Community Unions in Baltimore and Long Island: Beyond the Politics of Particularism

by

Janice R. Fine

B.A., Labor Studies and Community Planning, 1988
University of Massachusetts at Boston

Submitted to the Department of Political Science
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores newly emergent community-based organizations that are tackling work and wage issues at the local level and includes two lengthy case studies of the Workplace Project in Long Island and Solidarity in Baltimore.

The thesis is built upon five interconnected claims. First, that into the breach left by the decline of the labor movement and political parties in late twentieth century America, a new type of labor market institution had emerged that was trying to fulfill the dual role of raising wage standards and giving political voice to low wage workers. Second, that the emergence of these community unions implied a break with the “work/home divide” thesis, which argued that in the United States historically, while class functioned as a constitutive category for workplace struggle, when it came to politics, it was trumped by other categories. On the contrary, I found that in community unions, class and ethnicity, class and race and class and gender march hand in hand, both at the workplace and in the community. Third, that in community unionism forms of identity, such as race, ethnicity and gender stand in for craft or industry and that this represents a third model, distinct from craft or industrial unionism. I argue that this third form was not just a recent phenomenon, but has been present throughout labor history and provide several historical examples including the United Farmworkers and 1199.

Despite significant differences in origin, the Workplace Project and Solidarity ended up with a strikingly similar set of strengths and weaknesses. They created dynamic organizations for constituencies who had no place else to turn to pursue work-related issues, but their numbers remain small by union standards and they have not been able to regularize membership through systematic collection of dues. Both organizations have had a very concrete impact on the way the media reports and the larger public perceive low wage workers and their issues. They have drafted, campaigned for and won important and imaginative new public policies. But neither organization has succeeded so far at large scale economic intervention or worker organizing. At present, they seem to be best at bringing community organizing strategies to bear on labor market issues through politics and worst at doing so through economic strategies.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janice Fine received a B.A. in Labor Studies and Community Planning from the University of Massachusetts at Boston’s College of Public and Community Service in 1988. She has been the recipient of fellowships from the Industrial Performance Center at MIT as well as the Open Society Institute and is currently principal investigator for a research study of immigrant worker centers at the Economic Policy Institute. Fine has taught at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. She has written about the labor movement and community organizing as well as the influence of money in American politics.

In addition to her academic work, Fine has worked as a community, labor and electoral organizer for twenty-two years. From 1981-83 she was the President of United States Student Association in Washington, D.C. During the 80’s, she worked for the AFL-CIO in Broward County, Florida, Massachusetts Fair Share in Boston, the Jackson '88 presidential campaign as well as numerous other electoral campaigns. In 1991, she founded the New England Money and Politics Project at Northeast Action, documented the influence of special interest money in the Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Maine state legislatures and played a leading role in passing the nation’s first “Clean Election” law in Maine and subsequently in Massachusetts. Most recently, she has been the Organizing Director and Lead Trainer at Northeast Action, the hub of a regional network of statewide progressive electoral coalitions and citizen action groups across New York and New England. Fine has written an extensive grassroots organizing curriculum and used it to train hundreds of community leaders and organizers.

Fine’s publications include:

“Building Community Unions,” The Nation, January 1, 2001
“Still Point, Turning World,” Boston Review April/May 1996.

Fine has also co-authored the following:

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I have come to the end of this long project and my greatest fear is that all the categorizing, analyzing and evaluating has done a disservice to the groups I studied.
As anyone who has ever been involved in great organizing work knows, sometimes the vitality of an organization simply must be experienced, in order to be fully understood. I have subjected the Workplace Project and Solidarity to unparalleled scrutiny, fitting them to frameworks and evaluative criteria of my own devising. In so doing, I have inevitably highlighted their weaknesses. It is my great hope that I have also communicated their exceptional creativity and astonishing accomplishment.
I began work on my doctoral dissertation in 1995 when the winners and losers of the new economy were becoming abundantly clear. Manufacturing jobs were contracting, service sector jobs were expanding and a large number of these jobs were low wage, less than full-time and dead end. It seemed the emerging structure of the "new economy" required that about a tenth of full-time workers be below the poverty line and remain there. Due to privatization and globalization, extremely effective resistance to unions on the part of employers coupled with outmoded labor laws, the labor movement was on the ropes. Only a few unions were organizing at all, and only a very few unions were organizing among low wage service sector workers. Most low wage workers in most parts of the country were not in unions, not being approached to join unions and not engaging in collective action.

At that time, a new type of organization, one that was community-based but focused on worker issues, was cropping up in dozens of communities around the country. Immigrant worker centers located in ethnic enclaves were organizing among Chinese workers in New York City, Koreans in Los Angeles, Latinos in Long Island and a host of other places to bring pressure to bear on employers to improve wages and working conditions. Community organizing networks, some working in partnership with unions and others not, in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles and a host of other cities were also turning to issues of work and wages and trying to build a membership base among low wage workers in the service sector.

Community organizers turned to organizing workers around work and wages because they felt they had hit a wall in terms of their ability to stabilize and improve poor communities. They had developed affordable housing, created after school programs and attacked the problem of failing public schools, but their conclusions were that for communities to make real and lasting gains, larger numbers of people needed stable jobs at decent wages. They realized that the most effective anti-poverty strategy was fighting for good jobs. While many were open to partnerships with unions, they were not very optimistic that unions would want to do it or, with labor law so weak, would succeed at it. Some had strong critiques of the way unions operated.
and wanted to try something new. In most cases, there was just no large scale organizing of any kind going on among the working poor. These community groups were committed to taking wage issues on and to organizing among low wage workers—regardless of the excruciating difficulty of the task and with or without union partners.

Opinion about these projects was decidedly mixed. While program officers of liberal and progressive foundations were quite enthusiastic about these efforts, most union leaders and staff were more dismissive. They argued that nothing short of large-scale union organizing drives would effectively reach and mobilize large numbers of workers and succeed in achieving significant improvements.

As a union and community organizer all too aware of the challenges unions face in trying to organize and raise wages for a significant percentage of workers at the very bottom of the labor market, I was excited by the prospect of investigating these new organizations even as I was uncertain of their prospects for success. Perhaps some personal history will help to shed light on my own interest in and enthusiasm for these groups. I had long felt that existing union organizing approaches would not work and that new paradigms were essential.

When I went to work at my first union job, for the Broward County central labor council in Florida in the early eighties, I was struck by labor’s strict adherence to rules: detailed contracts that governed even the minutiae of work, plodding union organizing drives run by the book to comport with the National Labor Relations Act, and an evangelical commitment to jurisdiction above all else—even when it no longer mirrored the realities of an industry and even when the union with jurisdiction was not effective in organizing. Coming out of community organizing, I was shocked to discover that doing politics in a local labor movement was pretty much confined to endorsing candidates and telling members to vote for them or endorsing a piece of legislation and telling members to write letters to their elected officials urging support.

Meanwhile, labor’s work in the community, coordinated through a community affairs committee, was avowedly apolitical—Ronald McDonald House, muscular dystrophy, hurricane relief, habitat for humanity, and organizing workers through their employers to affiliate with United Way.¹ When I and others questioned the utility of all this charity work for which employers and not workers received the lion’s share of credit, we were told that in a largely non-
union environment with a decidedly anti-union bias, labor’s community work was essential to convincing the community that, contrary to their reputations, unions and union people were really good, solid citizens.

I brought my questions about the peculiarities of the American labor movement to graduate school, where I studied with Ira Katznelson and read his book *City Trenches*. Ira’s ideas about American working class political development helped me make sense of what I had seen and experienced as a participant in the labor movement. In *City Trenches*, Katznelson argued that, for the American working class, there has been a dramatic separation between the economic organizing that had gone on at workplaces through unions and the political organizing that had gone on in the community through parties. Whereas unions were organized explicitly around class, the parties were organized around non-class identities. The idea of a sharp labor/community divide, which I had so clearly observed myself in terms of how American unions functioned, was a powerful way of understanding labor’s past. I wanted to see what would happen if I used the framework to understand the new community unions.

The community-based worker organizations I observed in the mid-nineties were a sharp contrast to the local labor unions and central councils I had been a part of. Organized by people either not from a labor background or reacting against their experiences within organized labor, these groups were not rule-bound, and had little interest in mounting traditional union organizing drives or engaging in traditional collective bargaining. Rather, they were committed to building organization among low wage workers and working with these workers to improve wages and conditions through direct action on employers and local political bodies. Politics was a huge focus for them but while vigorous in their pursuit of local living wage ordinances and other local public policy measures, they had little to nothing to do with the traditional activities of electoral politics such as endorsing candidates or working through local political party structures.

1 United Way was a particularly curious institution to me—hundreds of union workers organized to bring it to their workplaces, to encourage their fellow members to sign up for the weekly deduction, and then were denied support time and time again when they went out on strike and struggled to feed their families.

2 Interestingly, while many community unions offered legal clinics to workers, legal cases seldom were brought on the basis of violations of the right to organize and other provisions of the National Labor Relations Act. Low income workers sought information about their individual rights and in making their claims were most likely to make use of federal wage and hour and employment discrimination laws.

3 One memorable phrase I heard again and again from the IAF organizers in Baltimore was: “We don’t endorse them, they endorse us.”
Finally, their community work was part and parcel of their organizing work. The services they offered were not charity work disconnected from their organizing mission, they offered them to people they wanted to try to organize among--while they certainly provided information, education and services to workers with whom they were organizing, it was offered as a draw to prospective members and as an incentive to organize. Building alliances with other groups in the community was not done as public relations, it was done as power-building. It was not done as: “see, we can work together for the betterment of our community and leave politics aside” it was done as “see, we can work together to build power with which we can transform the politics of our community.”

In conversations with my academic advisors, I honed a set of ideas and developed the term “community union” to connote the community-based worker organizations dedicated to bringing together low wage workers to fight for improvements in wages and working conditions through economic and political action. These community unions were intriguing to me because they seemed to be anomalous to the “work/home divide” thesis. Was the thesis wrong? Had there always been examples of organizations that had bridged this divide? Or were changed economic and political circumstances in the contemporary period now giving rise to new types of institutions?

During the years in which I researched and worked closely with my two community union cases, the Workplace Project in Long Island and the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee in Baltimore, I became extremely enthusiastic about them. Here were organizations that were working in some of the worst inner city and suburban areas with some of the least skilled workers, building lasting relationships, developing leaders from among the ranks, engaging people in hard-hitting action and having some victories. They were innovative in their strategies and their institutional shape was fluid—not determined by comportment with labor laws. They were hopeful about being able to overcome the dues collection hump by exploring ways to collect them outside the collective bargaining context and they were working to offer solid benefits packages that would make workers want to join and keep their dues up to date.

In addition, the idea of community unions and the limited data that I had about their work in communities synched well with a set of theoretical questions and theories that were coming...
out of the MIT Industrial Relations and Political Science departments. Some of the faculty with whom I worked most closely at MIT were part of initiating a three-year research project called “Reconstructing America’s Labor Market Institutions.” Many of our discussions centered around the problem that the existing labor market institutions—labor and social insurance laws, labor unions, or employment relations departments within firms were outmoded, or “mismatched” to today’s changed economic structures. We worried that internal labor markets were disintegrating yet nothing was being put in place to replace them. The old order of industrial relations was declining and we were searching for signs of what would replace it. We were on the lookout for new “labor market intermediaries” that seemed to us to be more consistent or “matched” to the structures of the new economy. In this context, community unions seemed to be just these sort of newly emergent institutions and I was strongly encouraged to develop and share my ideas about them—and more than that—to promote them as promising new phenomena that might be important pieces of the puzzle.

In stepping back over the past two years and trying to sum up what my research has to say about the promise and the limits of community unions, I have tried to trace out the developmental arcs of each of the organizations beginning from when I first began studying them when they were quite young organizations, to the present day. It is a daunting task to summarize the richness and the limits of their accomplishments and I resisted it for quite a long while, but in the end it was more than apparent that if I did not get clear about this I could not finish my thesis. So, here is the appallingly oversimplified one sentence assessment: As organizations, failures, but as movements, successes. Community unions have failed to build large membership bases and to bring significant economic pressure to bear but they have succeeded nevertheless, in surprising ways in building political power.

Economic organizing—bringing pressure to bear on private sector employers sufficient to compel them to substantially improve conditions has not for the most part succeeded.

For several years, as part of the Local Union Study Group convened by Richard Locke at MIT, I investigated and wrote about the new paradigms for organizing that the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) were developing. Historically, building services and the building trades had both been highly unionized sectors of the economy. In attempting to rebuild their membership bases, the focus of each union’s organizing efforts was on recapturing control over local labor markets in their sectors. The questions these strategies raised for me were: 1) could a local labor market organizing approach succeed in other sectors of low wage employment? 2) to be successful, did a local labor market approach require a different level of relationship between unions and community institutions? and 3) were community organizations capable of developing and implementing campaigns of this nature?
Community unions with their modest budgets have not had the resources to engage in the systematic industrial research, analysis, targeting and one-on-one organizing that it would take to succeed—and they may also not have the inclination. Perhaps as an artifact of their roots in community organizing they have been drawn more to politics and less on narrowly targeting by industry or employer. But as local movements that have altered the terms of debate in communities and beyond, they have been successful.

I now realize that the excitement I feel about these groups comes far less from the realization of my original hope that community unions could significantly raise wages and improve working conditions for large numbers of workers, and much more from my deep belief in what they have been able to achieve as mini-movements politically, and in the area of community organizing. After all, Solidarity pioneered the first living wage ordinance and touched off a national movement that has seen similar ordinances passed in more than 60 localities and is still going strong today. It followed this with several other groundbreaking pieces of municipal legislation which, taken together have started to reconstruct a set of labor market protections from the bottom, for the bottom. Solidarity not only put the issue of wages fore square on the City’s public policy agenda, it defined the issue brilliantly—people who work hard should make a living wage—and won the sympathy of a majority of elected officials. The Workplace Project pioneered the strongest unpaid wages law in the nation and got it through a Republican senate and governor, and it has beaten back several attempts by local authorities in conservative communities to abolish public shape-up sites for day laborers. The organization has forcefully and effectively given eloquent voice to Central American immigrant workers not by speaking for them but by empowering a core of leaders to speak for themselves.

As evidenced by the transformed media coverage of worker issues locally and by the passage of laws as well, these organizations have altered the nature of the wage debate in the communities in which they have operated. They have legitimated the grievances of the working poor and raised their expectations. Certainly, these are the necessary preconditions for the difficult economic organizing that will be required in order to overcome the challenges of economic restructuring, privatization and globalization. Without the culture change these groups are able to bring about, effective economic organizing will be less capable of overcoming employer resistance. For these reasons, I believe that community unions have a great deal to offer a labor movement still struggling to organize the worst-off workers. Through one-on-one
relationship building grounded in ethnic and spiritual communities and through political action. Not tied to candidates and parties, community unions are able to bridge the work/home divide and bring community networks to bear on workplace problems. Thus, despite their failure to evolve into full-fledged unions, there are lessons here that, if embraced by unions, could help them to be more successful in their organizing endeavors.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION\textsuperscript{1}: INTO THE BREACH: COMMUNITY UNIONS

Immigrants and the working poor are a substantial presence in American urban workforces today, but in contrast to earlier periods in U.S. history, mechanisms for their participation at work, integration into community life and American politics and society more generally, have narrowed. Many of the institutions, civic organizations, churches, and especially unions that may once have performed these functions have either disappeared or are no longer effective in reaching them and acting as their true voice. In particular, membership in unions has declined steadily, from a high of 35% of the overall workforce in the 1950's to today's low of 13.5%. Although in the past five years the spirit of the American labor movement has been revived by a new leadership team that is devoted to organizing, the actual results have been quite discouraging. It is estimated that unions now represent less than 8% of private sector workers, or fewer than one in twelve workers. Recent statistics released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics show labor to be at its lowest level in six decades.

