

Strengthening the Voice of California's New Workers:

Labor and Community Efforts to Improve Worker Health and Safety

By Marcos Vargas and Paul Ong

**The Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies
University of California, Los Angeles**

October 10, 2001

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements to the following for their contributions: The California Wellness Foundation, Future of Work and Health Research Project Co-Principal Investigator, June McMahon, The Institute of Industrial Relations; Research Assistants and Case Study Authors: Rena Wong, Andrea Tinsley, Andrew Graham, Thuong Mong Ha, Canek Pena-Vargas, Irene Pena, Dan Mitchell, Carol Ojeda, Shannon McConville and Terry Valen; staff members, Julia Heintz-Mackoff and Hien McKnight; Advisory Committee members: Wellford Wilms, Lucie Cheng, Maurice Zeitlin, Dan Mitchell, Christopher Erickson, Evy Blumenberg, Abel Valenzuela, Arleen Leibowitz, all the union and CBO representatives for their participation in the research surveys and interviews; and Leo Estrada and Glen Omatsu for the comments and suggestions.

Disclaimer: Neither the University of California, the School of Public Policy and Social Research nor the Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies either support or disavow the findings in any project, report, paper, or research listed herein. University affiliations are for identification only; the University is not involved in or responsible for the project.

Introduction

This research project is based on the belief that public policy must respond to the problems of how changes in the new economy adversely affect the health of workers and their families. Despite California's recent business boom, structural changes are reproducing low-wage and contingent employment and increasing worker health and safety risks. A growing segment of California's working families is struggling simply to make ends meet, and minorities and immigrants are disproportionately over-represented in this labor market niche. Other research has documented the link between work and health, and their findings have enlightened elected officials and other decision-makers to take corrective action. More, however, needs to be done so the problems are adequately addressed. In our political economy, societal institutions can and must play a role in promoting better public policy, and organizations that provide a collective voice for workers are central to improving work conditions and access to health care.

This failure of California's new economy to help those at the bottom of the economic ladder has prompted organized labor and community-based organizations (CBOs) to address these problems through grassroots organizing and legislative advocacy. Along with collective bargaining, unions are pursuing new forms of labor/management partnerships to promote worker health and safety, and CBOs are going beyond traditional social services in response to work-related problems, particularly those encountered by people at the margins of the economy. Among the most promising innovations are those based on new regional and local alliances among organized labor, ethnic, faith, and environmentally-based organizations.

The Study

This project, entitled *The Growing Role of Labor and Community in the Future of Work and Health*, provides insights into how these two societal institutions have acted independently and collaboratively to strengthen the collective voice of workers to improve the health of California's working families. The project has been made possible by a research grant from the

California Wellness Foundation and support from UCLA's Institute of Industrial Relations and Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies. The study draws its data primarily from a five-county survey of 214 California-based labor union locals and CBOs, as well as interviews and participant observations used to conduct eight case studies.

The unions in the survey are not a random sample representative of all California unions, but they do cover key economic sectors. Sixty percent are in the private sector, and 40 percent are in the public sector. Locals in Los Angeles County represent over one-half of the total unions surveyed, followed by Alameda (16 percent), Fresno (13 percent), Ventura (11 percent), and Orange (7 percent).

The sample of CBOs includes organizations that are most likely to work with working families - including many minorities and immigrants. Forty-two percent of the sample is comprised of Latino CBOs, and 23 percent is comprised of Asian Pacific Islanders CBOs. Nearly half of those surveyed are direct service providers (45 percent), and a third are involved in advocacy, planning and policy (34 percent). With two-thirds of all CBOs engaged in some form of advocacy and organizing activities, the most frequent advocacy and organizing activities are coalition building (72 percent), taking a public position on a specific issue (71 percent), grassroots mobilization (49 percent) and popular education (45 percent).

The questionnaires are designed to capture information on the basic characteristics of California labor unions and CBOs, their members and clients, and their strategies. The questions in the union survey are organized into eleven categories, including: local union background, health plans, health and safety issues, participation in policy debates, labor/community cooperation, immigration, technological change, union/management cooperation, organizing, government agencies, propositions and general working conditions. Similarly, the CBO survey questions are categorized as: organizational background, community organizing and development activities, labor-related activities, health care/environmental/ or worker health and safety issues, and organizational development.

