, leadership training
and organizing. All four functions tend to focus on issues related to work: pay and failure to pay, health and safety, immigration status, various employment rights. It is the organizing function and leadership development, however, that give worker centers the potential to play an important role in the development of unionization and a broader social and political movement. As community-based organizations they are geographically bound. Most of the workplaces or jobs in which their members are employed are within or near the communities. In some cases, like those of day labourers or farm workers where the work itself may be distant, the center focuses on sites where workers obtain jobs (street corners, contractors, or agencies). In almost all cases it is the employer-employee relationship, the reality of exploitation, that gives the worker center its significance.

The worker center phenomenon grows out of many of the changes in work itself that have taken place in the last thirty or so years, some of which were described earlier. Subcontracting, sweatshops, the fast-expanding food service and hospitality industries, relocated/de-unionized industries, new retailers giant and small, and the growth of ‘off-the-books’ work in the informal economy. All of these sources of employment have in common low wages, poor benefits, and workers of colour. Increasingly the latter are also immigrants. By 2005 there were by one count 137 workers centers, 122 of which dealt specifically with immigrant workers. In terms of the regions of origin of those immigrant workers who participate in worker centers about 40 per cent come from Mexico and Central America, another 18 per cent from South America, 15 per cent each from East Asia and the Caribbean, 8 per cent from Africa, 3 per cent from Europe, and 1 per cent from the rest of Asia. In terms of their region of settlement in the US, worker centers reflect concentrations of immigration: 41 are in the Northeast; 36 on the West Coast; 34 in the South; 17 in the East North Central region; and the rest scattered around the West. Almost 80 per cent of the workers involved are immigrants. The relatively large number in the South tells us something about the geographic distribution of reorganized and subcontracted industries such as food processing and automobile parts production.

The rise of worker centers has followed the rhythm of both work reorganization and of immigration and has come in three waves. The first group began in the late 1970s and early 1980s initiated by politically-minded activists with some connection to union organization. One of the first was the Chinese Staff and Workers Association (CSWA) in New York City’s Chinatown. CSWA was born out of a 1978 drive by Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) Local 69 to organize the city’s Chinese restaurants. Workers joined Local 69 but became disillusioned with the neglect
they experienced. In 1979, those at Chinatown’s huge Silver Palace voted to form their own union with the support of what became the CSWA. Others soon followed suit. CSWA organizers linked the independent unions to the community and went on to help workers not in unions as well and to deal with other neighbourhood issues such as housing. One of their organizers explained their view of organizing: ‘By organize, we don’t just mean joining the union. We see the union as a means to organize something greater… We organize where we live and work’.36

A number of other worker centers were formed around this time. La Mujer Obrera (the Woman Worker) in El Paso, Texas grew out of a garment workers strike at Farah Clothing. Formed in 1981, it focused on women in the small garment shops on the border after the big outfits like Farah folded up or moved across the border and the unions left the area. Not all of these women workers are immigrants. Many are citizens whose families have been there for decades or more, in areas overlapping the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo on the Mexican side) that forms the border. The Black Workers for Justice, based in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, came out of a fight against discrimination at K-MART. This is an African American organization in an industrializing area of the South’s ‘Black Belt’. It brought together workers from many of the plants in and around Rocky Mount on a community-wide basis.37 Black Workers for Justice, CSWA and La Mujer Obrera set the pattern of community-based worker organization for most of those that came after. Another organization that began as part of the first wave was the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAV) in New York City formed in the 1980s to defend Asian women in particular. In addition to that work, the CAAV would spin-off at least two other organizations that would form part of the third wave of worker centers: the Lease Driver Coalition that became the New York Taxi Workers Alliance discussed above, and the Domestic Workers Union.38

The second wave came from the late 1980s through the mid-1990s. Many of these were driven by the wave of immigration from Central America as people fled the wars, death squads and counter-revolutions that were largely the result of US foreign policy in the region.39 One of the earliest second wave worker centers was the Workplace Project based on suburban Long Island, New York. Founded in 1992, the Workplace Project was a spin-off of a Central American Immigrant service organization. The Workplace Project organized among those working in this suburban area’s restaurant, construction, landscaping and house-keeping jobs. Many of these workers were undocumented and were being paid well below the minimum wage. Often they worked as day labourers, gathering on street corners to be picked up by
potential employers. The Project began by taking legal cases to gain unpaid wages, a common problem for immigrants. But the Project’s founder, Jennifer Gordon, realized this was not increasing the power or security of the workers. So, the Project hired Omar Henriquez, a Salvadoran, to help the workers organize to press their claims collectively, learning from CSWA and La Mujer Obrera. In particular, day labourers who gathered on certain street corners organized and demanded a common wage and succeeded in increasing their earnings significantly.40