Into this breach a new type of labor market institution has emerged that is trying to fulfill a dual role of raising wage standards and developing mechanisms for voice for low wage workers in the broader society. I call these organizations “community unions” because they are based in specific geographic and ethnic communities (as opposed to specific workplaces) and they are made up of workers organizing together for improvements in wages and other conditions of work.\textsuperscript{2}

In the late 1980's and 1990's, community organizations began to focus on issues of work and wages outside of labor union structures. Urban activists were galvanized by the decline of

\textsuperscript{1}For significant conceptual and editorial help on this chapter, I am deeply indebted to my teachers Richard Locke and Josh Cohen and especially to my close friend and colleague Jennifer Gordon.

\textsuperscript{2}This notion of community unionism has been developed through a series of discussions with Michael Piore and Richard Locke as well as through a few key articles of theirs. Piore's are: "The Future of Unions" in The State of the Unions, Strauss, Gallagher and Fiorito, eds., (Wisconsin: Industrial Relations Research Association Series, 1991) and "Unions and Politics" a paper presented for the Conference on the Future of Unionism in Manufacturing in 1978. Locke's is: "The Demise of the National Union in Italy: Lessons for Comparative Industrial Relations
central cities and the persistent poverty of inner city residents, and angered by conventional
urban economic development strategies that insisted on the relaxation of regulation and the
extension of unconditional tax abatements as the price of attracting investment. These policies
seemed to give away the store to corporations without delivering on the promised high quality
jobs and more generalized community uplift. Churches and faith-based community organizing
groups like the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and neighborhood organizing groups like
ACORN, as well as community development corporations (CDC's) began to see jobs issues as
central to their goal of revitalizing urban communities. Other groups grew out of Asian and
Latino immigrant rights organizations, social service agencies, or individuals who were involved
in the Central America "solidarity movements" of the 1980's and 1990's. Begun by organizers
who observed immigrants' multiple travails in navigating the world of work, the absence of
effective legal protections and the lack of interest on the part of many labor unions, they started
organizations to fill the void.

A minority of these organizations are unions, or have some affiliation with a local or
international union, but most are not affiliated with unions at all. They are modest-sized
community-based organizations of low-wage workers that focus on issues of work and wages in
their communities.

These organizations are not advocacy organizations that lobby at the federal, state or
local level on behalf of low wage workers. They are not legal defense entities that work to
change laws on behalf of specific minority groups, and they are not social service organizations
that provide services to low wage workers. What distinguishes them from others that might
share their normative concerns and policy agenda is a focus on recruiting low wage workers into
membership organizations in order to speak and act on their own behalves.³ In the past, unions,
to some extent political parties, and certain other civic organizations were the vehicles through
which working class Americans acted together. My interest is at looking at what might be taking
their place.

Theory" Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 45, No. 2 (1992). Also, see appendix 1 on history of
community unionism as a term.
³ This study concerns itself exclusively with the study of grassroots power-building organizations that recruit and
mobilize members out of the constituency of low wage workers to take action on their own behalf. Of course other
organizations, including legal aid and defense organizations, public policy organizations, job training programs and
others have as their mission to help low wage, especially immigrant workers, but they are not the subjects of study
in this thesis.
The fact that I have grouped them together and given a name to the group, must not be mistaken for a common self-definition on the part of the organizations themselves. The term "community union" is one that I am applying to them, not one that they have selected for themselves. A subset of these organizations refer to themselves as immigrant worker centers and are referred to that way by others. For a short time, there was a formal network of immigrant worker centers that was bringing the organizations together and encouraging others to start. At present, there is a national network of day laborer organizing projects, virtually all of them are based at immigrant worker centers. Foundations are the only organizations that tend to group these organizations together, referring to them either as immigrant worker centers, "independent worker centers" or "labor/community collaborations." It has been in individual conversations with foundation personnel and at foundation gatherings that I have heard the most discussion about these organizations and their potential as a new model of organizing to improve wages and working conditions.

**The existence of community unions challenges traditional theories**

In addition to the practical role they are attempting to play in communities, their approach to doing so implies a break with long-held patterns and traditions in worker organizations in America. It is prevailing wisdom in American political science that there is and has existed since the Civil War era, a sharp bifurcation between the politics of work and the politics of community. This "work/home divide" is one of the central tenets of the American Political Development perspective on U.S. working class formation. In the workplace, the theory goes, workers acted on the basis of their class position and developed class consciousness because they were forced to engage in militant struggles with employers bent on denying them improved wages, working conditions and recognition of their unions. But in the community, the opposite was true. Instead of denying workers political voice, the formal institutional structures were open to them. In comparison to Europe's relatively closed system, white male suffrage

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4 In its focus on answering the question: "why no class-based party in America" it is sort of the organizational corollary to Sombart's classic query: "why no socialism in America?"
5 Katznelson argues that in Europe, the franchise was "expanded by fits and starts... Expansion was accompanied into the twentieth century by elaborate household, property and residence criteria. This political experience located class at the heart of the political process, and it thus helped create and perpetuate working classes that had the capacity to act politically." Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 62.
was extended to a large percentage of the white working class in America by the late eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, local political machines connected to mass political parties actively recruited working class men to play a role. Thus, a militant politics based on class that might have been the basis for a working class party, was trumped by party politics organized along ethnic, religious and territorial lines.

Today, when we look at the associational landscape of some American urban and suburban communities, we see organizations emerging that bridge this traditional work/home divide. These organizations are young and weak but they are interesting because they organize workers around class and ethnicity, both at their workplaces and in their communities. Since participation in party is no longer synonymous with pursuit of politics, rather than mitigating against them, core identities like ethnicity are helping to reinforce class-based appeals.

Community unions are combining features of labor unions, ethnic associations and community organizations to engage in organizing activities at the local level that establish a set of labor market protections for low wage workers. In contrast to most U.S. labor unions, there is no bright line separating the economic program—in unions usually pursued through collective bargaining with employers, from the political program—in unions usually pursued through electoral and legislative activity in close cooperation with the Democratic Party. In fact, it is arguable that some communities don’t make the same kind of absolute distinctions between the economic and the political that academics often. African-Americans for example, have often viewed the state as having played the instrumental role in setting the rules of economic affairs. 6

So far, community unions have seldom pursued their economic programs through traditional union organizing campaigns. They are more inclined to rely upon local community organizing and coalition-building with organizational allies to pressure employers as well as upon passing local living wage and other pieces of legislation that compel employers to make improvements. So far, community unions have seldom pursued their political program through political parties. Instead they pursue their political goals by crafting new laws and then organizing direct members and allies to bring pressure to bear on elected officials to support them. For community unions, economic and political issues are all part of a strategic whole. The organizations move back and forth between work site and community organizing and use a combination of economic and political strategies to achieve their goals.
This thesis will provide baseline information about community unions, contrast them to dominant craft and industrial models of unionism and explore where they fit in terms of historical and theoretical treatments of American working class development, with their stark separation between the economic and the political in terms of the associational lives of workers. In addition, the thesis will evaluate community unionism’s potential usefulness to the contemporary labor movement as it struggles to organize new members.

There have been few formal efforts made to comprehensively catalogue the set of organizations that I refer to as community unions. The most extensive list is the database that has been put together by the Phoenix Fund, a project of the New World Foundation which supports grassroots organizing efforts among low wage workers. Out of this database of more than 300 organizations, there are approximately eighty organizations that fit the profile of community unionism.7

A Predictive Typology of Community Unions

Community unions basically divide into four types that have predictable weaknesses and strengths:

1. **Community organization/No union partner**: These organizations are either new, free-standing community-based efforts to organize around work and wages or new initiatives created by existing community organizations. Many of the forty immigrant worker centers around the country fall into this category. They may seek support from other organizations including unions, but it is not a joint effort. They are most likely to succeed at three things: 1) altering the terms of the debate—what I call “climate change” in a local community, 2) developing a strong base of leaders out of the constituency group, 3) passing public policy. They are most likely to fail at two things: 1) building and institutionalizing a strong membership base and 2) achieving large-scale labor market interventions.

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6 For this point, I am grateful to Phillip Thompson of Columbia University, Department of Political Science.
7 The Phoenix Fund for Workers and Communities Clearinghouse, Phoenix Fund at the New World Foundation, 666 West End Avenue, suite 1B, New York, New York 10025, www.phoenixfund.org. Jim Sessions, working for the Neighborhood Funders Group in 1999 also undertook the creation of a comprehensive database that was never completed but included more than four hundred organizations. In 1996, Francois Carre and her colleagues at the Radcliffe Public Policy Center also compiled a partial listing.
2. Labor union or unions/No community partner: These organizations are either new union locals chartered by an international union for the express purpose of organizing in a given community and sector or new initiatives undertaken as part of a labor union's organizing strategy. They may seek the support and participation of community institutions but it is not a joint effort. They are most likely to succeed at two things: 1) building and institutionalizing a substantial membership base and 2) large-scale labor market intervention. They are most likely to fail at two things: 1) climate change and 2) leadership development. In terms of public policy change, they may or may not fail depending upon the ability of the union to project the issue outside a narrow special interest framework.

3. Community/Labor partnership but with community organization dominant: In contrast to "solidarity coalitions" in which community groups are mobilized tactically to provide support of union organizing efforts, or where unions are mobilized to give contributions of money or labor to community efforts, these are relationships that are more based upon mutual self interest and accountability in working together to improve conditions in the labor market through economic and political action. These organizations are explicit partnerships between a community organization and a union. But just as lobsters have one claw that is larger than the other, these partnerships often seem to have a dominant claw as well. In this first case, it is the community organization's leadership and culture that dominate the practice of the organization. They are most likely to succeed at three things: 1) altering the terms of the debate—what I call "climate change" in a local community, 2) developing a strong base of leaders out of the constituency group, and 3) passing public policy. They are most likely to fail at two things: 1) building and institutionalizing a strong membership base and 2) achieving large-scale labor market interventions.

4. Community/Labor partnership but with labor union dominant: Same explicit partnership around self interest and accountability, but it is the union's leadership and culture that dominate the practice of the organization. They are most likely to succeed at 1) building and institutionalizing a substantial membership base and 2) large-scale labor market intervention. They are most likely to fail at two things: 1) climate change and 2) leadership development. In

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8 This analogy to properties of the natural world is meant to be solely descriptive. While for the lobster, two differently-sized claws serve a clear function (one to hold and one to hammer), no parallel claim for functionality is being made here. Thanks to Weezy Waldstein for helping to clarify this distinction.
terms of public policy change, they may or may not fail depending upon the ability of the coalition to project an issue outside a narrow special interest framework.

Table 1.1
Typology of Community Unions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Organization (CS)</th>
<th>Union (US)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community-dominant (CP)</td>
<td>Union-dominant (UP)</td>
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Table 1.2
Predicted Strengths (+) and Weaknesses (-) by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>US</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Climate change</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>Leadership development</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Membership size and consistency</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>Public policy</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labor market intervention</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Common characteristics of community unions

Although they are heterogeneous projects, “community unions” share most or all of the following ten characteristics:

- They are “Organizing” not “Advocacy” groups: they work to organize people to act on their own behalf not to act as their advocates or representatives
- Outsiders: they are mostly organized by “outsiders” who, while perhaps “locals” do not come out of the constituency being organized
- Place-based: they have a local labor market focus
- Identity-based: workers identify as members of racial, ethnic or religious groups and as “low wage workers” and with the exception of healthcare and childcare, do not identify strongly by occupation or industry
- More “Movement” than “Organization”: they place worker organizing in a broader context of social and economic justice; the expression of their organizing is more through community organizing strategies than through workplace organizing or collective bargaining; they have weak structures--dues collection is not tremendously systematized and membership is smaller and looser than in traditional unions
- Hybrid Models: The organizations combine elements of community organizations and unions. As community organizations, in their rhetoric and organizing approach they resemble “Saul Alinsky-style direct action organizations.” In terms of unionism, they loosely draw upon elements of craft as well as industrial unionism, offering training and help with job placement reminiscent of hiring halls, but also taking a more industrial unionism approach in trying to organize sectorally--among childcare workers, or day-laborers or contract workers in public schools.
- Coalitional: they seek ties with other community organizations and religious institutions rather than going it alone in organizing workers
- Active membership participation: although they have not built large membership bases, a high percentage of those who do belong are actively involved
- “Thick ties” and Associational Monogamy: core members are closely tied to these organizations and seldom have strong ties to many other groups;
Service Provision for Membership Recruitment: they often use services (classes, health insurance and other benefits, legal assistance) to attract members and then try to convert consumers of services into active participants in the organization.

The Case Studies in brief

Research for this dissertation was begun in late 1995 and continued intensively through 1998. Since community unions were such a new phenomenon when my work began, I selected my cases on the basis of which organizations were the most promising exemplars of the new model. The two principal cases that I studied are the Workplace Project in Long Island, New York (community-based with no union partner) and Solidarity in Baltimore, Maryland (community/labor partnership with community dominant). During the three years of intensive study, I traveled to the cases at least four times a year and remained in close telephone and e-mail contact between visits. I interviewed staff, leaders and members of each organization over the three-year period, as well as important opinion leaders in each community and attended key actions and important strategy sessions and debriefed with staff after these meetings. I gained access to all internal documents of the organizations. To understand the larger economic and political context, I used census data, labor and labor market data, and historical data including newspaper reports.

The Workplace Project of Long Island

During the nineteen-eighties, Central American immigrants fleeing violent civil wars emigrated by the hundreds of thousands to Long Island and sought work. But in contrast to urban centers where newly arriving immigrants were able to connect to a cluster of ethnic, religious and labor institutions as well as some sort of infrastructure of non-profit social service and governmental agencies to provide services, here they found very little. Long Island was a difficult place for new arrivals to navigate, it had no real “center,” it was geographically spread out and politically decentralized.

The Workplace Project was founded in 1992 by Jennifer Gordon, a recent graduate of Harvard Law School, to create an immigrant worker center for Long Island’s Central American workforce that would bring workers together to develop economic and political strategies for improving working conditions within a framework of social justice. The organization is
governed by a seven member “all worker” board of directors that meets every three weeks and oversees the work of the staff, monitors organizing strategy and conducts budgetary oversight. In addition to the board, the organization has active committees of workers involved in specific areas of work.

The organization has pursued four strategies: First, taking exploitative employers to court, pressuring them to comply with back-pay orders and other fines and publicizing egregious cases through area media. Second, building a strong organization of immigrant workers through systematic membership recruitment and leadership development. As a draw for prospective members, it offers legal representation and worker’s rights classes. Third, direct economic intervention in low wage labor markets through picketing of individual employers, organizing specific groups of workers in the informal sector--specifically day laborers and domestics, and organizing worker cooperatives. Fourth, working to create a more sympathetic environment for Central American workers in the larger community through the cultivation of organizational and individual allies, members of the media and through the mounting of public policy initiatives.