The study includes eight case studies on collaborative strategies undertaken by unions and CBOs to impact worker health and safety. The case studies provide a more detailed analysis of the challenges and lessons learned from particular examples of labor/community collaboration to address worker health and safety issues. They also provide the political context within which these collaborations have been undertaken. Case study topics were chosen with input from the study's UCLA faculty advisory committee and the project's research staff. They involved interviews, as well as secondary data sources, and topic literature reviews. The interviews for the case studies included organizing staff, consultants, volunteers and other practitioners who participated directly in collaborative activities to impact health and safety problems affecting workers. Case study topics included: Agricultural Workers and Pesticide Health Hazards, Teachers Unions and Violence on Public School Campuses, Labor/Community Living Wage Campaigns, Joint Worker-Management efforts at Kaiser Health, Environmental Justice, Immigrant Worker Centers, Union participation in Single Payer Health Legislation, and Union and CBO Welfare-to-Work Policy Advocacy.

Union Efforts

Despite a thirty-year decline in membership, organized labor remains an important institution whose goals include protecting worker health and safety. Survey data and the case studies show that unions recognize that the dramatic transformation of the economy simultaneously threatens the ability of workers to act collectively and offers new opportunities to address the concerns and needs of workers. Organized labor has recently been able to stop the secular decline in membership and has experienced a moderate increase. California leads the nation, with a net gain of 132,000, increasing from 2,154,000 to 2,286,000 in 1999 alone, representing 17 percent of the state's workforce.¹ The gain is due partly to organizing drives targeting low-wage service sectors dominated by recent immigrants. Reflecting a dramatic reversal in organized labor's generally anti-immigrant public policy

and organizing stands, a significant number of unions are placing the issue of immigrant rights near the top of their political and social action agenda, as represented in over one quarter of the unions surveyed.

Since the 1948 federal court ruling upholding the National Labor Relations Board's ruling requiring employers to bargain on "other conditions of employment" other than wages and hours, organized labor has placed health coverage of workers as a priority in its negotiations. This is true for unions in California, which is an appropriate trend given that the state has the nation's fourth highest number of uninsured. Of those unions surveyed, eight-in-ten stated that they would be addressing health benefits in their next round of negotiations, and six-in-ten ranked health benefits over wages as the most important issue.

Not only do workers in these new jobs have no health insurance, but even union workers are seeing a real threat to their benefits...

Union official, Living wage case study.

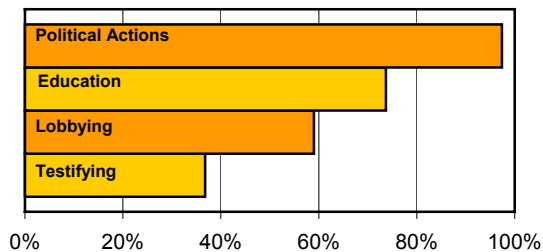
One area of concern is the cost of health coverage. Employers have responded to increasing costs by increasing employee co-payments for premiums, adopting plans with higher deductibles, and using providers that pursue cost containment. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that an overwhelming majority of the labor contracts (85 percent) include health maintenance organizations (HMOs), while only half include fee-for-service plans. Of the unions surveyed, over two-thirds (73 percent) have health plans where the worker pays a portion of the premiums. Two-thirds of the unions surveyed identify the rising cost of health care as the greatest barrier to worker health and safety. Because of these concerns and the financial burden on members, the issue of health cost and coverage have become increasingly central to current and upcoming rounds of contract negotiations.

Efforts to improve the well-being of union members go beyond the bargaining table. Nearly half (46 percent) of the unions surveyed indicated involvement in health and safety

initiatives with employers which are not explicitly in collective bargaining agreements. Seven-in-ten of the unions surveyed are currently engaged in some form of partnership with employers, and six-in-ten participate in joint safety and health committees, the most common form of cooperative union/management initiatives. An example is these partnerships involves America's largest not-for-profit health maintenance organization, Kaiser Permanente, and its unions, representing 60,000 workers, including memberships of AFSCME, AFT, and SEIU. The goals include making Kaiser a better place to work, involving employees and their unions in decisions, as well as assisting Kaiser to improve health care for its members, and in achieving and maintaining market profitability.

While collective bargaining and improving on-the-job conditions remain the principal means used to address health and safety, unions have pursued political action and legislative advocacy to improve conditions for workers. Sixty-four percent of the unions surveyed indicated that their local or international is involved in the broader policy debate around issues of health care for workers. While much of labor's advocacy focuses on the needs of existing members, the programs supported by unions also benefit the unorganized workforce. Examples include organized labor's support for a single-payer universal health system, ergonomics standards, a higher minimum wage, and work safety regulations.