Another second wave worker center is Make The Road By Walking located in Brooklyn’s Bushwick neighbourhood, one of New York’s poorest. With new waves of immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, Bushwick became a predominately Latino area. Make The Road is a multi-issue organization dealing with housing, education, community development and even Gay and Lesbian issues as well as workplace problems.41 The heart of its organizing program is Tabajadores en Acción, which focuses on local garment sweatshops and the area’s retail stores which employ mostly immigrants at notoriously low wages. Like other workers centers, one of its main activities is recovering unpaid wages. In one year, they recovered $200,000 in back wages.42 At one store, MiniMax, as organizer Deborah Axt explained: ‘We won $65,000 in back wages. More importantly, though, was that the women were organizing to change the conditions of the workers who are there now. We were able to win paid sick days, an FMLA [Family Medical Leave Act] kind of coverage, and public posting of legal and workplace rights’.43 Make The Road also worked with the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union to successfully organize a small athletic shoe chain, Footco, winning their first contract in January 2006.44

The third wave of worker centers came after 2000, and more of these were connected to unions than in the past.45 One example is the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) set up in the wake of 9/11 by workers from the Windows on the World restaurant in the World Trade Center. Under pressure from displaced workers, HERE Local 100, to which the workers belonged, asked former workers to set up the ROC as a self-help effort in 2002. Soon, however, it became an organizing project willing to work with those in restaurants the union hadn’t approached in the past. Like other worker centers it helped non-union workers win back pay, paid days off, lunch breaks and other improvements. ROC has its own Board composed mostly of immigrant workers, but still maintains a relationship with HERE Local 100, which acts as ROC’s fiscal sponsor.46 In part, ROC sustained itself by acting as a catering cooperative, but in 2005 it set up its own full service restaurant, ‘Colors’. Another third wave organization is the Domestic Workers Union
based primarily in Brooklyn among a very broad base of immigrant groups. In 2003, the DWU succeeded in winning a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights from the New York City Council, requiring agencies to spell out terms and condition of employment and the actual employer to sign an agreement to those terms.\footnote{47}

No account of worker centers would be complete without reference to the Coalition of Immokolee Workers (CIW) founded in 1995. CIW differs from most worker centers in that it is rural and based mostly on farm labour, though workers from other low-wage industries also belong. Immokolee is a dirt poor town in the midst of Florida’s tomato fields. CIW members come mostly from Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti. Although it is not affiliated with either the United Farm Workers or the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and does not regard itself as a union, it has used the same tactic as those unions to make its major gains: the boycott. In fact, CIW has used a number of tactics in its efforts to get Taco Bell, purchaser of most of the tomatoes they pick, to pay a penny more per pound – enough to double their wages. They have organized three strikes in the area, held a 30-day hunger strike in 2003, and marched 240 miles across Florida to make their point. Some of these actions produced wage increases. It was, however, the boycott that finally won the amazing victory of several hundred farm workers over Taco Bell and its parent, fast food giant Yum Brands, which also owns Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, Long John Silver’s and A&W. Like the UFW and FLOC boycotts before it, the CIW’s Taco Bell boycott got widespread support from other organizations, including Jobs with Justice, church groups and unions. Student ‘Boot the Bell’ campaigns got Taco Bell kicked off of 22 campuses by the time of the victory.

Key to the CIW’s going national with their campaign was the network of other worker centers around the country. This reminds us that worker centers are becoming a nation-wide force. What CIW won with this support would affect more than their own members. Yum agreed to double the percentage of the tomatoes’ price going to the workers by a ‘pass-through’ increase in what it pays. Taco Bell agreed to buy only from growers who agree to the ‘pass-through’. An enforceable code of conduct for fast food industry suppliers, with the CIW as a monitoring organization, was also part of the agreement. With the victory of the Immokolee workers and others that came before like the Asian Women’s Immigrant Association’s victory of Jessica McClintock in the 1990s, worker centers have staked a claim as part of the American labour movement.\footnote{48}
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF WORKER CENTERS

Worker centers are an important addition to working-class organization in the US, but like the unions they have their limits and structural problems. First, they are small. Most of those that are membership groups have 500 or fewer members. Perhaps more important is the matter of social power. Steve Jenkins, who was an organizer for Make the Road, argued that shared injustice does not necessarily mean shared social power. Unlike unions, the centers cannot stop production. They can exercise social power through rent strikes or civil disobedience, but their power over workplace issues, which is a major focus and purpose, is limited to appealing to governmental units or agencies and other elite institutions. Whether lobbying city hall for housing improvements or going to the courts or state agencies for back pay, there is a strong tendency for the workers to be dependent on professionals – organizers, lawyers, etc. Most of these centers are also dependent on foundation grants, which means dependency on the priorities of foundation officials and boards, and on those who are best at writing grant proposals. Thus, community-based groups tend to be dependent on staffers who are frequently, though not exclusively, drawn from the educated middle class.

