UCLA
IRLE Reports

Title
New Directions in Racial and Economic Justice: How California’s Worker Centers Are Bringing Worker Power into Workforce Development

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6j97s4n4

Authors
Lee, Kevin L.
Lopez, Magaly
Gonzalez-Vasquez, Ana Luz

Publication Date
2022-02-01

Data Availability
The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

UCLA Labor Center

New Directions in Racial and Economic Justice: How California's Worker Centers Are Bringing Worker Power into Workforce Development

February 2022

Kevin L. Lee, Magaly Lopez, and Ana Luz Gonzalez-Vasquez

Introduction

Low-wage industries in the United States have seen dramatic shifts in labor and employment that have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid eroding workplace standards,[1] the "fissuring" of the workplace,[2] decades-long union decline,[3] and occupational segregation, low-wage workers now face unprecedented workplace challenges. Many of them—farmworkers, restaurant staff, warehouse stockers, supermarket cashiers—have come to be known in the mainstream as "essential" workers. In times of crisis, these workers come to the rescue. They are integral to our lives but are often trapped in industries where they are dismissed as "unskilled" and undervalued for their contributions. This is an issue of both racial and economic injustice: Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and undocumented workers are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage industries where labor law violations are disturbingly commonplace.[4] The public workforce development system, which traditionally seeks to "prepare people for employment, help workers advance in their careers, and ensure a skilled workforce," is key to providing communities with opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.[5]

However, the public workforce development system has failed to make good on its promise. Workforce development programs have struggled to reach and meaningfully serve our state's most marginalized job seekers and workers. In fact, through its exclusionary policies and practices, this system has played a direct role in creating inequity and systemically limiting economic opportunities for all. Consider the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), the largest federal workforce development legislation responsible for funding state and local workforce programs. While WIOA provides critical employment support for BIPOC communities, its reach is limited: in 2019, there were approximately 296,000 unemployed working-age Californians with no education beyond high school; for the 2018-19 program year, WIOA Title I programs (which directly provide job training services and connect job seekers with employers) only reached approximately 74,400 adults and dislocated workers.[6] For Black participants, WIOA's failures have particularly devastating implications for their earnings: for the same program year, the median earnings of Black participants were $5,911, which lagged far behind their white counterparts ($6,998).[7] To add, WIOA's onerous metrics requirements reward providers for favoring clients who are more likely to be placed in jobs over those who face additional barriers to employment, a practice known as creaming. For example, a provider may be incentivized to reject immigrant job seekers whose first language is not English because the provider lacks the necessary resources to accommodate their language needs.[8] Because of selection biases created by creaming, racialized disparities are likely larger than currently observed in WIOA participant data. Absent explicit efforts to uncover and redress these persistent inequities in the system, BIPOC communities will continue to be excluded from vital workforce development services.

The security of California's economic future depends on a stable, empowered, and economically resilient workforce. If workforce development is to be part of this vision, the status quo must change. Worker centers—community-based organizations created by and for BIPOC and immigrant job seekers and workers in low-wage industries—provide a powerful, comprehensive alternative to the status quo of workforce development: an approach aligned with the key goals of leadership development, movement building, and systemic change.

Drawing on preliminary data from a study of worker centers in California, we present a case for considering these organizations as invaluable actors in the state's public workforce development system. While they share much in common with other traditional actors such as community colleges, American Job Centers, labor unions, and adult learning centers, worker centers are unique in that their approach to workforce development is (1) community and worker centered, (2) industry responsive, and (3) systems oriented.

At their core, the structural roots of worker centers lie in socioeconomic inequality. From there, they combine the strategies of workforce development, community organizing, strategic labor law enforcement, and policy advocacy to harness worker power—the collective power of low-wage workers and BIPOC communities—in an attempt to break down the systemic barriers to economic prosperity. Our preliminary evidence suggests that the public workforce development system can benefit from this approach to meaningfully serve the most disadvantaged communities, to improve industries with the most degraded labor conditions, and to work across systems (e.g., the criminal justice system, the immigration system) to transform in ways that promote the economic well-being of all Californians.

What is a worker center?

Although they have been in existence since the 1920s, worker centers exploded in growth nationwide in the early 2000s to support and address the needs of low-wage workers and immigrants by changing industry practices. In its early stages, worker centers provided a space where primarily undocumented day laborers, domestic workers, and other workers in low-wage, non-union industries (such as the restaurant and garment industries) could formally connect with employers and establish clear terms of employment, helping to prevent workplace exploitation. Over the past two decades, these organizations have become more professional, developing advanced systems of organization and organizing and quickly proving to be an influential force in advancing racial equity and economic justice by raising labor standards in low-wage industries.