Over its nine-year history, the Workplace Project has had important accomplishments. In many respects, the most impressive achievement has been the building of the organization itself. Instead of establishing a social service agency for immigrants, it has created a stable membership organization of immigrant workers and has done the intensive leadership development and training work to ensure that the organization is truly governed by immigrant workers. It has succeeded in creating a strong voice for the interests of low wage immigrant workers where none had existed previously. The organization is widely sought out by the media and opinion-makers and has been able to shine a spotlight on immigrant worker exploitation. Through its legal program, the organization has won over five hundred and sixty thousand dollars in back pay and benefits awards for workers. It has graduated close to 600 workers from its 9 week workers rights course, and succeeded in getting five of the six largest employment agencies that place domestic workers to sign a “Responsible Employer” pledge. Its most audacious achievement has been to secure passage of the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act, the strongest statewide wage enforcement law in the country. The law, supported by a republican senate and signed by a republican governor, increases penalties against employers who do not pay their workers from a 25% civil fine to a 200% civil fine, and from a misdemeanor with a maximum $10,000 penalty to a felony with a maximum $20,000 penalty.
Whereas the organizers and leaders of BUILD were explicit about creating a union and were explicit about developing strategies for building economic and political power, the Workplace Project never seriously pursued a union organizing direction and did not have an overarching strategy and analysis about impacting the low wage labor market or achieving political power. Aside from the day laborer and domestic work in the informal sector, the organization has not targeted other industries for economic organizing. In the context of a majority undocumented membership base, the organization has not sought to build political power by conventional means. Instead the group has focused on the accumulation of a cache of legitimacy and moral authority which in turn has helped it to win allies who possess political resources to its side.

Solidarity in Baltimore

The Solidarity Sponsoring Committee of Baltimore, Maryland began in 1993 as a project of BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, the Baltimore branch of the Industrial Areas Foundation--IAF) and AFSCME (the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees). Solidarity arose from a strong conviction on the part BUILD that the economic, political and spiritual revitalization of the inner city of Baltimore was impossible to achieve without steady work at decent wages for its residents. BUILD believed that it needed a union partner and sought out AFSCME, whose organizational self interest was in reversing the trend of privatization which was costing it members and in setting the stage for passage of a statewide collective bargaining bill. Solidarity’s mission is to organize among the primarily African-American, Christian low-wage workers in the service sector of Baltimore to improve wages and working conditions through a combination of economic and political strategies articulated within a broad social justice framework.

Solidarity is coordinated and staffed by BUILD and overseen by BUILD’s governing body as well as by national staff of the IAF. AFSCME has directly contributed staff in the past, but has primarily provided financial support to the organization as well as a local union charter so that Solidarity could constitute itself as a labor union. Solidarity has a steering committee of worker members and elects representatives to sit on the Strategy Team, the citywide governing body of BUILD.
Over the eight years of its history, the organization’s most important achievements have been passage of a set of local and statewide public policies that have put in place basic labor market protections for low wage workers who work for government or for government contractors. These have included: a municipal level “Right to Organize” ordinance which denies contractors with labor violations the right to bid on contracts; a “Right of First Refusal” ordinance which gives workers with good employment records the right to stay working at a facility even if the contractor turns over; and the nation’s first “Living Wage” ordinance which required contractors, when it passed in 1995, to pay a minimum wage of $6.10 an hour and has since been raised several times to the current level of $8.70 an hour. Finding themselves no longer able to compete on the basis of wages, several contractors were no longer able to deliver services cheaper than the City was able to do it for itself—as a result these ordinances led to the “re-publicization” of hundreds of jobs that had been contracted out.

Although founded with high hopes of building a new type of local union and devising new and effective union organizing strategies in the process, Solidarity has been least successful in this regard. Its greatest success has been in the public policy arena: working with BUILD and other Maryland IAF organizations, it has passed three ground-breaking pieces of legislation at the municipal level, shepherded two pieces of legislation through the state legislature and pressured the Governor to sign three executive orders. The development of the Living Wage ordinance in Baltimore catalyzed hundreds of similar efforts in communities across the country, with passage of it in sixty localities and campaigns underway in at least sixty additional communities. Solidarity also galvanized local union organizing. Whereas there was only one large-scale organizing drive underway in the early 90’s when Solidarity began its work (the AFSCME collective bargaining campaign for government employees) and that was in the public sector, now both the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees have kicked off major organizing drives. Both unions have become members of BUILD.

Despite important differences in constituency, organizational affiliation, strategy and program, the Workplace Project and Solidarity are both community-dominated community unions that have ended up with a similar set of strengths and weaknesses. The organizations are vibrant and have several hundred very active participants, but the membership bases are still fairly small and not formalized in terms of systematic dues collection.
been able to alter the terms of debate in their communities, casting the plight of low wage workers in moral terms and they have had solid success at public policy change. On the other hand, neither organization has yet succeeded at large scale economic intervention or worker organizing. At present, they are best at bringing community organizing strategies to bear on labor market issues and worst at applying union organizing strategies.

**Identity, Geography, Political Movement**

These cases illustrate well the three most important characteristics of community unions: identity, geography and political movement.

*Identity*

Identity is the uniquely distinguishing category of community unionism. It is where this model contrasts most sharply with other forms of unionism, because membership is conditioned neither by relationship to craft nor industry but rather by ethnic, racial and religious affiliations.

In the past, craft unionism, organizing and bargaining on the basis of occupation, provided an organizational category that skilled workers identified with strongly. When small artisanal shops evolved into early factories, skilled craft workers helped to lead organizing efforts among the semi-skilled and unskilled (as unskilled work has become more and more sectioned off from skilled work, we have seen less of this). As the pace of industrialization gave way to larger and larger factories requiring fewer and fewer skilled workers, craft unions and the craft union model proved inadequate to organizing these workforces. Industrial unionism, the idea that all workers ought to be organized on the basis of their employment in a particular industry, emerged as a separate and distinct organizational form and an organizational category that workers identified with.

For the workers of Solidarity and the Workplace Project, neither industrial nor craft union models offer a good fit. Neither provides a consistent, stable identity upon which to build solidarity and engage in economic organizing. While the structure of craft unionism—union-provided job placement, training and benefits—is a better fit for the workforce, “craft unionist” isn’t the right identity for workers who lack occupational consciousness as a member of a particular trade or occupation. As Wial argues, industrial unionism is also not appropriate to the low wage service sector because: “Industrial unionism is a plausible form of worker organization...
where, as in mass-production industries like automobiles and steel, clearly defined craft boundaries are absent, but clear boundaries between industries exist. In much low wage service work however, the prevalence of subcontracting blurs industrial boundaries, bringing workers in the same general occupation but in nominally separate industries into wage competition. Industrial unionism is economically inappropriate in such situations because an industrial union is unable to organize the relevant labor market so as to take wages out of competition. Industrial unionism is also inappropriate in such situations for reasons of union identity, because workers who are easily shifted across industrial lines are unlikely to identify their interests with a particular industry. 9

What made craft unionism craft unionism was training in a skilled trade, strong occupational identity and the idea of rights and benefits tied to occupational employment as opposed to firm-based employment. Craft unions were powerful because they controlled the supply of labor into the occupation. What made industrial unionism industrial unionism was the idea of organizing wall to wall in a factory, among all the factories of a single employer and throughout a mass production industry. Industrial unions were powerful because they were able to bargain collectively with an association of firms in their industries at the national or regional level and set “patterns” for the industry as a whole. Workers “identified” as members of an industry.

But what about workers who are neither skilled nor employed in heavy industry, or who have been excluded from craft and industrial union structures on the basis of race or ethnicity? As has been true for workers historically, to the extent that low wage workers, especially immigrants, are connected through their ethnic communities, the particular employment berths they occupy in low wage labor markets are determined more by their membership in an ethnic community than any other factor. 10 The community unionism argument concerning identity is that the ethnic, race, gender and community ties of low wage workers stand in for craft and

industrial identities. The Workplace Project is steeped in Latino culture and Solidarity is strongly rooted in the African-American church community.

There is an array of institutional and ideological implications of having racial or ethnic identity as the constitutive organizational category for worker organizing. Just as craft unions concern themselves with policy issues that will have an impact on the craft, and industrial unions are engaged by those issues that affect their industries, community unions identify with the broader concerns of their ethnic and racial communities. The organizations view civil rights or immigration issues as connected to their core mission around worker organizing—thus issues of class and race or ethnicity are joined in this model.

Geography

As political geographer David Harvey has observed “Unlike other commodities, labor power has to go home every night.” Community unions are distinguished by the fact that they are based in geographic communities more than individual work sites or industries and are defined by the geographic demarcations of community—neighborhood, city and town—and all that this implies. They define themselves in relationship to other community-based institutions: firms, local government, schools, business associations and other organizations of neighborhood, religious, cultural and political life.

At the local level, community unions can analyze labor market trends and opportunities in order to strategically target specific industries for organizing. Also, it is here that the impact of larger economic issues is experienced by families and neighborhoods: from lay-offs to privatization, unemployment, and the growth of non-standard work arrangements. Solidarity’s analysis of labor market conditions led it to political organizing because it recognized that local government institutions could be pressured to set some new rules at least for firms doing

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11 In the chapter entitled “Shiftless of the World Unite” Robin D.G. Kelley, drawing upon Earl Lewis’ work, writes: “During World War I, the all-black Transport Workers Association of Norfolk began organizing African American waterfront workers irrespective of skill. Soon thereafter, its leaders turned their attention to the ambitious task of organizing all black workers, most notably, cigar stemmers, oyster shuckers, and domestics. The TWA resembled what might have happened if Garveyites took control of an IWW local: their ultimate goal seemed to be One Big Negro Union. What is important about the Norfolk story is the startling success of the TWA’s efforts, particularly among workers who had been dismissed as unorganizable. Lewis is not satisfied with simplistic explanations like the power of charismatic leadership or the primacy of race over class to account for the mass support of the TWA; rather, he makes it quite clear that the labor process, work spaces, intraclass power relations, communities and neighborhoods—indeed class struggle itself—are all racialized. The result therefore, is a “racialized” class
business with city or state government, and that these new rules could help to stabilize employment, raise wages and serve as a positive example to other employers.

As I discussed in the previous section, in cases where occupation and industry matter little, just as identity is key, so is geography. In sectors with high turnover geography offers a way of being in relationship with workers in an ongoing way that is not wholly dependent upon being a presence at work sites. For a transient workforce, community unions have the ability to reach and serve potential members both before they are employed at a particular firm as well as after they have moved on. In this way it is possible for transient workers to be in stable, long-term relationship with community unions regardless of their employer or employment status. In this model, the organization is the still point in the changing universe of work: it is the nexus of skill development, job training and placement, and benefits provision. Both Solidarity and the Workplace Project have pursued these strategies: offering services, classes, training opportunities and jobs as well as mounting campaigns on important issues of public policy that affect low income communities. Solidarity has consistently worked to create an attractive benefits package—including health and life insurance, and negotiating with a bank to allow accounts to be opened without minimum deposits. It has created a temporary employment agency in order to help with job placement and training and is now in the process of raising money to open a full service workers center.

The workers I interviewed at the Workplace Project had changed jobs several times since they had first become involved with the organization—they moved from job to job but not from organization to organization.

Another way that community unions create a positive association in the minds of potential members is through politics—fighting for broader community concerns and issues that bridge the distance between what for many local unions are immediate, union specific concerns, but do not resonate with workers who are not members, and broader community concerns that will resonate with workers regardless of their current employment relationship.

Chapter 1. Introduction: Into the Breach: Community Unions

 Movement

With membership bases numbering from a few hundred to a thousand or so, community unions are significant organizations by community organizing standards of measurement, but by American labor union standards they are quite small. "Movement building" activities—organizing an activist base of workers and allies, launching passionate public campaigns, and casting the fight in economic and social justice terms—are central strengths of community unions. But "organization-building"—systematized membership recruitment and dues collection—is a central weakness. So far, in terms of membership recruitment and retention, the organizations’ aspirations have far exceeded their organizational capacities. Community unions do not have the stable, dues-paying individual membership bases that labor unions have. This is the case primarily because most community unions do not conduct standard union organizing drives and collective bargaining that would allow for a routinized system of payroll deduction and they have so far been unable to perfect an effective alternative system. Thus, beyond a relatively modest core of leaders and members who are the most involved, efforts to hand-collect dues have not succeeded, and efforts to implement systems of payroll deduction outside of a traditional collective bargaining context have not succeeded either. It is conceivable that so far the benefits offered have not been enough of a draw and that if the benefits package was attractive enough, workers would keep their dues up to date—to maintain their health insurance, for example.

In the few cases where a community union actually has a charter from an international union to organize a local union, and has succeeded in a worksite organizing campaign, another problem arises: for local unions to get to the point where they are self-supporting in terms of staff and overhead, they have to reach a certain membership threshold. Because their focus is elsewhere, and their staffing levels are quite modest, there is seldom enough staff devoted to systematic membership recruitment. As a result, even these community unions are not self-supporting. The vast majority of their budgets come from foundation grants and institutional contributions from churches and unions. This is the central paradox of community unions: the flexibility and anti-bureaucratic ethos that enables them to function effectively as advocates for low wage workers in the public arena may also prevent their institutionalization. It also is a central reason why community unions pursue the strategies they do.
Community unions combine economic and political action both as a matter of necessity and philosophy. They simply don’t have the requisite economic power to compel economic concessions directly from employers, so they turn to politics. They don’t have the direct political power to compel political concessions from elected officials, so they turn to political allies as well as to a different type of political organizing that mobilizes community sympathy for the plight of low wage workers. But necessity is not the only reason community unions enter into alliances with other community groups and speak in terms of social justice. They do these things because they are philosophically committed to doing so. They believe themselves to have a mission broader than improving the economic conditions of a particular set of workers—one that is focused upon improving economic conditions for all workers and upon the transformation of the larger American society.

Community unions do not engage in traditional electoral and party-building activities but rather independent political action through direct action community organizing tactics like “accountability sessions” in which elected officials are directly confronted by an organized base to support specific policy initiatives. They develop labor market policies that they feel will improve wages, benefits and working conditions and then organize to get local governments to enact them.

While some community unions do lay claim to large numbers of voters as members or close allies and so can legitimately claim direct political power, the political power of others is more indirect—it comes through the help of more powerful allies who come with either a larger base or some other type of status, and through the public assertion of justice claims—moral power—which swings public opinion to their side (and thus implies electoral support from community members).

So far, bringing economic pressure to bear through political organizing for increased regulation has been community unions’ most successful strategy. Since they have more political power (or access to political power through allies) than they have economic power, they have looked for ways of bringing public policy to bear on labor market problems. Because local, county and state governmental bodies often employ significant numbers of low wage workers, play a role in setting local and state labor market policies, and most importantly, are much more vulnerable to political pressure than private employers, they have been central arenas for
community unions. In living wage ordinances, they have been able to cast the struggle in economic justice terms: “it’s only fair that people who work hard for a living should be paid enough to support their families”-- as well as practical terms arguing that “our tax dollars should not be used to further a system that routinely pays below the poverty level wages and that since cities are governmental entities who rely on taxes, citizens ought to have a say in the quality of jobs their tax dollars go to support.” While activists are increasingly trying to craft ordinances that cover as many workers as possible, they also hope that, at least in tight labor markets, increased wages and benefits in one area of low wage contract employment will put upward pressure on other areas not covered by the ordinances. The argument that Baltimore leaders make is that, especially in tight labor markets in which demand for workers outstrips supply, the living wage in the public sector will put upward pressure on private sector wages.

Another important reason for turning to political organizing is that, with the rise of sub-contracting in the public sector, often low wage employers are embedded in a network of economic relationships in which they have limited ability to increase wages or benefits without an increase in government funding.