Viewed only in the terms in which worker centers and similar community-based groups define themselves and act today, these limits are real. But it is possible that in a period of more general social upsurge they can become a source of broader mobilization. The power of the poor, as most past upheavals show, lies in three areas: the disruption of business as usual; organization into and/or alliance with other working class organizations, notably unions; and in political action by virtue of numbers. The first, analyzed by Piven and Cloward, is the traditional recourse of the poor whether in the form of urban disorder, concerted civil disobedience, rent strikes, even mass workplace strikes. The 1960s provided many examples of this. The second, unionization or alliances with unions, is trickier. There is a history of tension between many workers centers and unions they have tried to work with. As one ROC leader put it in terms of the HERE, the union ‘seems to have trouble letting go’.

Unions as bureaucratic institutions don’t like sharing power with risky or unfamiliar groups. Yet there are also many examples of cooperation between the two. And while many unions prefer to ignore low-wage workers, many of the recent gains have in fact been among low-wage workers with no central workplace, such as home health care workers in New York as well as in California. Once again, the context is crucial and periods of more general resistance and upsurge offer greater possibilities, as do changes in union practices and perspectives. Jenkins, despite his criticisms, also notes:
Workers centers are an oasis of support and useful services for workers facing inhumane working conditions and have few other resources available to them. Many are playing a central role in developing linkages between progressive unions and community-based organizing efforts that have the potential to strengthen both organizing arenas. It is possible that this will open up new strategies for organizing workers that improve upon traditional union-organizing models by broadening workplace struggles to involve the working class communities.51

A good example of just that was the successful campaign to organize four big meatpacking plants in Omaha, Nebraska. The meatpacking industry had been drastically reorganized, the unions broken, and its new plants filled by recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America. It was the Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), a faith-based community organization affiliated with the Alinsky-inspired Industrial Areas Foundation, that first took notice of the plight of the packinghouse workers. In 1999 they held a mass demonstration of 1,200 people to protest these conditions. The OTOC, as a worker center, could spread the word and protest, but by itself it lacked the power to change things. Eventually, they decided that a union was needed and a joint plan with the Food and Commercial Workers union to organize 4,000 workers was announced in June 2000. With OTOC mobilizing the community as well as recruiting workers, the campaign was a success. This was a huge boost for the UFCW and a demonstration that this sort of alliance can bear fruit. There were, however, problems once the union began negotiating the contract. Basically, as we have seen before, the union officials didn’t really listen to the workers. The contract they negotiated neglected many of the workers’ most heart-felt workplace issues, or the question of immigration status.52 There is a gap between the culture of most unions and many worker centers that needs to be addressed. In particular, union officials and staff need to see worker centers as part of the same movement, but with unique functions.

Perhaps the UFCW leaders have learned something from this. In 2003, they set up a worker center in North Carolina as part of their long-term effort to organize the 5,500-worker Smithfield hog-processing plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina. About 60 per cent of the workforce are Latino immigrants and the UFCW has made a long term commitment. Drawing on community leaders and activists, the union called a May 1, 2006 rally and 5,000 people from many plants and communities showed up. Most plants had to shut down production for the day. In June, rallies were held in seven
cities around the country. Here is where the union, the worker center, other community-based groups, and the national upsurge of immigrant workers came together.\textsuperscript{53}

The organization of the May 1, 2006 ‘Day Without Immigrants’ reflected this strength. ‘The Great American Boycott’, as it was also called, was done largely city-by-city, town-by-town by local coalitions of worker centers, advocacy and grassroots organizations, with the Catholic Church also playing a key role in many places and unions in some. Even ‘The’ Church was divided between the hierarchy who cautioned against strikes and consumer boycotts and the parish priests in the immigrant communities who were caught up in the spirit of resistance. To be sure, the calendarized coalitions (March 10, March 25, April 9, May 1) that called the national actions and brought 600 organizations together to meet just before May 1 were galvanized in part by the Republican-dominated Congress, whose Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 was a massive threat to all immigrants. The outpouring of May Day killed that bill.\textsuperscript{54}