Throughout their history, worker centers have maintained at least two distinctive features. First, they are established and driven by the initiative of low-wage workers. Second, members create spaces in which they advocate on their own behalf. They address the systemic injustices that disproportionately affect low-wage BIPOC workers, their families, and the broader community.

Worker centers represent a diverse set of community-based organizations seeking to advance racial and economic justice through a range of activities. They are not homogeneous, monolithic entities. Each worker center may look different from the next, as each serves different populations, operates in different industries, engages in different activities, and even adopts different approaches to the same activities. Some of these activities are outlined below.

Table 1. Examples of Worker Center Activities

Activity	**Description**
Worker voice and leadership development	Transform members into leaders who recognize themselves as industry experts and changemakers through formal governance structures, popular education methods, and innovative programs, such as workplace organizing training, Know Your Rights training, train-the-trainer program models, community navigator roles, and formal worker committees to drive organizational decision-making, direct the advocacy agenda, lead community organizing efforts, design programs, etc.
Labor market intermediation	Create job allocation systems (e.g., software, apps, data management systems) to match quality workers with employers meeting minimum workplace standards, such as minimum wage rates and occupational safety requirements.
Supportive services	Develop partnerships with other human service providers (e.g., healthcare clinics, housing, immigration attorneys) to secure additional supportive services necessary to remove barriers to employment.
Skills development and recognition	Develop collaborations and partnerships with other education and training providers (e.g., universities, community colleges, nonprofit training providers, public school districts) to provide members with job training opportunities; develop mechanisms (e.g., certificates) through which low-wage worker skills are recognized.
Civic engagement	Promote worker engagement in volunteerism, community service, voter education programming, canvassing, voter registration drives, etc. Collaborate with other worker centers to anchor citywide and regional civic engagement initiatives to share information, network, and promote political mobilization.
Community organizing and advocacy	Transform communities by launching campaigns and building coalitions that address a range of systemic injustices impacting low-income BIPOC communities (e.g., housing, immigration, employment), thereby creating more pathways to fuller social, economic, and political participation.

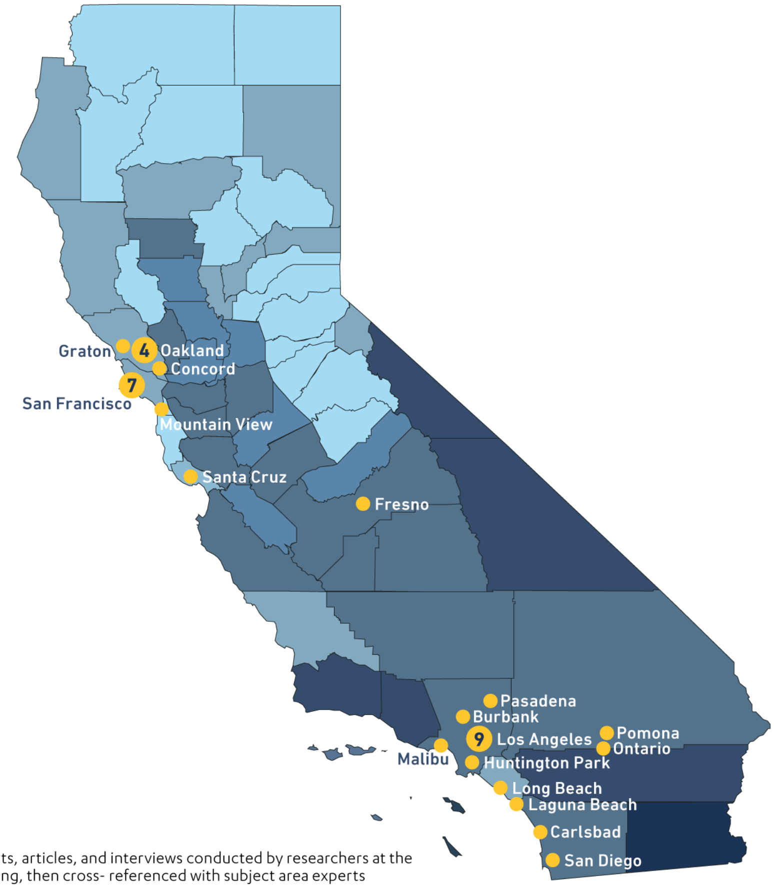
Labor standards enforcement	Create mechanisms of accountability for low-road employers by gathering information on workplace conditions and leveraging long-standing relationships with BIPOC communities to identify and address incidences of workplace abuses, including wage theft, scheduling instability, harassment, retaliation, and hazardous and unsafe workplace conditions.
Raising labor standards	Engage in worker organizing, policy advocacy, workforce development, worker cooperative entrepreneurship, occupational safety and health training, and other strategies to contest substandard working conditions and expand economic opportunity.