Structure of the dissertation

This thesis uses two case studies of community unions as the foundation to pose, and propose answers, to a series of theoretical and practical questions. In this introductory chapter, I have set out basic typologies and characteristics of community unions. In Chapter Two, I explore the work/home divide in much greater depth and turn to a historical discussion of the ways in which this divide played out in the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. In Chapter Three, I explore some exceptions to the

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12 In attempting to explain variations in political activity, Gary Marks argues that workers less able than craft workers to control the supply of labor into their occupations were both more likely to pursue “open” unionism strategies like industrial unionism (to seek to organize everyone who worked for their employer, regardless of occupation) and “…because open unions could not influence the labor market from the inside by controlling the supply of labor, they focussed on enforcing changes externally, through legislation and by threatening employers with the consequences of a complete shutdown of their enterprises…Both closed and open unions politicize the labor market by introducing power relations in place of the impersonal logic of market competition. But open unions have had to introduce political considerations in a more explicit way, by force of numbers rather than by controlling the supply of labor, and this has led them to support extensive political regulation of the labor market.” Gary Marks, Unions in Politics: Britain, Germany and the United States in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 47.

work/home divide and seek to explain why community unions have emerged within the past ten years and why they are more important to understand now than they might have been in the past. Following these chapters, are the two case study chapters, where I tell the stories of the two organizations at length. The final analytical chapter looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the two organizations and try to read my work back into the original formulation of the work/home divide thesis. The chapter also asks why Solidarity and the Workplace Project have had political success but economic failure. Then I look at the reasons, at least so far, for their failure to develop a successful approach to economic organizing.
CHAPTER 2. CITY TRENCHES: THE WORK/HOME DIVIDE IN AMERICAN HISTORY

The Political Consequences of Early Suffrage

As I elaborated in Chapter One, community unions are holistic, locally-based institutions that pursue economic and political strategies to achieve labor market improvements as part of a larger vision of social and economic justice. To understand their uniqueness, it is essential to understand what they are a contrast with. In this chapter, I explore the historic separation between the pursuit of economic and political interests in the life of the American working class, and some important exceptions to this history. I argue that the current emergence of community unions in cities and towns across America, with their regular breaching of the work/home divide, is a predictable result of the weakness of unions and parties in today's political economy.

In the opening pages of City Trenches, Katznelson states the idea of the work/home divide dramatically:

American urban politics has been governed by boundaries and rules that stress ethnicity, race and territoriality rather than class, and that emphasize distribution of goods and services while excluding questions of production or workplace relations. The centerpiece of these rules has been the radical separation in people's consciousness, speech and activity of the politics of work from the politics of community.

...The links between work and community-based conflicts have been unusually tenuous. Each kind of conflict has had its own separate vocabulary and set of institutions: work, class and trade unions; community, ethnicity, local parties, churches and voluntary associations. Class, in short has been lived and fought as a series of partial relationships, and it has there fore been experienced and talked about as only one of a number of competing bases of social life. What is distinctive about the American experience is that the linguistic, cultural and institutional meaning given to the differentiation of work and community, a characteristic of all industrial capitalist societies, has taken a sharply divided form, and that it has done so for a very long time. 1

1 Katznelson: 6.
Katznelson and others have described a long historical period when workplace and community were two distinct and separate spheres of activity with separate institutions of representation—unions and parties. Working class Americans, almost from the very start of the industrial revolution, thought of themselves as “workers at work, but ethnics at home” and pursued their interests in politics apart from their class identities.\(^2\) The explanation for this unusual separation was, in comparison to Europe, a legal system that was more tolerant of the development of trade unions and the early extension of the franchise to adult white males.\(^3\) Early on in the establishment of the American State (by the end of the Jackson presidency), popular sovereignty, manhood suffrage, popular participation, equality before the law and basic civil rights had been established as bedrock principles of American democracy, albeit extended to an extremely limited class of persons. Dawley argues that, because political democracy came into its own during the transition from the commercial to the industrial stage of capitalism, it was principally through the agitation of small property owners: farmers, artisans and shopkeepers as well as some slaveholders and members of the commercial gentry and not through an industrial working class that these rights were won. As a consequence:

...By the end of the 1830’s, the basic democratic objectives that might have been raised later on as class demands of industrial workers had already been won through the agitation of petty property owners. Thus in its formative years the American working class could identify with achievements of bourgeois political economy and could claim the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights as its own heritage.\(^4\)

Because a large percentage of white males could vote, from the mid-1800’s on, the major American political parties reached out to them and included them in their activities. According to

\(^2\) Ibid., 18.

\(^3\) Martin Shefter contrasts this to the British experience: “In an effort to win the elective franchise during the nineteenth century, the leaders of England’s skilled workers entered into a political coalition with the class beneath them in the social structure rather than the one immediately above. During this common struggle to gain the right to vote, artisans transmitted their ideology to laborers, and skilled and unskilled workers came to regard themselves as belonging to a single class, with interests in both the political and economic realms that were distinct from those of other social classes.” Martin Shefter, *Trade Unions and Political Machines in Political Parties and the State*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 140.

Dawley makes a similar point: “The modern European working class emerged when republicanism—let alone democracy—was still a thing of the future. In fighting simultaneous battles for political emancipation and economic improvement, they concluded that the state was an instrument of their oppression controlled by hostile social and economic interests. Thus the seed of widespread class consciousness was planted early in the history of Europe’s industrial revolution...” Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976): 237.
labor historian David Brody: “the rituals of campaigning, the fury of electoral battle, the symbolic meaning of party loyalty—these amounted to a preempting political culture that acted powerfully on American working people...Party affiliation intertwined with ethnic and religious identity.”

**History of Working Class Participation in Political Parties**

Although the Federalist and Jeffersonian Republican parties began to organize and structure politics in ways similar to modern parties between the 1790’s and the 1820’s, “modern” political parties as a mechanism for structuring mass political participation, were really invented in the United States in the 1830’s and 1840’s. The Democrats and Whigs assiduously worked at building party structures, recruiting party activists and waging campaigns in every state; with the active participation of working class voters, voter turnout hit a historic high in the presidential election of 1840 (from 26.9% in 1824 to 55.4% in 1832 to 80.2% in 1840). In contrast to the earliest model of elite parties, in which party leaders drawn from the upper class took a largely instrumental approach to members of the working class, these parties actively worked to recruit workers into their leadership ranks and to project sympathy for their economic issues.

The Civil War, which united northern wage earners with their employers in the Union cause, was another unique and formative experience in the early political life of the American working class that also had the effect of undercutting the development of a militant and separate working class politic. Again, according to Dawley:

> The 1860’s were the turning point of the Industrial Revolution, a period that saw the economic and political ascendancy of industrial capitalism and the full emergence of an industrial working class ready to organize national trade unions...and to unleash an insurrectionary spirit, as in the great strikes of 1877.

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4 Dawley: 236-237.

5 “On this point, if no other, the quantitative evidence seems entirely conclusive. The Democratic party attracted the Irish, the Germans, and the Catholics; the Whig party, evangelical Christians, both native-born and British. Other groups tended to split more evenly between the two parties. But for those swept up in ethnocultural conflict, religious and ethnic identity served as the primary determinants of party affiliation. These ethnocultural forces, cutting across class lines as they did, profoundly affected the political behavior of workers...” David Brody, *In Labor’s Cause: Main Themes on the History of the American Worker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48.


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At a time when scores of industrial cities like Lynn were seething with resistance to industrialism, national politics were preoccupied with the issues of war and reconstruction. Economic and social issues arose such as factory reform, hours of labor, the distribution of wealth and cheap money, but they were crowded off of the center stage of debate by issues of military strategy, presidential impeachment, racial adjustment and reconstituting the Union. Workers who had fought and bled in the war were vitally interested in these matters and did not have to be hoodwinked into paying attention by devious employers...Thus, a special configuration of events having to do with the inter-class character of the American Revolution, the radical, antimonopoly critique of capitalism and the nationalist impact of the Civil War established among nineteenth century workers an orientation away from class consciousness and toward a view of labor as one interest group in a pluralist society.  

From the Civil War period on, the distinction between the playing out of conflicts at work versus in communities became ever sharper and remained so, Katznelson argues:

The patterns of consciousness, speech and organization at work and away from work grew increasingly distinctive. Away from work, ethnic and territorial identifications became dominant. They were acted out through community groups and through local political parties, churches and secondary associations. At work, workers were class conscious, but with a difference, for the awareness narrowed down to labor concerns and to unions that established few ties to political parties. 

As a result of these unique conditions the American working class evolved separate realms of economic and political life. Workers engaged in militant struggles with employers at the workplace and joined unions, developing a strong class identity. But at home, the potential for a militant working class politics was trumped by party politics organized along “non-class ethnic and territorial affiliations”. Despite continuing efforts throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries to organize autonomous working class parties, they never really caught on with the vast majority of the American working class. Most American workers continued to be “mobilized into politics principally by political machines where they lived and by labor unions where they worked.” While unions certainly participated in politics and encouraged members to vote and play an active role locally, for the most part they channeled workers into mainstream party

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7 Dawley: 238-239.
8 Katznelson: 52.
politics and not into separate working class political organizations. Workers joined the dominant political parties and engaged in regular politics—voting the party line, working for party candidates and sharing in the spoils of patronage from big city political machines. In politics, ethnic identity mitigated against class identity and the two parties themselves cannot be said, for most of the last century and a half to have aggressively set out to conduct mass political education and agitation of workers around a working class vision or policy agenda.

On the contrary, Burnham argues that, although American “mass-mobilization” political parties are the oldest in the modern world, and emerged as “full-grown, recognizably modern structures” by 1840 (which was a full thirty years before their counterparts in Britain) they have had a case of “arrested development” since about 1915, at the latest. In his essay, “Party Systems and the Political Process,” Burnham asserts that American parties’ most creative period began around 1820 with the establishment of state nominating conventions to about 1848 when the Democratic National Committee was created. But he argues, “once that era had passed, very few major changes in organization occurred until the replacement of the convention by the direct primary during the years 1900-1915, and very few have taken place since…”

In her book about the New Deal and working class politics, Lizabeth Cohen makes note of the fact that in contrast to France and Italy, where workers were “less integrated into mainstream political parties...American workers, in contrast, even when they harbored a “class” agenda as in the 1930’s, turned to an existing mainstream political institution like the Democratic Party to achieve it. As a result, although at the time many individual workers and CIO officials hoped to accomplish working class objectives through the Democratic Party, the reality of the party’s broad base early on committed it to multiple, and ultimately less progressive goals.” Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 366.

One has to wonder as well, about the impact of institutional design on the question of working class party development. According to Rogers, of the approximately one thousand minor parties formed in the United States since the 1840’s, only 10 have ever polled more than 6% of the presidential vote. Could it be that workingmen’s parties never caught on because, given representational structures at the state and federal levels, they were increasingly viewed at best, as an ineffectual strategy and at worst, as “spoilers”? Rogers goes on to state that, “in the last century, outside that tiny number of states that have permitted plural nomination (fusion) candidacies, none has even been able to participate as an important player in determining electoral outcomes, much less electing any significant number of candidates on its own ballot line, for more than a few election cycles—and then, typically only during periods of massive economic depression or war.” (Joel Rogers, “Pull the Plug” Administrative Law Review, vol. 52, no. 2, 2000) 743-768. If our two party system has made it almost impossible for any alternative parties to emerge and grow—perhaps the failure to organize successful working class parties is a microcosm of this larger problem of institutional design. In a two party political system that requires aggregation of diverse constituencies, it makes sense that unions would not try to form their own parties.

Of course there have been exceptional periods, such as the New Deal era and the Reagan period of the Reagan presidency, when the parties were extremely ideologically polarized and the national labor movement did play a leadership role. During the 1930’s, working class voters were mobilized through their unions to support a strong class-based political agenda by building their local democratic party organizations and backing democratic candidates for local, state and federal offices. During the Reagan years, the labor movement was a key participant in challenging the right-wing Republican economic and social agendas.

Burnham sets out four functions served by fully developed parties under democratic conditions:

1) "constituent," "integrative," or "nation-building" in which the party fulfills an important acculturation and aggregation role—helping to mediate conflicting regional, ethno-cultural, group or class interests, and in so doing plays a critical legitimization function for the regime over all, 2) an office-filling function in which the party recruits and fields candidates for office, 3) political education/socialization for their mass bases and 4) policy-making once in office.

Burnham argues that American parties primarily engaged only in the first two activities, and that:

"So far as the function of political education is concerned, indeed, there is evidence that during the nineteenth century the parties were engaged in propaganda and political-socialization activities on a scale which knows no parallel today. This intense activity seems to have been closely related to the quasi-monopoly which election campaigns and partisan press of that period had on entertainment prior to the development of other mass media...But as the party press faded out of the picture toward the end of the nineteenth century, as elections became concentrated in November and terms of office were lengthened, and as non-political mass media undermined the salience of the political campaign as a species of entertainment, the educative functions performed earlier by parties tended to atrophy. American parties during the twentieth century have not been organized to provide political education or indoctrination for their clienteles on a month-in-month-out basis."

The integrative function, on the other hand, has been a central focus of American parties since the 1850’s because of the need to manage the major sectional cleavages between the South and the northeastern states. The Union went to dramatic lengths to prevent the southern states from seceding, and then later in allowing them to reassert their autonomy over political affairs post-Reconstruction. The south’s influence on national politics continued to be quite dramatic. Southern members of congress exercised enormous power during the New Deal period, the Great Society and through the 80’s and 90’s to the present day.

In addition to the regional cleavages, the huge influx of immigration that took place between the early 1880’s and 1914 also had to be managed, and on more than one level. Much of the middle classes of the northeastern cities were of the early American Protestant variety, and the working class they encountered was made up largely of newly arrived immigrants. But the immigrant working class was also tremendously fragmented along ethnic lines. This is where Katznelson’s thesis is joined-- the parties’ integrative function for the new immigrant working
class played itself out in terms of the construction of (in Burnham’s words) “non-programmatic, patronage fueled urban machines” which gave workers, in exchange for their votes, jobs, help with connections that led to jobs, and access to other types of social welfare benefits and services.

Although the story of immigrant worker incorporation through urban machines is historically accurate, it has lost some nuance in the retelling. While political integration was accomplished most effectively through the urban parties, what was the nature and depth of that integration? Plotke and others make a set of compelling arguments about the limits of the political incorporation that went on through the local machines. After all, they were undemocratic organizations and they greatly constrained immigrants’ political choices. Too little attention has been given to the ways in which the machines discriminated among ethnic groups, blocking the entry of some while favoring others, and established a system of clientelism among some urban immigrant communities. For these immigrant groups, the machines never provided any sort of real representation in the party or local government and shut out other more labor-based political options.13

In terms of fulfillment of the policy-making functions, Burnham asserts that the parties’ lack of internal cohesion and organizational capacity has made the performance of policy-making functions difficult as well. What have American parties looked like for most of the 20th and into the 21st century?