Graph 1: Union Steps to Improve Worker Health and Safety



Nearly half (46 percent) of the unions surveyed have participated directly in efforts to pass living wage ordinances, which would cover both union and non-union workers.

One of the major challenges facing organized labor is reaching the growing immigrant labor force.² While nearly a third of the state's workers are foreign-born, only a fifth of union members are. This underrepresentation is due to a number of factors, including a high concentration of immigrants in hard to organize industries, characterized by a preponderance of small firms, high turnovers, low-skill requirements and pervasive competition. Unions have attempted to address this problem, and half of those surveyed have engaged in campaigns to organize immigrant workers and have advocated for laws and policies to protect the rights of immigrants.

Emerging CBO Sector

In recent years ethnic and multiethnic CBOs have emerged as an important voice for California's growing minority and immigrant population and workforce. Immigration has redefined the Golden State. With the renewal of large-scale immigration from the Far East and Mexico, and the influx of refugees and those seeking asylum from Southeast Asia and Central America and Mexico, California has become a state where no single racial group is in the majority. These same demographic forces have also transformed the labor force. In 1970, only one-in-ten workers was foreign-born, and by the latter part of the 1990s, three-in-ten were foreign-born.³ The CBO sector has responded to these changes. According to *Anuario Hispano/Hispanic Yearbook*, a comprehensive directory of Latino community organizations, the California-based Latino CBOs listed in their directory grew approximately 55 percent between 1990 and 1995 and 24 percent from 1995 to 2000.³ Similarly, UCLA's Asian American Studies Center *Asian and Pacific Islander Community Directory* indicates that in the Los Angeles and Orange County region, API CBOs have more than quintupled, growing from 106 in 1980 to 588 in 1994, while increasing slightly to 592 in 2001.⁴

The CBOs in our sample are particularly well positioned within immigrant communities to work with underserved populations. Of the CBOs surveyed, 62 percent identified the low-income population as one of their primary

constituencies or groups their organization is in existence to serve, while 31 percent also identified immigrants and refugees as one their primary constituencies. With the trend towards greater government devolution, the CBOs form the frontline in the delivery of many social services and the provision of public education. When possible, the CBOs utilize culturally and linguistically appropriate programs. Because of their strong links to immigrants, the CBOs are well situated to act as a collective voice for this population.

Community based organizations are being forced by welfare reform ... to reassess their relationship with other community-based programs, as well as with the coalitions that have formed in response to the policy changes.

Welfare reform case study.

A growing number of ethnic and multiethnic CBOs have expanded their role to address workplace-related issues, including active participation in unionization efforts, campaigns for living wage legislation, and the creation of community-based worker centers. Of the CBOs surveyed 27 percent are providing labor and employment related services as one of their primary or secondary services, with 17 percent providing employment training, 18 percent providing job placement services, and 7 percent engaged in labor organizing. Of the advocacy and organizing activities being undertaken by those CBOs surveyed, 20 percent are in labor-related issues, 18 percent in community economic development, and 12 percent in affirmative action. Of those CBOs involved in labor-related advocacy or organizing activities, over half are in the area of worker rights education, another half in labor advocacy, over a quarter in directly organizing workers, and a sixth in labor research.

Health issues are also becoming increasingly important among a broad sector of CBOs. Despite the diversity of the sample, over half have had some involvement in efforts to affect health policy, and just under 65 percent were actively taking some steps to address one or more health, environmental or worker health and safety related issues. Furthermore, a

significant number of CBOs have the community organizing capacity to mobilize their constituencies around health issues. Over one-third of those participating in efforts to improve health care were involved in grassroots organizing efforts, primarily around issues related to public health care delivery. Furthermore, those that provide health services, such as nonprofit health clinics, were all directly involved in health policy issues affecting workers and their families.

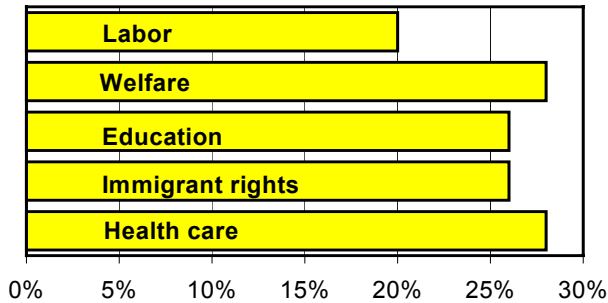
Unions/ CBO Collaboration

Unions and CBOs have their own unique concerns, but they also have overlapping interests and complementary activities that serve as a basis for the two institutions to work collaboratively. Union leaders see CBOs as potentially important allies, and over three-quarters of the unions surveyed stated that they work cooperatively with CBOs. The most common activity is comprised of joint efforts to increase voter participation, with over half of the responding unions being involved in such activities. While this is not surprising, given organized labor's historical involvement in politics, the focus on electoral politics in labor/community collaboration also reflects the desire to recapture political power lost by the labor movement over the last two decades. This form of labor/community collaboration has been particularly effective with Latino CBOs, whose constituency has historically voted in support of pro-labor candidates. Such alliances have been in the form of labor support for naturalization services and direct collaborative participation in voter registration drives and get-out-the-vote efforts.