Worker centers in California

In California, worker centers have a storied past. Some are among the most established, highly networked, well funded, and professional in the nation. By building working-class coalitions across race/ethnicity and immigration status, they have been credited with strengthening the immigrant labor effort and helping to revitalize the broader labor movement.[9] Currently, California's worker center ecosystem is thriving, with 35 such organizations operating in low-wage industries statewide.[10]

Low-wage workers in California are disproportionately foreign born (40 percent), women (53 percent), and overwhelmingly BIPOC (74 percent).[11] This means that in California, workers with specific demographic characteristics (namely, along the axes of race, gender, and immigration status) are directed toward jobs with low wages, high incidences of wage theft, heightened scheduling instability, high exposure to workplace safety hazards, limited worker voice, and countless other poor working conditions.[12] Particularly affected are low-wage workers with multiple and/or intersecting identities (e.g., woman, immigrant, undocumented, Latinx, Pilipinx, Black, queer, transgender), which poses additional disadvantages by creating further obstacles to long-term success in the labor market. Worker centers operate across industries and boundaries in order to reach our state's most marginalized workers.

Worker Centers in California


Graton
4
Oakland
Concord
7
San Francisco
Mountain View
Santa Cruz
Fresno
Pasadena
Burbank
9
Los Angeles
Pomona
Ontario
Malibu
Huntington Park
Long Beach
Laguna Beach
Carlsbad
San Diego
● Worker center per city (number included when n>1)
— County Boundaries
Percent Increase in People of Color
0%
99%

Note: The data presented was derived from internet searches, reports, articles, and interviews conducted by researchers at the UCLA Labor Center and MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, then cross- referenced with subject area experts

Source: 2017 National Equity Atlas data on people of color as share of total population

What makes a worker center's approach to workforce development unique?

Community and Worker Centered

Started by workers, for workers, worker centers have built deep, long-standing relationships of trust with low-income communities of color and immigrant communities because they center worker expertise and leadership development from the ground up. This enables them to connect with BIPOC and undocumented workers and communities hardest hit by economic exclusion who may not otherwise be reached by unions, labor standards enforcement agencies, and workforce development providers.

With their roots in community organizing, worker centers see both employment and supportive services as integral to community building. Central to this approach is the continuous investment in strong relationships with members. Anyone who walks through the door of one of these organizations is received by a member of their own community who will focus on learning more about them and their most urgent needs. Often this starts by addressing the basic needs of housing, physical and mental health, language, immigration, and transportation, prior to providing employment support or addressing issues at the workplace (e.g., wage theft, safety issues, discrimination).

Worker centers often incorporate principles from “popular education,” a community-oriented and community-guided approach to education that is grounded in everyday people’s own experiences to raise consciousness about racial and economic injustice, and provides useful tools and support as they become an integral part of broader social and political transformations. Local residents become members of a broader community who exercise a degree of ownership over the worker center, support one another in learning, and collectively access resources and engage in organizing. Above all, they have the desire to engage in changing the system. Some members are job seekers who want to connect with employers while setting their terms of employment. Others are workers who wish to build workplace solidarity and community power to transform low-wage industries. Still others are community residents—often spouses and children of job seekers and workers—who wish to participate in community-centered organizing and movement-building practices to advance immigrant rights, labor rights, and racial and economic justice.

These organizations recognize that low-wage workers have skills and expertise, and that their knowledge is often devalued at their workplaces and by society at large. The strong, supportive relationships with and between members help foster dignity and confidence among all. Members are encouraged to make decisions on behalf of the worker center, including those that impact organizational structure, strategic direction, and policy and systemic change. Participants in committees that develop and implement programs such as train-the-trainer models often gain enough industry expertise to become program instructors. Building confidence is critical in encouraging members to engage in organizing activities and to self-advocate in the workplace as well as within their own communities, at city hall, in state houses, and beyond.