Typically, the American party is composed of an inner circle of office-holding and office-seeking cadres together with their personal supporters and limited number of professional party workers. This structure has been decentralized but probably not significantly broadened under the direct primary system. Outside this circle lies the mass of party identifiers, only a tiny fraction of whom are involved in any more extensive partisan activity than voting every two or four years...14

Liberalism, State Structures and the Separation of the Social from the Economic Spheres

Two arguments have been made by Burnham, Skowroneck, Lowi and Hartz, among others about why American parties have turned out the way they have. The first has to do with

12 Ibid, 278-279.
13 see David Plotke “Immigration and Political Incorporation in the Contemporary United States” in Hirschman, Kasinitz and DeWind.
federalism and the extraordinarily decentralized nature of the American State historically, which was a major stimulus to the development of political parties even while mitigating against their development into centralized, strong, programmatic and ideological parties.\textsuperscript{15} The second has to do with American political culture and the non-primacy of a left versus right ideological contest in the American context. In The Liberal Tradition in America, Louis Hartz makes the case that a "natural liberalism" has pervaded American culture and politics from the very beginning:

...for a society that begins with Locke, and thus transforms him, stays with Locke by virtue of an absolute and irrational attachment it develops for him, and becomes as indifferent to the challenge of socialism in the later era as it was unfamiliar with the heritage of feudalism in the earlier one. It has within it, as it were, a kind of self-completing mechanism, which insures the universality of the liberal idea...It is not accidental that America which has uniquely lacked a feudal tradition has uniquely lacked also a socialist tradition. The hidden origin of socialist thought everywhere in the West is to be found in the feudal ethos.\textsuperscript{16}

In America, as Bob Dylan once put it: "We is all individuals."

The federalism argument, as it applies at least to the Democratic Party in the era of the New Deal and afterward, is more complicated. Plotke argues that the defeat of the Republican candidate for President in 1928 opened up new opportunities for immigrant workers to participate in politics;

via the New Deal and the labor movement, they were linked with an emergent Democratic political order. The process of building this new regime diminished the power of state and local political machines. Machines did not disappear and Roosevelt was often happy to ally with them. But the New Deal moved decisions toward the national level and reduced the role of machines in supplying jobs and positions...By the time, the Democratic national regime fell apart in the late 1960's and early 70's, urban machines had often disappeared. Local and state party forms were relatively weaker and most political structures had become more national.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Chambers and Burnham: 278.
\textsuperscript{17} Plotke: 304.
Piore makes a different type of argument about the separation between work and home. He argues that the political world of Katznelson’s description had its origin in the evolution of work and the social structures in which work was embedded. In his article “Historical Perspectives and Unemployment” which compares the origins of the French and American systems of unemployment, Piore revisits the earliest days of industrial work in these two countries (the early nineteenth century for America, early twentieth century for France), days during which:

...industrial work...was combined in close geographic and institutional proximity to domestic work and agriculture. It tended to be done in small household-based workshops and put out to farmers. Thus, when industrial activity was slack, industrial workers simply shifted to farm tasks or household maintenance; when demand picked up, they shifted back to industrial activity. In the course of the century however, work moved off the farms and out of the household into factories that were separated socially, geographically and institutionally...

This initial separation between work and home was strongly reinforced in the New Deal and then post-World War II periods, due to the institutional construction of an industrial system that “led to the separation of work from everything else”. He argues that industrial unionism embodied a certain conception of industrial society that was characterized by a sharp distinction between work and other activities. This industrial system, set in place during the New Deal period, evolved into the archetypical 1950’s model of a single dominant wage earner with a wife and family at home in the suburbs. This system reinforced the separation of the workplace from home life, albeit for a different set of reasons. The isolation of workingmen’s issues to the narrowest of workplace concerns meant that labor’s legislative agenda was mainly procedural in character—focused on preserving the rights of unions to organize and to engage in collective bargaining but the larger agenda of families was left out.

The Labor Movement and the Work/Home Divide

The work/home divide was not only furthered through the diversion of the working class into the mainstream political parties, it was also reinforced through the institutional structures

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18 Michael Piore, “Historical Perspectives and the Interpretation of Unemployment” Journal of Economic Literature Volume XXV (December 1987), 1834-1850.
19 Michael Piore and I discussed these ideas most recently in a conversation on August 16, 2001, but he has spoken of them for years and published them in various articles and books.
that evolved inside of organized labor to address economics and politics. And this makes sense. Without a strong working class socialist or social-democratic political ideology, without a working class party, it makes sense that the national labor movement would mirror its membership and establish a very limited and pragmatic political operation. National unions as well as the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the merged combination of the two (AFL-CIO) reinforced the separation of economics and politics through internal structures that created separate organizing/collective bargaining and political programs and departments. But the American labor movement did not always take this form: for a brief period the Knights of Labor bridged the work/home divide. Indeed, for many labor historians and political scientists interested in explaining the ideological and organizational course taken by the American labor movement, the story of the rise and fall of the Knights is the ultimate “tale of what might have been”.

The Knights of Labor

Formed as a secret society in 1869, by six Philadelphia garment cutters disgusted with their craft union (almost thirty years after the emergence of America’s first modern political parties), the Knights aspired to the construction of a “labor fraternity” that would organize members of individual trades as the first step, but then would bring workers together across trades to pursue a republican economic vision. They believed that the specific difficulties workers were facing as the pace of industrialization quickened—declining wages and loss of autonomy on the shopfloor—were tied to a larger political problem: as the Knights’ George McNeill summarized the Organization’s position, there was “an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage system of labor and the republican system of government.” 20 Self government was only possible in a society of solid citizens possessed of sound judgement and wisdom. Like Jefferson’s “yeoman farmers”, these qualities of character were shaped first and foremost through their experiences as autonomous producers. The emerging concentration of wealth and evolving system of wage labor meant that workers would become more and more

20 Kim Voss, The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 82. As quoted in Voss, McNeill also said “We complain that our rulers, statesmen and orators have not attempted to engraft republican principles into our industrial system, and have forgotten or denied its underlying principles.”
economically dependent and more and more lacking in the qualities necessary for civic participation—thus imperiling the republican form of government.

The Knights argued that, to ensure the conditions of self-government, citizenship required the inclusion of a basic set of economic rights for wage earners including the right to reasonable hours of work, to membership in unions and to the union pay scale. But beyond guaranteeing a just wage and the right to organize, the Knights called for industrial democracy. Fundamentally, they believed that economic progress and prosperity rested upon the efforts of the laboring classes, but that under the current system, workers were becoming more impoverished and would never receive their just rewards unless the structure of industry itself was democratized and decentralized. The organization espoused a producers’ vision of a decentralized economy in which production and distribution of goods would be carried out by small local firms and entrepreneurship would be supported and encouraged through easy access to credit. 21 Undergirding their vision for American society, would be a thorough-going mutualism—in which the working class would see after its own people and build up its own institutions—this was the foundational value upon which a more just social order was to be created.

For a short time, the Knights were able to create a structure that was capable of overcoming the occupational, ethnic and geographic fragmentation that was the hallmark of the American working class. Knights’ local assemblies brought skilled craft workers together with less skilled workers across a variety of industries as well as ethnicity, race and gender: according to Voss,

...the Order was open to all workers—whether unskilled, female, black, foreign-born or independent craftsmen. And having opened the organization to a much more inclusive group of workers than any other American labor union, Knights leaders attempted to bridge the differences between these workers by continually stressing the importance of solidarity. ‘An injury to one is the concern of all,’

21 Because this was their ideology, as Hattam, Voss and others have suggested, the Knights had a more expansive answer than traditional trade unions to the question of “who is in versus who is out”: As Hattam suggests: “...As late as the 1870’s and 1880’s, many skilled workers did not consider the primary social cleavage to be between labor and capital or between workers and employers. Instead they identified as producers and allied with small manufacturers against the non-producing classes. The principal threat to the producer’s republic, from a NLU and KOL perspective lay with bankers, lawyers and land speculators—the quintessential nonproducers—who were endangering the republic through their abuse of political and economic power...” Victoria Hattam, “Economic Visions, Political Strategies: Labor and State” Studies in American Political Development Volume 4, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press): 91.
declared the Order’s slogan....the Order was not always successful in its attempts to overcome the skill, gender and ethnic differences that divided the American working class. However by the standards of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, its success was extraordinary: thousands of local assemblies explicitly recruited less-skilled workers, and by 1887, nearly one-tenth of the Order’s membership was female, and a similar proportion was black.22

By the mid-1880’s there were members in every American city and town with a population over 8,000. In a single year, 1886, membership grew seven-fold, from 100,000 to 700,000 and the Knights had local assemblies in every state. The KOL combined effective organizing strategies with strong cultural and political organizing efforts that concentrated on positing an alternative vision for American society. This breadth of activity meant that for a brief period, the Knights transcended the trade union model and created a more comprehensive cultural and social alternative. In cities and towns across the country, whole communities took part. According to Ostreicher:

Everywhere the Knights mobilized wider audiences than their own ranks, holding torchlight parades, mass demonstrations and monster rallies and entering local politics, overnight creating local labor parties in more than two hundred cities and towns. The Knights built on older traditions of mutualism, ethnic and craft fraternalism and neighborhood identity to organize a vibrant movement culture incorporating drama and singing clubs, picnics and social events, militia companies and marching bands, newspapers and debating societies...23

Despite this period of dramatic success, the Knights effectively collapsed as a national organization by the early 1890’s although some local assemblies lived on quite a while longer. While scholars have debated the ultimate reason for the Knight’s demise, there is substantial agreement that the national leadership’s opposition to popular local initiatives was extremely detrimental. On three key issues, sharp disagreements emerged between the national leadership and many of the Knights local lodges. First, borne of its strong commitment to an alliance with small producers, the national leadership of the Knights opposed the strike as a tactic and at a time when many lodges were becoming embroiled in local strikes24, the national publicly opposed them and withheld its financial support. Second, borne of a concern that partisan politics would

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22 Voss: 81
24 There was a huge strike wave in 1886.
divide workers along ethnic and religious lines, the national leadership opposed the establishment of local labor parties, at a time when many lodges were enthusiastically building them. Third, employers took advantage of the Haymarket incident to crack down on workers and destroy worker organizations and the national leadership of the Knights refused to stand with the Haymarket defendants.²⁵

In its strong pursuit of the political as at least equal to its pursuit of economic power through workplace organizing, the Knights differed from the normal pattern of trade unionism in America. The strong community-based territorial and cross-trade nature of their local structures as well as the autonomy and centrality of local assemblies were also exceptional. But, as we will see later in this chapter, they were not unique. Throughout the twentieth century examples of community-based worker organizing efforts persisted.

The AFL

By the 1890’s, the Knights had declined as an effective national organization, and the American Federation of Labor emerged as the largest and most effective national labor organization. In addition to deep internal organizational tensions and problems, ultimately the KOL lost out to the AFL because its vision and strategy was radically out of synch with emerging political and economic realities. Despite a literature that often portrays events in a left-right framework, it is arguable that the founders of the AFL were no less politically radical or committed to fundamentally altering the relations of power in America than were the Knights, they simply disagreed with the Knights analysis and strategy. Hattam argues that the AFL shifted its strategy away from the construction of a broadly defined producers’ coalition to one of building trade unions instead, because the producer’s vision of how the economy should function had simply become unattainable—the mass production model was unstoppable. Thus, in light of growing economic concentration and large scale industrial development, workers needed to organize unions in order to act collectively as a countervailing power to the huge business enterprises that were consolidating their holds in many industries.²⁶ In addition, the AFL, after

²⁵ Local lodges of the Knights were also tremendously disillusioned by the fact that, despite the Haymarket defendants being members of the Knights, the national leadership refused to come to their aid.

²⁶ Hattam’s view is that the AFL’s turn away from mixed assemblies across trades was not “just an attempt to narrow union activity across craft lines. Instead AFL leaders believed workers must abandon their old allies and establish exclusive organizations to represent the newly emerging working class.” Hattam: 101.
initially placing its central focus on politics just as the Knights had, found that victories won at
the legislature were being overturned in the courts. Because of this, Federation leaders
concluded that wresting support from the state through political and judicial action was less
effective than collective action in the economic realm. Thus the origins of the “business
unionism” model that is dominant in the American labor movement today are complex and
cannot be neatly consigned to ideological conservatism at the founding moments. Nick
Salvatore makes a parallel point about the pragmatism behind Samuel Gompers’ philosophy of
voluntarism:

Gompers elected trade unionism over labor politics as the basic strategy for
working people. This insight originally stemmed from his profound appreciation
of the fact that even favorable labor legislation required for effective enforcement
the concerted power of workers to withhold their labor…

During its formative years, Gompers and the American Federation of Labor asserted the
primacy of the economic struggle between workers and their employers and subscribed to a
limited political agenda for the movement. They also believed that, due to strong party loyalties
of members based upon ethnic and territorial identities, the other reason to limit political
involvement was to avoid factionalism within the ranks. By the late 19th century, most trade
unions included constitutional prohibitions on taking positions on political issues or endorsing
candidates for public office. Thus the activities members involved themselves in
politically—acting through the local branches of political parties in their communities—were
outside the purview of their local unions and orthogonal to their membership in them. These
prohibitions on political activity were overturned as the Federation was drawn inexorably into
political affairs by the events of the first few decades of the twentieth century. But the national
unions continued to place a premium on economic organizing and worked to ensure that the

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27 Business unionism is a unionism based upon workers’ interests in particular workplaces and industries, and
eschews any claim to representing other interests beyond the workplace. In terms of broad ideology, it accepts the
status quo in terms of the current economic system. Especially after the dawning of the Cold War, Hattam says, it
placed itself in “opposition to philosophies and ideologies in which issues of work and the economy are seen in
terms of a transformative vision of the socioeconomic system such as socialism or communism.” In terms of a
union’s core functions, the focus is on negotiating contracts and servicing existing members—the idea that unions
should operate like businesses for their members.

introduction by Nick Salvatore.
evolving political structure and program of the Federation would be subservient to their specific economic interests and limited in scope.

Although Gompers and the rest of the leadership of the AFL espoused a pluralist approach to the parties and had a formal position of non-partisanship, from as early as 1906, labor unions began to align themselves with the Democratic Party. According to Greenstone, "The AFL's strictly pluralist strategy of nonpartisan bargaining with each party proved untenable. Gompers and the Federation leadership concluded that the emphasis on homogeneity to make organization possible had to be supplemented by an alliance with a party seeking a majority constituency in order to make organization secure." 29 It was not until the New Deal that the labor movement solidified its relationship with the Democratic Party becoming in effect a "party organization"; in 1924 it endorsed a third party candidate for President (La Follette), and refused to openly endorse the democratic presidential candidates in 1928 and 1932.

The leaders of the unions that founded the American Federation of Labor enshrined the principles of trade unionism and trade union autonomy above all else. Trade unionism as a principle meant that training and employment in a particular craft or employment in a particular industry is what determined membership in a union. Local unions were constituted on this basis—local chapters of national organizations of carpenters, plumbers or auto workers, etcetera. As an ideology, trade unionism was a pragmatic unionism focused upon protecting the interests of workers and unions in a capitalist system and devoted to the bread and butter concerns of union members in a particular craft or industry: hours of work, training and certification, rules governing trade. Trade union autonomy meant national unions exercised control over their craft jurisdictions and the local unions they chartered, were not answerable to any over-arching labor institution and carefully controlled the scope of activities of the umbrella federation and the financial resources available to it to do its work.

The Federation has always been entirely dependent upon support from international unions. In order for it to provide over-all strategic direction it has to win over the majority of affiliates to its point of view. More often than not, this has created and reinforced a "lowest common denominator" culture. National unions and their local affiliates have the lions' share of resources and are essentially free to join or not to join the local and statewide coordinating

bodies of the labor movement: central labor councils and state federations of labor. These coordinating bodies are charged with conducting community relations and politics but given very few resources to do so, comparatively less say in Federation affairs and prohibited altogether from organizing. AFL-CIO central bodies are thus limited in their ability to organize the unorganized, and to coordinate strategy between unions. As a result, they have not been able to effectively mediate disputes between local unions or to bring locals together to concentrate economic and political pressure on common targets.