Organized labor has also sought support for its labor organizing, and half of the unions in our sample have pursued community backing for unionization drives. Such support is crucial in campaigns to organize low-wage immigrant workers because CBOs have ties to and legitimacy in minority communities. A primary example is the Justice for Janitor campaign by Los Angeles' Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which sought to increase wages for its members city-wide and mobilize Los Angeles' faith-based and progressive community groups, thereby contributing to

greater public support for this and other unionization campaigns for low-wage workers in the city.

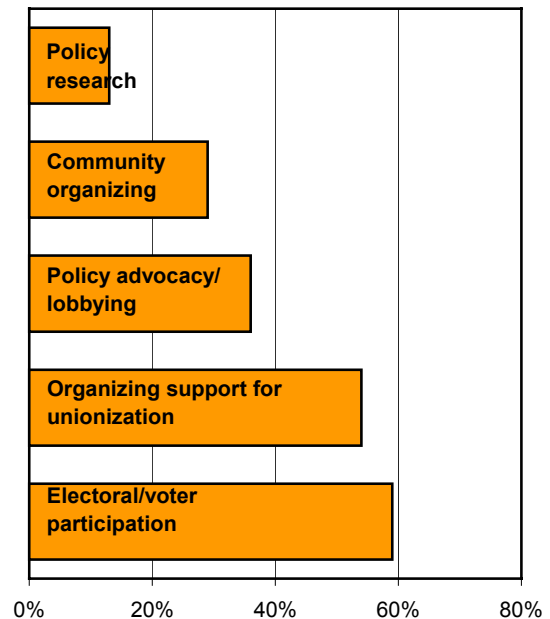
Graph 2: CBO Advocacy and Organizing Activities



Unions participate in other less common forms of collaboration. One-third of the surveyed unions are involved in cooperative policy advocacy and lobbying, one-quarter are involved in community-based organizing, and one-ninth are involved in cooperative policy research. Issues addressed by these coalitions include concerns of labor unions and CBOs. Efforts to pass local living-wage ordinances ranked at the top of list, supported by half of the unions surveyed. This was followed by one-third of the coalitions addressing health care reform, and nearly one-fifth advocating for immigrant rights.

While the survey data indicate that CBOs have a high propensity to be engaged in collaborative efforts with other CBOs, the data also indicate that they are less frequently engaged in collaborative efforts with unions. Of the one hundred CBOs surveyed, 72 percent were actively participating in ongoing coalitions around community organizing or advocacy activities, yet only 40 percent of the total sample had any experience in working cooperatively with unions or other worker organizations. The CBOs that work with organized labor have sought support for affordable housing, economic development, popular education, and environmental safety. Not surprisingly, CBOs involved in labor-related issues are more likely to work with organized labor, with 83 percent of these CBOs collaborating with unions. The three most common activities are worker-rights education, labor advocacy and labor organizing.

Graph 3: Union/CBO Collaboration



Living-wage campaigns are particularly illustrative of the types of issues that bring CBOs together with unions. The primary reasons CBOs gave for their participation in living-wage campaigns was a desire to both improve wage

The *Just Transition* movement, ... must also include the communities living around industrial plants, and these are usually communities of color fighting for both environmental and economic justice. *Environmental Justice case study.*

and benefits standards for workers and to strengthen the collective voice in support of worker issues. Of the 26 CBOs that have participated in efforts to pass local living-wage ordinances, two-thirds have worked with unions. The case study on the living-wage movement in Ventura County shows how a broad-based coalition built around economic justice succeeded in increasing wages and health coverage for employees of firms that receive public financial assistance or contracts. The campaign also generated another benefit, the establishment of a new organization that conducts applied and policy research for labor and community organizing and development efforts.