As worker center staff and members learn to navigate the system and local bureaucracies (e.g., wage theft documentation, citizenship applications, immigration law), they become de facto community anchors, able to broker connections and locate resources that may be beneficial to them. Further, they can organize to make changes to the system that advance racial and economic justice. In doing so, members provide increasingly valuable assistance to their peers while growing as leaders in the workplace and the community.

Highlights of the worker center approach to workforce development

Worker centers take a community- and worker-centered approach that combines workforce development with popular education, leadership development, community organizing, and advocacy to provide support for the most under-resourced populations, and to pursue long-term improvements in low-wage industry labor standards and the community overall.

This involves the following:

- Moving beyond skills “deficits” of individual job seekers and instead focusing on community knowledge and linguistic and cultural expertise, cultivating leadership, confidence, social relationships, and worker solidarity as part of broader organizing strategies to raise labor and workplace standards

- Removing barriers to long-term employment retention by connecting members with relevant services, checking in with them regularly, and sometimes personally accompanying them to provide emotional and practical support
- Customizing workforce development programs (i.e., job training, career services) to address issues and needs raised by members at the workplace and beyond (housing, healthcare, immigration, transportation, etc.) by providing language assistance and translation services, scheduling programs around members' work schedules, determining which skills and industries to focus on, and using organizational partnerships to tap into a range of supportive services, among other adjustments
- Adopting train-the-trainer program models to give members ample opportunities to hone their leadership capabilities and improve their industry expertise, allowing participants to become instructors

The LABWC: Fostering a Black Community of Industry Leaders and Experts

The Los Angeles Black Worker Center (LABWC) advances racial justice through creating high-quality employment pathways for Black workers using policy tools such as Project Labor Agreements (PLA), which establish clear conditions for high-quality employment practices. In 2012, the LABWC—as part of a community-based coalition—successfully advocated for provisions in a five-year PLA with Los Angeles County's Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The PLA required that 30 percent of jobs must be located in high-unemployment zip codes, that 10 percent of jobs must be provided to disadvantaged workers, and that an apprenticeship program must be developed targeting select local residents for high-wage construction jobs.[13]

The LABWC's flagship workforce development program, Ready 2 Work, exclusively serves Black job seekers and workers and sets new standards for the use of racial justice in workforce development programs. It has been historically focused on unionized jobs in commercial construction but is expanding to include a broader range of jobs such as those in the public sector.[14] Participants in this program first attend sessions on structural inequality, racial capitalism, and worker empowerment. At this stage, both participants and instructors begin to build relationships and community with each other—a foundational condition that makes the LABWC's workforce development programs possible.

As part of these apprenticeships, staff accompany members to worksites and provide ongoing navigational support. These apprenticeship opportunities are coupled with industry certifications, trauma-informed conflict resolution, and wellness training, as well as financial literacy workshops for workers who are new to stable incomes and regular paychecks. During employment placement, the LABWC also works with unions to promote Black cohort hires. This ensures that members are not the only Black persons at their workplaces, and the mutual peer support helps to increase members' employment retention over time.

In this manner, the LABWC goes beyond the standard workforce development metrics of job placement and short-term retention. It strives to build a community of Black workplace leaders and industry experts who actively support one another and who collectively have a voice in communicating and negotiating with unions and employers to improve workplace conditions.

Industry-responsive

Worker centers respond to the ever-shifting dynamics of the demand side (employers) and the supply side (workers) of low-wage labor markets. Employers that take the low road—as opposed to the high road—exploit cracks in the labor standards enforcement apparatus, exercising unfair competition by pursuing profit-maximizing strategies at workers' expense. They do so by adopting flexible scheduling arrangements, decreasing wages, and failing to meet workplace safety standards, among other practices. In response, worker centers institute, enforce, and raise industry standards that aim to create environments where workers are appropriately valued and recognized for their skill and labor, and where employers benefit from a skilled workforce equipped and empowered to increase overall performance.

Being industry responsive means navigating the unique dynamics of various industries in what are called the formal and informal economy. For instance, in the informal economy, worker centers may engage with a different set of employers every day, such as a homeowner seeking day laborers or domestic workers. These employers pay in cash "under the table" and hire a limited number of workers for any one job. This practice sees particularly high incidences of wage theft. In response to these unique challenges, worker centers like Pilipino Workers Center (PWC) and Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA) organize legal clinics, file wage theft claims, and document wage theft incidents to address workplace abuses and raise industry labor standards.