The CIO

In his The CIO Challenge to the AFL: A History of the American Labor Movement 1935-1941, Walter Galenson writes:

The period...from the formation of the CIO to the entrance of the United States into the second World War, was one of the most significant in the history of the American labor movement. Within the brief span of six years, American workers in the basic industrial sector of the nation witnessed the transformation of their bargaining structures from relatively impotent bodies into equal partners in the industrial relations system. It is no exaggeration to say that there was a fundamental, almost revolutionary change in the power relationships of American society. Few episodes in our history have been as dramatic as the upward thrust

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30 "...Unlike the affiliated national trade unions, the city centrals and state federations were directly subordinate to the AFL...." Brody, In Labor's Cause: 58.
31 "...They held only one vote each at AFL conventions, while national union representation was on a generous per-capita basis. At every level, AFL included, labor's political units were severely circumscribed. Their share of the dues flowing into the trade unions was tiny, and compliance with their political decisions was strictly voluntary. This distribution of power and resources quite precisely reflected the low standing of political action within the trade-union movement." Ibid: 58.
32 The exception to this general rule was the federal local unions included in the original constitution of the AFL and chartered directly by the AFL President. Similar to the mixed assemblies of the Knights of Labor, the federal locals enrolled unorganized workers in various trades in a geographic area. When enough workers in a given occupation joined, the group was then attached to the national union. If the national union rejected the new local which some did because they contained unskilled workers, the local was allowed to remain directly affiliated with the AFL. Although some have argued that the federal local was evidence of Gompers' concern with getting past the jurisdictional issues of international unions and organizing the unskilled, Foner argues that the federal local union was used by Gompers as an "out" for racist local and international unions who refused to allow workers of color in their organizations. See Philip S. Foner, Organized Labor and the Black Worker: 1619-1981, (New York: International Publishers, 1981): 72-73.
33 Despite the structural limitations and ideological confinements at the top of the Federation, from the 1890's on, central labor councils and state federations did play a role in the great reform movements of the Progressive and New Deal eras. But in these movements, they were followers not leaders. Historian David Brody notes: "In this, they were not so different from the urban political machines. Neither of them was an innovator in social and political reform—that was the task of middle class progressives, but both learned fast and became in the end sustaining elements in what historians have designated "urban liberalism." Brody: 59.
of American labor, suddenly breaking the bonds of constraint which had checked it for half a century.

...The defeat of the industrial union forces at the 1935 convention of the American Federation of Labor marked a new epoch in American labor history. The establishment of the Committee for Industrial Organization heralded a split in the forces of labor deeper and more permanent than anything in the past. For two decades, the factories, the press and the legislative halls of the nation were to resound with strife between the contesting groups, each attempting to secure the allegiance of workers and to enroll them within its ranks...34

Just as the idea of the Knights of Labor represented an alternative vision for American labor and a path it might have trod as a movement, the idea of the Committee for Industrial Organization, insofar as it was about industrial unionism and the ways in which a federation based in industrial unions might operate differently from the AFL, also represented a possible alternative trajectory for the movement. But it was not to be.

Formed in 1935 by a subset of national unions favoring organization of the new mass production industries, the CIO started out as a committee of AFL unions committed to organizing unorganized workers in mass production into a nationally chartered federated local labor union structure and then bringing them into affiliation with existing AFL unions. In these early efforts, labor historian David Brody distinguishes between the craft unions' interest in “mass production unionism”—essentially organizing workers in the new industries into existing craft unions versus “industrial unionism”—including all workers in an industry within one union. The former model, with which the craft unions that dominated the AFL were most comfortable, ended up making little sense in practice. Workers who were organized in the large industrial shops wanted to remain together after their initial organizing drive, not be divided up according to pre-existing lines of craft jurisdiction. Despite professing an interest in organizing the mass production industries, the AFL unions were unbending on issues of exclusive jurisdiction and trade autonomy and unwilling to invest the requisite resources (which were still largely in their individual hands, not the Federation’s) to organize large-scale industrial unions. In the face of this conflict, the CIO institutionalized itself as a separate national labor federation, making the shift from the Committee of Industrial Organizations to the Congress of Industrial Organizations, late in 1937 after unity negotiations with the AFL broke down. It continued as a separate and

competing national federation until the two finally merged twenty years later. The organizing was a spectacular success. Within a decade, with the help of the breakaway AFL unions, including large grants from John Lewis’ United Mine Workers to the Steel Workers Organizing Committee as well as Sidney Hillman’s Clothing Workers union to fledgling efforts in the textile industry, a majority of the mass production industries were organized. The heroic participation of thousands of rank and file members coupled with the violent resistance of the great industrial combinations etched a new chapter in the history of American social movements. The great new industrial unions were brought to birth by widespread, militant direct action, and the right to join a union, at least after 1937 was believed to be strongly supported by the President of the United States.

The industrial organizing drives brought large numbers of workers together across narrow bonds of craft jurisdictions into larger industrial communities. Different ethnic and linguistic communities in the shop became important spokes in the wheels of organizing which then merged together with other work groups and ethnic communities in common direct action. In contradistinction to a culture of exclusivity and in some cases of xenophobia and racism within some of the craft unions, the CIO identified a strategic advantage (not just a moral imperative) in championing the cause of equal treatment for African-American workers within the shop as well as without. The AFL was not able to compel individual craft unions to open their doors, and while adopting positions in favor of racial equality in broader American society, it was not matched on the ground with action. African American, immigrant and women workers responded to the CIO’s welcome mat by flooding into the ranks of industrial unions. The political needs of the industrial unions also necessitated a shift from the craft unions’ focus on the pursuit of a narrow agenda through purely local politics to an activist stance with a focus on a national program including industrial regulation, social welfare, labor law and trade policies. Given Roosevelt’s support for union organizing and the enormous CIO victories in auto and steel in the wake of his landslide re-election in 1936 as well as the support of the liberal democratic governor of Michigan during the Flint strike, the CIO and its membership at the local level became increasingly committed to the Democratic Party. As Greenstone argues, the 1930’s affected the labor movement and the Democratic Party in very similar ways: just as the labor movement was broadened out by the industrial union drives, Greenstone argues, “the Democrats dramatically expanded their constituency to include the same groups of urban industrial workers.
and ethnic minorities that the CIO brought into organized labor.” In addition, “...labor and the party profited from an intense, if transient, political and social awareness. These feelings, temporarily approaching class consciousness, destroyed traditional partisan allegiances often acquired in childhood, as well as the deep-seated ethnic hostilities that had inhibited unionization among industrial workers.”35

Just as on the shop floor, class consciousness was reinforced by ethnicity, the early CIO unionism got out of the workplace and into the community, embracing a broad agenda. Faue writes,

...They rooted unions in the community and directed their attention to what can be described as the reproductive sphere—specifically, consumer concerns, family and community networks, and education. In Minneapolis, San Francisco, Akron, Toledo, Flint and the cities of New England, the labor movement was strengthened by networks of sociability, ethnic association and political affiliation. Working class activism through 1937 was local activism, at times encouraged by, but kept at a distance from established bureaucratic structures. For women, the new orientation of the labor movement in the 1930’s was crucial...Encouraged by an egalitarian call to organize the unorganized and make their cities union towns, women joined unions in the workplace and formed auxiliary units. They engaged in strategies of solidarity including strike support, boycotts, union label purchasing, education and political action in behalf of labor...36

Faue argues that by the 1940’s, however, the labor movement again became more exclusively tied to the workplace. Politically, while the CIO forged important new structures for actively engaging its members in partisan politics, it remained within the confines of a Democratic Party that was always aggregating a much larger set of interests. It never was and never became a working class party.

By now, many labor analysts have debunked the mythology of the CIO as ever having been a radical alternative to the pragmatic trade unionism of the AFL. Despite earlier incarnations of industrial unionism that were radical, utopian dreams of an industrial unionism that would advance a thorough-going critique of American society and economy, a program for industrial democracy and possibly a demand for public ownership of basic industry were not those of the pragmatic national labor leaders who broke away from the AFL to form the CIO.

35 Greenstone: 40.
Their interest in organizing the unorganized through an industrial union strategy was tactical and certainly had implications for the structure of these new national unions, but in the end not for their political philosophies and practices. In his chapter on the emergence of mass production unionism, Brody quotes Chester M. Wright, a labor consultant in the 1930’s who observed: “Much has been said about principles in the war between the CIO and the AF of L...as I see it, the whole dispute is one involving tactics and practices. I fail to find any principles at any point.” This pragmatism had its parallel in terms of the CIO’s politics, as James Q. Wilson explains:

Indeed, for a while it seemed as if industrial unionism would produce a lasting and organized radical impulse in American politics. Walsh, an early pro-labor historian of the CIO expressed the hope in 1937 that to those conventional items in labor’s platform (social security, wages and hours legislation, support for the Wagner Act) would be added a demand for public ownership of various basic industries, but neither Labor’s Nonpartisan league nor the PAC took up the socialist view...

By the time of the merger, the AFL had become less narrowly focused on local politics and more invested in a national legislative program that was not unlike that of the CIO, whose politics became increasingly conventional. According to Wilson, “In time, and surely no later than 1950, the CIO had become, not an alternative to the Democratic Party, but an adjunct to it, concentrating on helping candidates get elected within the two-party system and supporting liberal Democratic measures, at least on domestic issues, in Congress.”

Thus, by the time of the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955, the archetype of the “work/home divide” of militant independent economic organizing combined with conventional party politics was once again the norm.

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37 Brody: 88.
39 Ibid.: 134.
The American working class of the City Trenches thesis reflected a strict separation between economic activity, carried out through unions, and political activity, carried out through parties. Workers did not seek to vindicate the economic issues they felt so strongly at the workplace through independent action in the political realm. Workers maintained a class identity and a militant stance in the workplace, and expressed other identities – ethnic, religious, territorial – through mainstream participation in politics, not through protest.

The City Trenches thesis explains a great deal about the historical development of working class politics and the nature of the American labor movement as an institution. But this history has not been without substantial exceptions. Gerstle argues that this other history, the history of immigrants of color who were not incorporated into local political institutions was ignored because for so many years historians of immigration did not pay attention to race.

“...Immigration history was conceived of in Eurocentric terms. The histories of non-white, non-European immigrants-Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans and others-were ignored by most of the major figures in American immigration history and sociology. The relations between European immigrants and blacks received almost no attention. Studies of nonwhite groups were regarded as irrelevant to the main drama of transatlantic migration. It is hardly accidental that the nation’s greatest monument to the immigrant—the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor—affirms the Eurocentric tradition and marginalizes the experience of those who came to the United States via the Pacific or across the Rio Grande.”

When we read the experience of non-whites back into the city trenches paradigm, we can see that perhaps there was more than one political trajectory for elements of the American working class. At times when unions and or parties failed to act in ways consonant with the city trenches model—particularly with regard to service workers (including many women), workers

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1 See Gerstle in Hirschman, Kasinitz and DeWind: 287.
of color, and non-white immigrants in the post World War II period—city tunnels appeared in lieu of city trenches. As I will illustrate shortly, the more recent history of successful organizing in these communities is dotted with examples of strategies and affiliations that link the economic and political arenas. Contemporary community unionism is, in its way, only the latest in a long line of examples of a city tunnel in lieu of a city trench.

Because trends in the labor market and the workforce are moving inexorably toward those industries and people who have been the exceptions to the city trenches rule, these new tunnels demand a more detailed exploration. Each of the following examples demonstrates how the walls of the city trench have been breached, especially in the period after the Second World War.

**HERE Waitresses Union**

Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) waitress unions from 1900 through the middle of the century were an early example of a tunnel between the trenches, both because the unions’ principal organizing category was gender as much as class, and because union members carried their gender and class identities into their political activity. In so doing, the waitresses created an identity and an occupation out of what was considered the low skilled work of loose women.

The first permanent and separate HERE-affiliated waitresses union was chartered in 1900 in Seattle and by the First World War there were seventeen separate waitresses’ locals. Unlike the vast majority of American unions launched during the first decades of the twentieth century, these locals managed to survive. Although they reached their peak strength in the 1940’s and 50’s, many waitresses locals thrived until the 1970’s, when they were ordered to merge with male locals in the case Evans v. Sheraton Park Hotel.

Waitresses built the union around their identities as women as well as around class consciousness. Dorothy Sue Cobble argues that the form the union took was very much shaped by the gender specific experiences of waitresses. As more and more women entered food service over the first few decades of the twentieth century, they confronted difficult work environments and working conditions and embraced unions. Because of gender stratification within the

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2 As I explored these examples I found a strong coincidence between these alternative forms of organization and a lack of coverage of these groups of workers and industries in the original National Labor Relations Act.
industry, and the sexist attitude of male waiters toward waitresses, women evolved separate local unions and established a distinct form of craft unionism with hiring halls, job training and placement, strict self-regulation and peer discipline.

"Working woman" – with its class and gender elements equally paired - was the key category that was accessed in order to build solidarity among workers at work to form, expand and maintain a union. The predominantly single, full-time employed women of these locals identified strongly as workers and more specifically as waitresses, did not have families to fall back on and looked to the union for job placement, professional respect, important sickness and death benefits and a community that extended beyond the workplace.³ Defying the typical "skilled" versus "unskilled" worker dichotomy implied by the craft paradigm⁴, these sex-segregated locals with their appeals to gender and occupation were quite successful in organizing the hotels and restaurants within their jurisdictions and the women workers within them.

In addition, union members traveled into the realm of politics with their identities as working women intact. Their work in local and statewide politics and in legislative reform campaigns was carried out with the same militancy and along the same lines as their organizing efforts. Thus they did not organize along different lines at home than they did at work—gender and class were consistent and reinforcing between the two. To elaborate upon Katznelson’s phrase, “waitresses were organized as women at work and women workers in the community”.

UFW ⁵

The organization of the United Farm Workers (UFW) during the 1960’s is an important example of ethnicity as a constitutive identity for worker organizing and politics. Ethnicity was

³ Cobble argues that “because many waitresses lacked strong family bonds and lived outside the traditional family setting, they needed union institutions that would provide emotional and social sustenance as well as economic. In response, locals adopted the standard union practice of setting up sick and death benefit funds for its members. They also organized social events, concerned themselves with family problems such as childcare and even attempted to establish rest and recreation homes. In one extreme example, one waitress, in the hospital recovering from a suicide attempt had listed the Waitresses Union as her next of kin. Dorothy Sue Cobble: Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 130-133.

⁴ Cobble writes: “Waitresses desired to raise their moral and social status by establishing their work as a distinct craft and themselves as skilled craftswomen...To elevate waitess work and achieve the dignity they felt was rightfully theirs, waitresses developed extensive “craft rules” that were designed in part to define the boundaries of their occupation and secure employer recognition of table service as a specialized trade. They also restricted union membership to those deemed competent, took responsibility for training new entrants into the industry, and monitored work performance through fines and removal of unacceptable workers from the job.” Cobble: 120.

⁵ This section draws upon the book by Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement (San Diego, New York, London: Harvest/Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1997.)
the key constitutive category of the UFW, much more than class. And the union directly channeled the militancy that was generated in the workplace into political activity.

The union that was to become the United Farm Workers of America began as a community organization that took up worker issues. It was launched by community organizer Cesar Chavez in 1962, after working for ten years with the Community Service Organization (CSO) and Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) affiliate in California. Using Chavez and others' well-honed community organizing skills, the new organization recruited members by going from community to community, tapping into family and church networks, speaking at house parties and developing strong networks of rank and file leaders. They sought to build a movement that was as much about the ethnic pride of Chicanos as it was about the dignity of farm labor.