Success, however, soon brought new problems. For one thing, the Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) waged a fierce crackdown on undocumented workers. For another, the movement lost the single focus of 2006. With softer bills appearing even before the newly elected Democratic Congress convened, the movement began to divide over support for new legislation. WE ARE AMERICA, led by the SEIU, UNITE-HERE, and several liberal advocacy groups, supported the Kennedy-McCain bill with its guest-worker provisions. The National Alliance for Immigrant Rights (NAIR), formed in August 2006 by mostly grassroots organizations, opposes any guest worker program or repressive immigration enforcement. Along with older rights groups such as the Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, it will continue to fight for the legalization of all immigrants.\textsuperscript{55} Lacking a national focus and organizational push, the turnout on May 1, 2007 was much smaller. The biggest turnout was in Chicago where estimates ran from 150,000 by police to 250,000 by the organizers. Los Angeles saw two separate demonstrations draw 100,000 each, while in New York two feeder marches brought an estimated 20,000 to Union Square. Altogether, the LA-based Immigrant Solidarity Network estimated that about half a million people in more than 100 cities and towns across the US demonstrated on that day.\textsuperscript{56} Had this been the first such demonstration, it might well have been seen as a remarkable turnout, but it was put in the shadow of the brilliant success of the 2006 May Day mobilization.
Nevertheless, it is clear that immigrant workers will play a major role in the revitalization of organized labour in the US. In August 2006, the AFL-CIO took a significant step toward greater unity of trade unions and worker centers when they reached an agreement with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, a nation-wide network of community-based day labour organizations, that would allow workers centers to affiliate with state and local labour councils. In late 2006, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance announced that it would affiliate with that city’s Central Labor Council. These moves follow on other local efforts at cooperation between unions and workers centers, such as those described above and that between the Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance and building trades’ Ironworkers Local 416 in Los Angeles in order to bring more immigrants into the union. These recent developments represent a new direction in the way at least some of organized labour in the US sees itself.

On the other hand, it is important that the worker centers be understood in the context of a broader labour movement of which they are one piece. Like unions trying new ways to organize and still not making huge breakthroughs, they need to be seen for their potential as much as for their current achievements and limitations. They are a potential training ground for groups of workers who are finding their own leaders and voicing their own demands and concerns. One measure of their potential is their survival rate as organizations. In a political atmosphere where most of the mass social movements have faded, unions have lost members and power, and politics has largely been unfavourable to working-class people in general and immigrants in particular, even the oldest of the worker centers have survived and thrived, while new ones have arisen to challenge this atmosphere.

NOTES

1 The demonstration in Chicago spilled over into support for locked-out workers at a major farm-implements factory, followed by pitched battles between picketers and scabs, the shooting of two workers by police, and a subsequent protest rally in Haymarket Square – where policemen fired indiscriminately at the crowd after a bomb was tossed into the police ranks. Eight anarchist leaders were arrested, tried and sentenced to death (three were later pardoned). These events triggered international protests, and in 1889 the first congress of the new socialist parties associated with the Second International called on workers everywhere to join in an annual one-day strike on May 1st – not so much to demand specific reforms as an annual demonstration of labour solidarity and working-class power. May Day was both a product of, and an element in, the rapid growth of new mass working-class parties of Europe – which soon forced official recognition by employers and governments of this ‘workers’ holiday’.
But the American Federation of Labor, chastened by the ‘red scare’ that followed the Haymarket events, went along with those who opposed May Day observances. Instead, in 1894, the AFL embraced President Grover Cleveland’s decree that the first Monday of September would be the annual ‘Labor Day’ – and Canada soon followed suit.


5 *Labor Notes*, #253, April 2000, pp. 1, 14 and #273, December 2001, pp. 15, 16.


8 The 1965 Hart–Cellars Act ended the highly discriminatory national quota system and opened the door, within limits, to Third World immigration, particularly for those with sought-after skills or relatives in the US.


23 Ibid., p. 67.


27 Ibid., p. 111.


32 Ibid., pp. 58–129.


35 Ibid., pp. 7–21.


39 Ibid., pp. 10–11.


45 Fine, *Worker Centers*, p. 11.


Lavor Notes, #329, August 2006, pp. 10-11.


Ibid., p. 9.


Labor Notes, #334, January 2007, pp. 1, 14.