Worker centers' engagement with employers can vary from contentious to collaborative, depending on workplace conditions and employer compliance with existing labor laws. The terms of engagement include the following:

- Creating job allocation systems to help match employers with quality workers who hold appropriate skill sets
- Educating employers on minimum occupational safety and health standards and on compliance with minimum wage and other labor laws
- Supporting high-road employers in low-wage industries to demonstrate the viability of high-road practices

The terms of engagement with workers involve identifying and eliminating barriers to long-term employment retention and labor market success as follows:

- Providing skill recognition opportunities (e.g., certificates) for workers to explicitly identify the skill sets that they have
- Creating linguistically and culturally competent professional development opportunities for workers in low-wage industries where such opportunities either do not exist or are not provided, are cost prohibitive, or are legally inaccessible

- Providing, on an ad hoc basis, a range of workplace equipment through lending circles and small-scale equipment procurement

Worker centers also respond by establishing a range of partnerships. For instance, worker centers often leverage resources from proximate colleges and universities, human service organizations, community-based organizations, public school districts, and other groups. At colleges and universities, most common are collaborations with college students, which have in the past created English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, vocational training programs, and know-your-rights workshops. Worker centers also collaborate with faculty and staff researchers, who have worked to document workplace conditions and abuses and lift up practices and policies to advance racial and economic justice. Worker centers also partner with college-affiliated labor education and research programs (e.g., UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program (LOSH) and UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP) to provide a range of services such as occupational safety and health training and certification, and know-your-rights workshops.

Highlights of the worker center approach to workforce development

Worker centers respond to exploitative and abusive low-wage industry conditions by combining labor standards enforcement and workforce development to ensure dignity and respect at the workplace. This approach puts mechanisms in place to improve workplace environments and employer compensation of worker skills, issues that must be addressed in order for workforce development to create genuine career pathways and socioeconomic mobility for low-wage workers.

In addition, worker centers seek to improve low-wage industries through unique and meaningful engagement with employers, workers, and higher education institutions. This involves the following:

- Extending skills training opportunities to low-wage industries in the informal economy—industries that have been particularly overlooked by traditional workforce development actors and stakeholders[15]
- Incorporating worker rights and community organizing training into skills training programs to position workers as industry experts and affirm their value as workers with dignity
- Making training opportunities accessible by taking advantage of the availability in workers' often irregular and unstable work schedules
- Providing ongoing support to participants well beyond program completion and successful job placement in order to reduce employee turnover, improve communication between workers and employers, and support worker and employer mobilizations to create policy environments in which employees can thrive

CLEAN Carwash Worker Center: Training Industry Experts

The car wash industry operates in the informal economy. Workers earn below minimum wage, put in 60-hour workweeks without overtime pay, are denied adequate time for rest and meal breaks, and have little to no health and safety protections despite constant exposure to toxic chemicals.[16] These workers, who are predominantly undocumented, are often intimidated into silence, allowing companies to continue to violate numerous labor laws with minimal penalties.

The Community Labor Environmental Action Network (CLEAN) is trying to change that. For its in-house, eight-week training program in car detailing, CLEAN schedules training times around members' schedules. Trainings do not take place during the summer, when car wash demand is high, or during the Christmas holiday season, when members need valuable time off with their families. Instead, trainings are scheduled during the rainy season, when workers typically have less work.

In these hands-on workshops, members learn car detailing and then hone their detailing skills. Spouses are invited to participate and gain skills so that they may fill in for a member in the future when necessary, say, in the event of illness. Children are also welcome, eliminating the need for child care and creating a sense of community among members and their families.

The program adopts a train-the-trainer format. Five members who are graduates of the program or who are already established as experts in car detailing are brought in as instructors. Each class consists of ten members. When these members complete the program, the instructors also depart to make way for the next set of students and teachers. This allows members to continue cycling through and become validated as industry experts, mentors, and leaders. Members are given a graduation certificate in recognition of their skills and achievements. Although the program is not accredited, this certificate has the potential to change industry norms. At present, it has been recognized and adopted by some car wash companies as a credential of car detailing skills for their workforce.

Systems-oriented

Worker centers build power and social movements to achieve systemic change that improves social and economic outcomes for some of the most marginalized communities. Many of these individuals face intersectional disadvantages; for example, a Pilipina immigrant who identifies as transgender may have increased difficulty finding a job, compared to their white, male, native-born and/or cisgender counterparts. The worker center approach includes not only improving low-wage industry standards but also addressing other systems, such as immigration and criminal justice, that perpetuate inequality.