Politics were a part of the UFW's organizing plan from the beginning. Chavez understood that "Alone, the farmworkers have no economic power, but with the help of the public they can develop the economic power to counter that of the growers." Tapping into the cadre as well as the repertoire of the anti-war, anti-poverty and civil rights movements, the UFW engaged in civil disobedience, marches and rallies to make the plight of farm workers visible. Through targeted economic boycotts aimed at particular growers, the UFW was able to turn liberal support into effective organization to support "La Causa".

By the summer of 1970, the UFW succeeded in bringing 85% of table grape growers under contract. Unfortunately, after this landmark agreement, the UFW was faced with a protracted battle with the Teamsters union that was recruited by growers who felt it would be less of a militant union to deal with. Since there were no labor laws at the federal or state level which gave farm workers the right to organize and bargain collectively, growers could sign contracts directly with the Teamsters with absolutely no demonstration of support from the workers themselves.

The UFW launched a political organizing campaign to oppose anti-union legislation and referenda and to pass legislation providing a set of labor law protections for farmworkers. In 1975, it won the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA), which guaranteed the right of workers to organize and collectively bargain through representatives chosen through secret-ballot elections, and the Teamsters were vanquished. Despite the ALRA, the farm workers continued to struggle to increase the union's membership in the face of more hostile political leadership,
persistent opposition on the part of many growers as well as the continuing presence of a huge labor supply, many of whom had no emotional connection or experience with the UFW.

The United Farm Workers union saw ethnicity and class as mutually reinforcing categories for workplace organizing as well as political participation. And politics was conducted not through party structures but through community organizations. Farm workers were organized around work issues and community issues through the lens of ethnicity—they were "ethnics at work and ethnics at home". The political activities that farmworkers engaged in thus grew out of and were a direct extension of the economic organizing they were doing in the fields.

**AFSCME Sanitation/Memphis**

Another example of a city tunnel is the 1968 struggle of black sanitation workers who were members of AFSCME, in Memphis, Tennessee. The Memphis sanitation workers' identity as black people was certainly as central as class consciousness to their understanding of why they faced such poor working conditions—and to their vision of what had to be done to remedy it. They saw the problems they faced at work as the result of generations of racism and political exclusion, and they sought to remedy them through tactics of protest in both economic and political realms.

Best known because it was at their April, 1968, rally that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Memphis's sanitation workers faced abysmal working conditions. They worked without protective clothing or bathrooms, were given no pensions, and earned wages so low that forty percent of them qualified for supplementary welfare checks to support their families and many collected food-stamps. The strikers demanded an end to discrimination in addition to a written contract that would guarantee a wage increase, health benefits and a pension. They were explicit in their analysis that the exploitation that they faced on the job was a direct outgrowth of the racism and discrimination that African Americans faced in the city at large.

The mayor refused to deal with the strikers until they returned to work and the Memphis newspapers supported him completely. The strike was only won because of the support of the Memphis black community, including church and civic groups. Casting the strike in civil rights language, the groups used slogans like “Justice for the strikers-Jobs for all the People.” Faced
with an injunction to return to work, the Memphis sanitation workers stayed out, and the black community responded by organizing a boycott of downtown stores as well as daily marches through the downtown which reduced retail sales by over 40%. King came to town five weeks into the strike and from then on, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference played a significant role in the conflict. Tactics included a boycott of the newspapers and of downtown stores until the bulk of the workers’ demands were met. This was a militant political strategy to win economic rights, based on racial more than class identity.

11997

The immigrants and people of color who made up New York City’s hospital workforce and the membership of Health and Hospital Workers Union Local 1199 are our final example of a “city tunnel.” Both because of the strength of their ethnic affiliations and because of their strategic assessment that hospital strikes would not be won without the support of the community, the people who staffed hospital laundries, cafeterias and maintenance departments organized around the identity of being people of color and they turned their economic struggle into a political battle involving a wide range of allies.

In 1957, despite the fact that hospital workers were excluded from the NLRA, the union initiated a hospital organizing drive beginning with Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx. The campaign came on the heels of a concerted campaign of efficiency reforms led by outside professionals. Ripe for the union’s message of dignity and respect, the kitchen and laundry staffs were most severely impacted by changes in work organization and became the backbone of the unionization drive. The union also recognized that it could only organize all non-professional workers at the hospital if it respected the distinct culture and identity of each department and then built a coalition of each of these separate entities. Leaders were recruited from each work group. The union’s strong commitment to racial equality guided its organizing approach.

Once the drive was well underway inside the institution, the union, in what would become its signature strategy, enlarged the battle beyond the workplace to enlist powerful allies and cast its drive in stark moral terms. It won the support of the New York Times editorial board as well as Eleanor Roosevelt and Harry Van Arsdale, president of the New York City Central

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6 Foner: 378-396.
Labor Council who hoped to use support for the drive to enhance labor’s image with regard to organizing the growing nonwhite workforce. Ultimately, the progressively minded “social medicine” upper-echelon management of the hospital broke with its own Board of Trustees, and strongly pushed for a settlement.

The union won an historic agreement at Montefiore in late 1958. It was the first openly negotiated contract at a hospital in the post-war era and catalyzed enormous interest in unionization on the part of New York City hospital workers, thousands of whom struck and agitated until, in 1963 the New York state legislature passed a law allowing collective bargaining in the city’s voluntary hospitals. By 1970, 1199 had 30,000 members and three quarters of the city’s hospital labor force was unionized.

The politics in which Local 1199 engaged had nothing to do with local party machine politics. Rather than working through party structures and partisan politics, 1199 engaged in direct community organizing and built a reform coalition of pro-civil rights organizations and key elites as a necessary extension of its union organizing effort. Again, race and class, politics and economics marched hand in hand.

While the preceding examples all fall outside of the prevailing craft or industrial union paradigms, they all did eventually constitute themselves as unions. Further historical research would likely yield a host of examples of community-based organizing around work and wages that were wholly outside of a union context. Given the racial, ethnic and gender exclusivity of so many American unions, it is probable that not all efforts mounted by immigrants, workers of color and women have been included in the canon of American labor history. Thus although the work/home divide paradigm is premised upon an assumption of worker organizing taking place exclusively within a union context, it is almost certain that other types of organizing efforts took place.

Why Bother with History?

In contrast to typical work/home divide unions, workers in the union efforts summarized above faced hostile political as well as economic power structures. They were economically

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7 This section relies for its history upon: Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers Union, Local 1199* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
disadvantaged and politically overlooked. Class anger was not in any way mitigated by political identity at home because, for Chicano farm workers, Black sanitation workers and Caribbean hospital workers, there was little ethnically based political inclusion in the mainstream political institutions. The forms of political action that did take place were outside of the political mainstream through the alternative politics of community organizing efforts, social reform coalitions and social movement efforts; in these efforts class identities were reinforced through politics.

Why does the question of historical antecedents to today’s community unionism matter? Even if it’s true that, since the post-war period, there has been an alternative form to the dominant craft and industrial models of American trade unionism—if it hasn’t found a way to foment a real challenge to dominant models—why is it important?

First, if this is a form of unionism that was highly compatible with communities of color, among service sector immigrants and among women workers, then it is important to study it, now that people of color, immigrants and women are targeted more and more for organizing drives, and the ones most likely to want to belong to unions. Before now, from the American labor movement’s perspective perhaps, this was not as urgent a question, (however urgent it may have always been for these workers of color), because the service sector and minorities and women within it, were less central to its success. Thus to the AFL-CIO, the history of organizing among workers of color was less important to understand.

Second, the knowledge that this alternative “model” developed and has continued to exist alongside the dominant models reinforces the idea that the U.S. labor movement was not predestined, due to some peculiarly American ideology or immutable trajectory of industrialization, to become the archetype of business unionism it became. As Hattam points out, different political choices, conditioned by a set of economic and political considerations, were made by the key actors of the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor. These political choices can be revisited, and new strategies embraced.

Third, the reader will note that the above examples all share a common local labor market or territorial strategy. This strategy is certainly relevant to the current economic context which is

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8 I learned to look for the alternative form that grows beside the dominant, from my teachers Michael J. Piore and Richard Locke. This view is most clearly articulated of course, in *The Second Industrial Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), which Piore co-authored with Charles F. Sabel.
characterized in part by the increasing localization of the labor market. Sabel argues: “Firms...are opening themselves to one another (through the transformation and extension of subcontracting relations) and to the society in which they are more and more embedded (through increasing reliance on public or at least collective provision of training and other services as well as new forms of social insurance). This double opening is leading...to the regionalization of production: at the limit the fundamental unit of production is not the firm, but an ensemble of firms and public or community institutions in a particular locale.” With globalization and technological change, decentralization of production and the rise of flexible manufacturing, regional and local economic activities have become much more important. As a result, regional and local economic policies become more central as well. As I mentioned in my prologue, the American unions that are having the greatest success in organizing among service workers today are pursuing strategies that are based on recapturing control over their local labor markets. Finally, it is precisely at the level of local public policy where community unionism today is most effective.

Fourth, the current strategies aren’t working for the labor movement. Despite a tremendous effort by the AFL-CIO over the past five years to work with internationals around increasing resources going toward organizing the unorganized, the results have been mixed. Between 1997 and 2000, labor organized approximately 1,725,000 workers (300,000 in ’97, 475,000 in ’98, 600,000 in ’99 and 350,000 in 2,000) However, just to maintain current levels of density, unions needed to organize five hundred thousand new members a year, which means that labor has really only managed to add members to its ranks in one of those four years—the rest of the time, new members were just in effect replacing old ones. (For example, in 2,000, on a

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9 “In recent years, the new terms of international competition and technological innovation have radically altered markets and the organization of production. The simultaneous globalization and segmentation of national markets has rendered traditional business practices in all advanced industrial nations less effective...” Richard Locke, “The Resurgence of the Local Union: Industrial Restructuring and Industrial Relations in Italy” Politics and Society vol. 18, no. 3 (1990): 350.


11 In his book Metro Futures Joel Rogers states the case: “...more and more of what makes firms competitive is precisely what cities once offered and could offer again. Firms are not islands. They depend on complex webs of suppliers and customers, and on public and private programs for training, technical assistance and financing.” Joel Rogers, Metro Futures: Economic Solutions for the Cities and their Suburbs (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

12 These figures are from the AFL-CIO Public Affairs Department and from the Organizing Department.
net basis, labor actually lost 200,000 members due to retirements, layoffs, factory closings and other factors.)

Although organizing is expensive and the financial investment in it is a prerequisite for success, in the context of the new economy, increased financial resources are not enough. Effective strategy is key. Although a handful of internationals have devised more effective labor market organizing strategies, most unions are not organizing effectively--according to the AFL-CIO, ten of the federations 66 affiliates account for 80% of the organizing. What is needed is more than increased resources or improvements around the margins in terms of strategy and tactics. Labor needs some new paradigms for organizing.

The Context of Contemporary Community Unionism

The above historical examples all took place under somewhat anomalous circumstances for their times, where unions or parties were weak and trench walls were breached. But the anomalies of the pre-1970's period are increasingly the standard of today. In this section, I will trace the wholesale deterioration of the model of unions and parties that prevailed during the pre-World War II era. This will set the stage for the rise of community unions as a response.

The City Trenches description of the character of the American working class and the American labor movement was, for the most part, an accurate description of the world through the second world war, and certainly continued to be more right than wrong as an accurate description of the labor movement, and how and why it looked the way it did. Unions conformed to the content of the world they found and shaped their economic and political organizing around it: tending to their members, doing some new worker organizing and forming a reliable institutional bloc in the Democratic Party coalition.

For white working class blue collar workers who belonged to unions, this world remained largely undisturbed through the 1970's: they paid their dues, a minority actively participated in union activities, grew comfortably middle class, and voted democrat most of the time. But for workers of color employed in non-manufacturing sectors, the fifties, sixties and seventies were times of great tumult. The civil rights movement emboldened black and Latino workers often with the help of white liberal social activists to organize unions. But the approach that these workers took to organizing and politics veered sharply from the traditional unions. The organizing was carried out at work and far beyond it. Politics meant organizing to bring pressure...
to bear on elected officials largely separate and apart from party constructs, and it emphasized coalition building with community groups, and embraced the direct action tactics of community organizing. Most importantly the vision, language and strategies of these unions reflected their direct ties to the racial and ethnic civil rights struggles that were then taking place.

With the decline of the manufacturing sector in the 1970’s and worsening in the 1980’s, traditional manufacturing unions began to hemorrhage members and have continued to do so to the present time. For a different set of reasons the building trades unions also hit upon hard times, beginning with the 1973 oil embargo and ensuing recession, coupled with the Business Roundtable’s assault on labor laws and commitment to building a serious non-union construction infrastructure. These were not the building trades’ biggest problems however; for the most part they had simply stopped organizing—engaging in exclusive membership practices on the one hand so that the number of non-union persons working in the trades was allowed to climb unabated—while simultaneously walking away from whole categories of work and leaving these to non-union contractors who used the experience to grow in capacity and competence.13

As the manufacturing sector declined, and the construction unions steadily lost membership and market share, the agricultural, service, healthcare and government sectors were experiencing explosive growth. As the public sector and healthcare unions devised political strategies to open collective bargaining up to workforces previously prevented by law from organizing, low wage workers of color became the bedrock constituencies for the new unions that grew up among blue collar government workers, and healthcare workers. As the manufacturing sector continued to contract dramatically, the service and information sectors were bursting at their seams. There are more workers employed for example, in nursing homes today, than in auto and steel combined.14 For a host of reasons, the vast majority of unions did not keep pace with this expansion.


14 As Eaton puts it: “If auto plants represent the “typical” industrial workplace of the twentieth century, nursing homes could be the quintessential social service sector workplace of the twenty-first century. Nursing homes now employ more workers today than the auto and steel industry combined, and the number of jobs continues to grow.” Susan C. Eaton, Beyond ‘Unloving Care’: Linking Human Resource Management and Patient Care Quality in Nursing Homes, forthcoming in International Journal of Human Resource Management, 2.
Neither unions nor parties have fared well in twenty-first century urban America. Although the top handful of American cities have continued to have the highest concentration of union members of any geographic area in the United States, the union membership percentage of the overall workforce in these cities has declined dramatically. The vast majority of urban low-wage workers in today's urban centers and nearby suburbs are simply not organized at their workplaces through unions. Neither are they likely to be registered and recruited for active participation by robust local political parties.

Unions

If community unions are suggestive of a pattern of organization that does not conform to the classic work/home divide thesis of American working class life it is in large part because the world of work that it was based upon—large, vertically integrated firms with large-scale mass production on assembly lines, has been fundamentally transformed. Across the United States, dramatic changes in the structure of industry, the organization of work and patterns of employment have taken place in recent years. Between 1979 and 1996, 43 million jobs were lost, and while millions more were created during that same period, many of these new jobs were of comparatively inferior quality. Firms have responded to the heightened pace of globalization, technological advance and shifting markets by adopting more flexible systems of employment relations characterized by strategies of outsourcing and sub-contracting.