Environmental justice is another area of common interest for CBOs and unions. The case studies on agricultural pesticides and air-quality regulation document the necessity to link issues of worker safety and issues of community health. The problems of air pollution, toxic chemicals, and other environmental risks affect both the job site and the larger community. The case studies also highlight the challenges to collaboration, such as those based on historical community/labor divisions around job development versus environmental protection. There are other barriers, such as the legal and funding restrictions placed on nonprofit organizations, which prohibit them from engaging in certain types of litigation, working directly with unions, and engaging in lobbying.

As ... alliances are formed, they are contributing to a better understanding of how labor/community collaboration can strengthen the voice of workers and their families.

Interview with CBO Executive

One of the important lessons from the research is that the development of union/CBO collaborations is a dynamic process. It often starts with a realization of the link between the poverty conditions facing low-income working families in their homes and communities and the low-wages and powerlessness they experience at the workplace. This common ground provides CBOs and unions the incentive to reach out to each other for assistance in community-based development, advocacy, and organizing efforts. The first step often involves identifying very concrete issues and problems. Interviews with CBO and union leaders indicate that the initial collaboration can lead to broad-based coalitions addressing economic justice issues because they come to understand the advantages of ongoing collaboration. The desire for more collaboration is clearly present, but the trajectory and rate of progress remains to be seen.

Findings and Recommendations

One of the major challenges facing California is strengthening the collective voice for workers and their families, particularly of those most economically disadvantaged. The findings of this project document how unions

and CBOs operate independently and collaboratively can serve that function. Organized labor has traditionally played a central role in addressing health and safety issues for its members; however, dramatic changes in California's labor market and union membership have created the need for unions to find new models to respond to the needs of the working poor and their families. Community-based organizations are a key link to low-income communities, and immigrant communities in particular; however, focusing solely on delivering social services is not sufficient to addressing the multiple problems associated with work and health. Both institutions have evolved over recent years to more effectively meet the needs of the new workforce. There are also emerging forms of community and labor collaboration around work and health issues, and these joint efforts have produced benefits for those at the margins of California's economy. We believe that the collective voice for the working poor and their families can be enhanced by strengthening unions and CBOs and their joint ventures. To further this goal, we offer the following recommendations:

- Identify ways to broaden and strengthen organized labor's efforts to address broad community issues, particularly those related to immigrant communities.
- Identify ways to broaden and strengthen CBOs' efforts to address work-related issues, particularly those related to immigrant workers.
- Identify factors that facilitate and hinder labor/community collaboration.
- Conduct systematic evaluation of outcomes of union, CBO and union/CBO efforts to improve work and health conditions.

Philanthropic foundations can play a pivotal role in supporting efforts to implement the recommendations by funding the programs and research needed to strengthen unions and CBOs so they can be a more effective voice for workers and their families.

¹ Zabin, Carol (2001) "Union Organizing Challenges and Opportunities." *The State of California Labor*. p. 313. Edited by Paul Ong and James Lincoln. Institute of Industrial Relations. University of California, Los Angeles.

² Bonacich, Edna and Gapsin, Fernando (2001) "Organizing the Unorganized." *The State of California Labor*. p. 61-77. Edited by Paul Ong and James Lincoln. Institute of Industrial Relations. University of California, Los Angeles; and Milkman, Ruth and Wong, Kent (2000) *Organizing Immigrants: The Challenge for Unions in Contemporary California*. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press.

³ Valenzuela, Abel and Paul Ong (2001) "Immigrant Labor in California." *The State of California Labor*. p. 61-77. Edited by Paul Ong and James Lincoln. Institute of Industrial Relations. University of California, Los Angeles.

³ Ovidio Zavala, Juan (1990, 1995, 2000) *Anuario Hispano/Hispanic Yearbook*. Mclean: Virginia. T.I.Y.M. Publishing Company.

⁴ UCLA Asian American Studies Center. *Asian and Pacific Islander Community Directory*. University of California, Los Angeles. 1980, 1994, 1999 and 2001

Established in 1945 under legislation proposed by then Governor Earl Warren, the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations (IIR) is an intellectual center for the study of labor-related issues. The IIR provides support for research by UCLA faculty and students around areas of organized labor, occupational health and safety, human service management, changing demographic composition of the labor force, employment policies, and economic development.

Since 1990, the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies has served as an interdisciplinary policy research center for the study, understanding and solution of regional policy issues including problems of the environment, urban design, housing, community and neighborhood dynamics, transportation and local economic development with special reference to Southern California.

**The Ralph & Goldy Lewis Center
for Regional Policy Studies**

University of California, Los Angeles
School of Public Policy & Social Research
3250 Public Policy Building
Box 951656
Los Angeles CA 90095-1656
YK16