Efforts involve helping members cultivate both hard and soft skills through workforce development programs, learn about workplace rights, and gain social consciousness about the complex processes that create inequality. Empowered with this expertise, members become agents who can contest these inequalities and navigate the complicated, mazelike bureaucracies of the system. Indeed, outside of worker centers, members share their experiences as low-wage workers to lend legitimacy and credibility to advocacy efforts at city halls and state houses. In turn, this helps advance progressive policies for working-class BIPOC communities. For example, members actively educate policymakers about the importance of minimum wage legislation and immigrant integration policies, providing testimonials of their own workplace abuses and community struggles.

Worker centers engage their membership bases in coalition building to expand the power and impact of their efforts to bring about systemic change. In these efforts, worker centers and their partners are brought together by shared goals of racial and economic justice. They learn about different policy structures and identify policy and advocacy priorities, then proceed to mobilize their members. Together, the coalitions work across scales—meaning local, state, and federal levels—to create a range of policy, research, advocacy, and public education mechanisms that address sources of inequality for their members.

The coalitions leverage the key strengths of the participating organizations to achieve win-win results for everyone. Take, for example, the partnership between worker centers and unions. Comparatively, worker centers are relatively small, with fewer resources, but they have powerful connections with BIPOC job seekers and workers within many low-wage industries. Unions are typically larger, with more resources, but they often have limited reach within these same industries. By partnering together, they increase their sphere of influence by garnering more media attention and mounting state-level advocacy campaigns to advance the Fight for 15 minimum wage campaigns nationwide, among other successes.[17]

Table 2. Examples of Worker Centers Advancing Systemic Change through Coalitions

Coalition	Scale	Mechanism	Outcome
Black Worker Center, unions and community allies	Project	Project Labor Agreement	Increased the number of Black construction workers from 0% to 20% on the Crenshaw Line project in 2015
LA Coalition Against Wage Theft	Local	City of Los Angeles Ordinance No. 184,319	Established the Los Angeles Office of Wage Standards in 2016 to enforce wage and hour violations
California Coalition for Worker Power	Local	Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors initiative	Launched worker-led Public Health Councils that promote workplace safety through education on infection control measures in 2021
California Domestic Workers Coalition	State	Domestic Worker Bill of Rights (AB 241)	Extended overtime pay rights to domestic workers, disproportionately benefiting Pilipina and Latina women workers
ICE Out of California Coalition	State	California Values Act (SB 54)	Placed additional restrictions on collaborations between local law enforcement and federal immigration enforcement
National Day Laborer Organizing Network	Federal	Research, organizing, advocacy, public education campaign	Changed the public discourse on day laborers by dispelling negative perceptions of them

Highlights of worker center approach to workforce development

Worker centers respond to systemic barriers to achieving racial and economic justice by building

coalitions that center and leverage the collective power of low-wage workers and underserved communities. The result is to transform low-wage industry labor standards and increase worker access to socioeconomic opportunity.

This involves the following:

- Building resources and opportunities to learn about and engage the public workforce development system
- Cultivating relationships with state and local workforce development agencies in order to refine and institutionalize their role in the public workforce development system
- Identifying and advocating for the establishment of specific policies and programs to incorporate worker power into workforce development programs and improve meaningful access to these programs for low-wage BIPOC workers
- Forging strong relationships with other key organizational partners in the workforce development system and the broader labor ecosystem (e.g., community colleges, public school districts, American Job Centers, unions, community-based organizations) in order to build coalitions that can transform workforce development policies and programs

Transforming California's Labor Standards Enforcement System

In late 2016, California Labor Commissioner Julie Su established the California Strategic Enforcement Partnership to increase anti-wage theft enforcement efforts and foster a labor law compliance culture. Multiple worker centers—including the Chinese Progressive Association, CLEAN Carwash Worker Center, Garment Worker Center, Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project, Pilipino Workers Center, and Koreatown Immigrant Worker Alliance—worked alongside other nonprofits and legal advocates to reduce wage theft and ensure minimum wages for workers in six industries: construction, agriculture, car wash, janitorial, residential home care, and restaurant. The commission set five key goals:[18]

- Collect unpaid wages and improve the use of agency and legal tools to collect wages
- Develop industry-specific enforcement strategies
- Identify high-impact cases that influence industry practices and support law-abiding employers through effective enforcement
- Build a sustainable strategic enforcement system in California
- Increase worker engagement in advocating for better working conditions

By establishing stronger relationships and formal linkages between labor standards enforcement agencies and worker organizations on the ground, this partnership led to the following improvements in the wage recovery system:

- Substantial wages were recovered on behalf of workers. For instance, in 2017, the Labor Commissioner's office secured six car wash workers $363,625 in back wages owed by two car wash operators in the Los Angeles area. The workers were shorted on minimum wages and overtime and were denied rest and meal breaks as required by law[19]
- Accessibility of underserved workers to make workplace claims was increased, and improvements were made in governmental ability to reach workers experiencing wage theft, with worker centers as a trusted intermediary

- Improvements were made in the capacity of the commission to identify noncompliant employers and to process wage theft claims by integrating worker centers into the initial stages of the process, expediting the workplace claims process, and leveraging worker center knowledge of industry dynamics
- Worker centers were further empowered to engage in labor standards enforcement by creating formal linkages to the state labor standards enforcement agency to provide worker centers with renewed credibility and regulatory power
- Collaborations between the state labor standards enforcement agency and the district attorney's office were strengthened to increase governmental ability to address larger-scale cases of wage theft among particularly unscrupulous employers

Key takeaways

As we recover from the high unemployment rates wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, workforce development is a key strategy through which job seekers are matched with employers and equipped with the necessary skills. However, the pandemic has *also* exacerbated preexisting social and economic inequalities, particularly for our nation's most underserved communities. This means the status quo must change, and a more holistic and comprehensive approach to workforce development is needed. To address these long-standing problems, worker centers offer three takeaways for the public workforce development system:

1. Worker centers show that it is possible to reach low-wage workers and industries that have been traditionally beyond the grasp of workforce development providers
2. Worker centers demonstrate that working at the intersection of workforce development and labor standards enforcement can create new opportunities to transform low-wage work
3. Worker centers model how community organizing and policy advocacy are important tools needed to change the very fabric of the workforce development system, as well as other, adjacent systems that contribute to inequality

Methodology

In Janice Fine's landmark 2006 study of worker centers, she defined worker centers as "community-based and community-led organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy, and organizing to provide support to low-wage workers."[20] Recognizing that this definition is broad and that there are a range of worker rights organizations that fit this definition but do not identify as worker centers, we focus on organizations in California that actively identify as worker centers, and that participate in local, regional, state and national networks designed by and for worker centers (e.g. Los Angeles Worker Center Network).

We adopted a multi-step methodology to create an updated database of California worker centers. First, we identified the whole universe of California worker centers between January 2020, by consolidating and cross-referencing multiple sources: (1) the UCLA Labor Center's list of worker centers that was created based on the 2006 National Day Labor Survey; (2) an updated 2018 list of California worker centers, jointly maintained by Janice Fine and Jacob Barnes (Rutgers) and Victor Narro (UCLA); and (3) informal conversations with key informants who have long-standing involvement and expertise in California's immigrant rights and labor movement. Second, to compile information on all our worker centers, we reviewed all worker centers' websites where available, other secondary literature (e.g. policy briefs, archival documents) and contacted (via phone and email) each worker center on our consolidated list via phone and email.

The information provided in this brief is derived mainly from individual interviews with staff members from 12 California worker centers—including executive directors, frontline organizers, workforce development coordinators (where applicable). These interviews took place between January and April 2020 as part of a longer-term project on the underexplored pathways through which worker centers are transforming low-wage work (e.g., workforce development, worker cooperative development). In our interviews, we asked descriptive questions about the kinds of services offered by worker centers and their relationship to other workforce development actors (e.g., community colleges, computer literacy programs, ESL instructors, employers, WIOA-funded WorkSource Centers, local and state workforce development agencies). We also posed perceptive questions on what executive and managerial staff viewed as successful in their relationships with employers (where applicable) and in their workforce development and worker training programs. Interviews on average lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Using the mixed-methods software application Dedoose, these interviews were coded by team members, collectively reviewed to arrive at consensus, and analyzed by individual team members. Interviewees received a $100 gift card for participating in the study.

Notes

---

[1] Annette D. Bernhardt, Heather Boushey, Laura Dresser, and Chris Tilly, eds., *The Gloves-off Economy: Workplace Standards at the Bottom of America's Labor Market* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[2] David Weil, *The Fissured Workplace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[3] Dan Clawson and Mary Ann Clawson, "What Has Happened to the US Labor Movement? Union Decline and Renewal," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25, no. 1 (1999): 95–119.

[4] Annette Bernhardt et al., *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America's Cities* (Chicago: Center for Urban Economic Development; New York: National Employment Law Project; Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, 2009).

[5] "Workforce Development Systems." Building America's Workforce, Urban Institute, accessed December 22, 2021. https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/building-americas-workforce/about/workforce-development-systems.

[6] 2019 American Community Survey data; *Results Achieved Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA),* report by California Workforce Development Board, n.d., https://cwdb.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/43/2019/12/PY-2018-WIOA-Annual-Report.pdf.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Kevin Lee, "How California's Workforce Development System Excludes Immigrants, Why It Matters, and What We Can Do about It," Scholars Strategy Network, September 2019, https://scholars.org/sites/scholars/files/2019-08/SSN%20Memo%20Lee%20on%20Workforce%20Development%20and%20Immigration.pdf.

[9] Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006).

[10] Nik Theodore, Beth Gutelius, and Ana Luz Gonzalez-Vasquez, *The Worker Center Ecosystem in California* (San Francisco: Labor Innovations for the 21st Century, 2019).

[11] These data points are taken from UC Berkeley Labor Center's Analysis of 2017 Current Population Survey and American Community Survey data. "Low-wage work" here is defined as wages that fall below $14.35 an hour, and is inflation adjusted for data from previous years. "Low-Wage Work in California," UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2017, https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/low-wage-work-in-california/#worker-profile.

[12] Importantly, BIPOC workers are not destined for bad jobs because of their demographic characteristics alone. Ultimately, employer and occupational characteristics (e.g., company size, pay arrangements, benefit packages, health insurance) are the strongest predictors for creating bad jobs in low-wage industries. For more on this, see Annette Bernhardt et al., *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America's Cities* (Chicago: Center for Urban Economic Development; New York: National Employment Law Project; Los Angeles: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, 2009).

[13] Cynthia E. Griffin, "MTA OKs Project Labor Agreement," Our Weekly LA, September 29, 2011, http://ourweekly.com/news/2011/sep/28/mta-oks-project-labor-agreement/.

[14] Deja Thomas, Lola Smallwood-Cuevas, and Saba Waheed, *Reimagined Recovery: Black Workers, the Public Sector, and Covid-19* (Los Angeles: Center for the Advancement of Racial Equity [CARE] at Work at UCLA Labor Center, 2020).

[15] For example, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network collaborated with Pasadena City College and LA Trade-Tech to provide ESL classes and vocational training classes in flooring, framing, and carpentry for the network's day laborer members.

[16] *Cleaning Up the Carwash Industry: Empowering Workers and Protecting Communities*, report by Carwash Workers Organizing Committee of the United Steelworkers, March 27, 2008, http://assets.usw.org/Organizing/Documents/car_wash_paper.pdf.

---

[17] However, community-labor partnerships––like all coalitions––must make trade-offs; these coalitions sometimes form at the expense of neighborhood-level organizing and protest turnouts. For more on these trade-offs, see Marc Doussard and Brad R. Fulton, "Organizing Together: Benefits and Drawbacks of Community-Labor Coalitions for Community Organizations," *Social Service Review* 94, no. 1 (2020): 36–74, https://doi.org/10.1086/707568.

[18] *California Strategic Enforcement Partnership*. Report for the National Employment Law Project, 2018, https://s27147.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/CA-Enforcement-Document-Letter-11-27-18-1.pdf.

[19] "Labor Commissioner Returns $363,625 in Unpaid Wages to Six Car Wash Workers in Los Angeles," news release, State of California Department of Industrial Relations, March 1, 2017, https://www.dir.ca.gov/DIRNews/2017/2017-18.pdf.

[20] *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream*, report by Janice Fine, 2005.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank our worker center respondents for their participation and wisdom, Joaquin Escalante for research support, Veena Hampapur and Angela Hana for communications support, Antonio Rodriguez for the brief design, Dianne Woo and Leticia Bustamante for editing support, and Luz Hernandez for administrative support. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the Labor Research & Action Network (LRAN) New Scholars Research Grant, MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning William Emerson Travel Grant, MIT Priscila King Gray Public Service Center IAP Fellowship, and the UCLA Labor Center for their financial support.

Kevin L. Lee, Magaly Lopez, and Ana Luz Gonzalez-Vasquez, New Directions in Racial and Economic Justice: How California's Worker Centers Are Bringing Worker Power into Workforce Development, (Los Angeles: UCLA Labor Center, February 2022).