Major industries have undergone massive processes of restructuring, reengineering their structures and strategies and in the process, shedding thousands of blue and white collar jobs. Bowing to pressure from financial markets, companies have become "leaner" spinning off peripheral activities, employing fewer full-time workers and relying more on contract and part-time employees. Individual firms are providing less training and fewer opportunities for job security and upward mobility for low skill workers. Whereas in the fifties, sixties and seventies, most U.S. workers, but especially blue collar workers, were shielded from competitive unstructured labor markets, today a growing number of workers are not. According to the

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16 Doeringer and Piore estimated that, in the 1960's, fewer than one in five members of the U.S. workforce could be found in these markets which were characterized by temporary work, transient labor, low formal skill levels, and
Economic Policy Institute, almost 30% of all jobs in the United States are in non-standard work arrangements (NSWA’s)-independent contracting, working for temporary help agencies, contract or on-call work, day-labor, self employment and regular part-time employment which are typically inferior to normal full-time jobs. These changes in the structure of industries and firms combined with “institutional mismatches” between workers and structures of social insurance and representation, have disturbed the economic side of the work/home divide equilibrium and have transformed the terrain upon which unions and other worker organizations must act.\(^{17}\)

One of the key institutions in American society that played an important role in the overall regulation of employment relations, including the recruitment and promotion of workers, the determination of wages and benefits and the regulation of workplace practices including training, health and safety and work hours and conditions, was organized labor. But in the vast majority of firms, employers have pulled back from collective bargaining agreements, and the pattern bargaining of the past which effectively took wages out of competition well beyond unionized firms, has been effectively eliminated. Now, non-union firms are in the majority in most industries and they are setting the pattern. Among high school graduate workers, between 1978 and 1997, the unionization rate was almost cut in half—from 37.9% to 20.8%.\(^ {18}\)

The majority of workers in America today find their wages back in competition and set through highly individualistic means. Economic restructuring has stimulated a burgeoning service sector which has never been highly unionized, is highly decentralized, weighted toward low wage jobs and typified by more impermanent relationships between individual employers and employees.

Along with the rise of flexible production systems, this shift from goods-producing to service producing industries is essential to the story of community unions. The 18.1 million net jobs created between 1979 and 1989 involved a loss of manufacturing (1.6 million) and mining (266,000) jobs and an increase (19.3) million jobs in the service sector. The largest amount of job growth (14.2 million) was in the two lowest paying service sector industries-retail trade and

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\(^{17}\) In her discussion of the New Deal era labor and social insurance legislation, Elizabeth Faue elucidates their exclusive nature: “The National Labor Relations Board regularized union elections and disputes but restricted the community-based strategies in which women had been central...the dual-track welfare state privileged skilled, industrial wage earners and disadvantaged those who were not engaged in regular, continuous employment—a category into which the majority of women and minority workers fell.” Faue: 12.
services (business, personnel and health). Taken together, these two industries accounted for 79% of all new net jobs over the 1979-89 period, and 73.9% of all new jobs in 1989-99. In 1999, 10.8% of the workforce earned very low wages\(^1\), which represented 6.6% more of the workforce than in 1979.\(^2\) Because service sector jobs in the U.S. tend to be much less aligned with manufacturing wages, non-college educated workers have seen a significant erosion of wages and compensation.

From its origins in the 1930’s, the underlying assumption of the American system of employment relations was long-term stable relationships between workers and firms. As relationships between workers and firms have become more contingent, workers are less able to rely upon employers to supply training, benefits and upward mobility.\(^2\) In this context, traditional workplace-based unionism has become less and less appropriate and community-based unionism appears to bear the greatest possibilities for success. For unions to organize effectively in many sectors they must radically alter their traditional approaches. Neither organizing, bargaining, benefits administration, nor training can be fruitfully carried out one firm at a time. By necessity, all of the above must become less firm-based and more labor market based. Building trades and entertainment industry unions have always been labor-market based, but so far it has been difficult to transfer these models to the low wage service sector.

To have success in an economy in which employees move more frequently from firm to firm, the unions that are putting resources into organizing know that they must be more whole labor market-based. This has proven extremely difficult to do, especially in light of the rise of anti-union activity on the part of employers, the weakening of labor protections by the labor board and the courts and a legal framework of labor law that does not facilitate organizing among today’s contingent workforce. The few unions that are doing it with some success are


\(^2\) The Economic Policy Institute defines “very low earners” as those earning salaries of 25% lower than the poverty-level wage. The poverty level wage is the hourly wage that a full-time, year round worker must earn to sustain a family of four at the poverty threshold, which was $8.19 an hour in 1999. Mishel, Bernstein and Schmitt: 145.

\(^3\) Ibid: 168-170.

\(^4\) “Regionalization has two closely related effects on the organization of labor markets and hence on the boundary conditions that any labor movement operating in such markets would need to respect. First, the blurring of boundaries among firms that follows from the reintegration of conception and execution means that even as the demand for skill increases, individual jobs become less and less secure. When even the largest firms expect to turn to system suppliers to provide crucial expertise but cannot predict when and for what sort of know-how they will do so, who at what level of the firm can be sure of his or her job?” Sabel:153.
choosing their campaigns with great parsimony because they know that no matter how much they want to be everywhere, organizing in this climate requires enormous financial resources.

From discussions with community union organizers, it is clear that these limitations of the American labor union model and its approach to organizing as prescribed by the National Labor Relations Act, are the key reasons that so many community-based efforts around work and wages have organized totally apart from labor unions. For many activists, because of these problems, organizing around work and wages has not equated with union organizing. Even when they concede that union drives can be effective, they know that the likelihood of a union targeting their constituency is slim.

**Political Parties**

Likewise, the nature of the political world of the American working class has completely changed. If American parties were much less ideological and more limited in function than their European counterparts, their more limited organizational functions have declined dramatically in the most recent generation. Skocpol writes: "As late as the 1950’s, U.S. political parties were networks of local and state organizations through which (in many if not all locales) party officials brokered nominations, cooperated with locally rooted membership associations and sometimes directly mobilized voters. Then demographic shifts, reapportionment struggles, and the social upheavals of the 1960’s disrupted old party organizations; and changes in party rules led to nomination elections that favored activists and candidate-centered efforts over backroom brokering by party insiders. Such “reforms” were meant to enhance grassroots participation, but in practice have furthered oligarchical ways of running elections. No longer the preserve of party organizations, U.S. election campaigns are now managed by coteries of media consultants, pollsters, direct mail specialists and—above all—fundraisers."²² Local and state democratic parties are now much weaker forces for grassroots recruitment and political participation in urban neighborhoods and communities at large. The political party affiliation of candidates is still an important heuristic tool for voters, but the parties themselves play less of a direct role in mediating the relationships of workers to politics.

As Skocpol, Burnham and others have argued, weakened first by progressive era reforms which limited their ability to choose their own candidates and to generate and distribute the spoils of patronage, and second by the rise of the mass media candidacy and big money in politics, party-centered politics have been replaced by candidate-centered politics in many communities. Political campaigns often draw the circle tighter still by doing very little effective voter registration work and through targeting only frequent voters for their voter persuasion and get-out-the-vote appeals. Thus political parties of today bear little resemblance to the old party machines which, despite lacking a strong ideological and working class-centered focus, were at least successful to some degree at involving members of the working class in participation in urban politics. For the most part, they don’t even do that any more.

Just as today unions are not the sole mechanism through which workers are organizing to improve their wages and working conditions, working through political parties is not the only way to engage in local politics. In fact, few community unions work through local political parties. The assumption that in the absence of a working class based political party, class-based politics disappear is incorrect. Contemporary community unions demonstrate that class-based politics have simply taken a different route—grassroots organizing with the goal of pressuring elected officials to support organizing efforts and pass legislation that re-establishes a set of labor market protections at the local level.

The City Trenches model was also in fundamental respects, based upon the assimilation of immigrants both economically and politically. The scale of European immigration at the turn of the century is astonishing: between 1880 and 1920, 23 million people arrived in a country that, in 1900 numbered only 76 million. European immigrants (even those from the European

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23 Katznelson, in City Trenches argues that the War on Poverty programs set up structures which played some of the same roles as political parties in African-American communities—whether we agree entirely with this thesis or not, these programs and structures, along with vibrant local parties now belong largely to history as well.

24 As David Mayhew argues: “...as the M.P., the typical American congressman has to mobilize his own resources initially to win a nomination and then to win election and reelection. He builds his own electoral coalition and sustains it. He raises and spends a great deal of money in doing so. ...The important point here is that a congressman can—in fact must—build a power base that is substantially independent of party.” David Mayhew, Congress: The Electoral Connection, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 26.

25 Gerstle: 275. From 1881 to 1890, over 5 million immigrants came to the United States. The vast majority came from Northern Europe: England, Ireland, Germany, France and the Scandinavian countries. From 1890 to the beginning of the First World War, European immigration shifted toward the periphery with immigrants coming from the rural populations of Italy, Greece, Poland, the “eastern reaches” of the Austro-Hungarian empire and Russia. Following the mid-decade depression of 1890, immigration exploded for the next ten years and close to 9 million new immigrants arrived, two thirds of whom were from East Central and Southern Europe. In 1910, immigrants represented 21% of the labor force; by 1920, half of the urban population of the United States was either foreign
periphery, who were less welcomed) certainly through the early 1920's, were able to take advantage of immigration laws that made it much easier to achieve legal status than laws today, as well as labor market structures that allowed them to work their way up through manual labor. Due to dramatic industrialization of the economy, a massive demand for unskilled labor, and a domestic labor shortage, European immigrants were able to access entry-level factory jobs in the primary sectors of the economy. At home, Northern European immigrants together with their children, over time were able to acquire citizenship, and to participate politically—voting and playing an active role in local party structures. Anti-immigrant animus toward the Eastern and Southern European immigrants was very intense and meant that they were not as likely to be welcomed into local civic and political institutions. Their political assimilation took longer, but over time, especially after new immigration was so dramatically curtailed, Italians, Poles and others became integrated into American urban political machines. But they were white and they

26 Of course in 1921, Congress passed the First Quota Act, which set in place a set of quotas on the basis of nationality, that were highly discriminatory. The act set forth the requirement that the number of aliens admitted from a country could not exceed 3% of the foreign-born of that nationality in the United States in 1910. In 1924, the Second Quota Act lowered the total number of immigrants who could be admitted and slashed the size of the quotas. Quotas were recalibrated to 2% of the foreign-born of each nationality in the United States and the baseline year was changed to 1890, when immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were far less numerous.

27 “The turn toward new sources of immigration and the rapid increase of this movement by the turn of the century coincided with shifts in the structure of the American economy. The powerful drive toward industrial consolidation and monopoly distanced agriculture as the dominant sector of the economy and reduced the demand for a permanent, settler-oriented immigration. New, urban-based industries generated a strong demand for manual labor. Skills became less necessary as technological innovation and large-scale methods of production reduced many jobs to routine, machine-tending tasks... What the new industries required was a mass of unskilled workers who could be hired cheaply and dismissed freely during economic downturns...” Alejandro Portes and Robert L. Bach Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 29-31.

28 “...immigration to the United States dwindled sharply in the 1930's. From 1930 to 1947 only 23% of all quota spots were used. From 1930 to the end of World War II, less than 700,000 immigrants entered the country as compared with 5.4 million who entered in the decade and a half before 1930. Furthermore, because of the lack of opportunities in the Great Depression, more people left the United States than entered in the 1930's. In the aftermath of the Second World War, various selective efforts were made by the U.S. toward refugees and displaced persons. For example, in 1948, Congress passed a Displaced Persons Act which provided 202,000 visas to refugees to settle in the U.S. permanently, over a two year period. The law favored refugees coming from the Baltics while discriminating against Jewish applicants. Finally, in 1952, congress passed the McCarran-Walter Act, which continued the practice of assigning fixed quotas by nationality and which allocated 85% of total annual admissions to northern and western european countries. Reed Ueda, Postwar Immigrant America: A Social History (Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin Press, 1994), 18-51.
were legal immigrants. Asian immigrants were never accepted, or assimilated culturally and politically in the same way.\(^{29}\)

Today's working class immigrants of color confront job ladders that are missing most of their rungs, and immigration laws that have made it much more difficult to gain legal entry, working status and naturalization\(^{30}\). They encounter anemic local political structures that have less ability to incorporate newcomers, and less political clout.\(^{31}\)

**Conclusion**

The tectonic plates of union and party that under-girded American working class development for generations, and reinforced a strict separation between economic and political organizing, are crumbling beneath us. Even when they were firmly in place, borderlands existed in which women, immigrants and workers of color built organizations that pursued economic and political change in tandem. Once interlopers, today women, immigrants and workers of color comprise the labor movement's most likely recruits. Once borderlands, the service, health and hospitality sectors are now the nation's largest territories. As we shall explore in the case chapters to come, contemporary community unions act upon a terrain that has become increasingly devoid of unions and parties on any large scale, and they reflect the strengths and the weaknesses of independent entities anchored in neither labor union nor political party traditions, strategies or structures.

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\(^{29}\) Under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Chinese were denied access to citizenship. After 1910 most immigrants from other parts of Asia were denied citizenship as well, and in 1922, in *Ozawa v. United States* the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Japanese aliens were not white and were therefore ineligible for American citizenship.

\(^{30}\) Summing up immigration patterns in the 1970's and 1980's, Rivera-Batiz writes: "The last two decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in the volume of labor migration to the United States. Not since the early 1900's, when the number of immigrants averaged over 1 million per year, has the arrival of the foreign born in the United States been so large. ...In sharp contrast to previous immigration waves, the immigrant flow of the last 20 years has been composed of a large fraction of undocumented aliens. See *U.S. Immigration Policy Reform in the 1980's: A Preliminary Assessment* Rivera-Batiz, Sechzer and Gang eds., (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 1-3.

\(^{31}\) Since early suffrage is such an important part of the Shefter, Katznelson, Brody and Dawley stories of the peculiar history of American working class development, clearly the lack of suffrage for so many immigrants also affects the contemporary story—because it is not just an issue of whether or not parties organize today's newcomers into politics as they once did, it is whether or not they have the right to vote. Shefter argued that the struggle for suffrage had a radicalizing effect on the British working class and took it in a direction of more working class oriented political participation and party-building. By the same light, it would make sense that the lack of suffrage for today's immigrants could catalyze a different attitude toward political participation including perhaps more skepticism toward the two main political parties.
This is a story about an organization of workers that should never have existed at all. That it was created in the first place defies conventional wisdom, to say nothing of common sense; that it has thrived, confounds both. The Workplace Project of Hempstead, Long Island is an organization of the displaced, disorganized and undocumented. It was created in 1992 without the institutional sponsorship of church, union or state. In ten years, the Workplace Project has successfully brought together “bottom of the barrel” central and south American immigrant workers who had little in common beyond their lowly station, to create an incredibly dynamic and effective organization which provides legal services and courses in workers’ rights. It has built a membership base and a real governing board, which is to say, one that is composed entirely of low income immigrant workers, and that actually closely oversees the organization.

The Project has targeted dead-beat employers and secured hundreds of thousands of dollars in back wages for its members. It has organized cooperatives for day laborers and domestic workers. It has won campaigns to force employment agencies to act as “responsible employers” and it helped compel New York to pass the strongest unpaid wages legislation in the United States. It has transformed the way that immigrant workers are portrayed in the Long Island and New York City media and the way they are perceived by elected officials and the general public. Not bad for an organization that should not exist.

The organization was founded in November of 1992 by Jennifer Gordon, a young Harvard law school graduate who had been awarded a grant by the Echoing Green Foundation. The seeds of the idea for the Project were sown in the 1980’s, when Gordon worked part-time while going to school, at Centro Presente, a Cambridge-based multi-service organization for Central American immigrants. At Centro Presente, Gordon helped file political asylum cases and
later went on to create and conduct on-site trainings on federal immigration law for the heavily Latino workforces at area factories.¹

Gordon traces her interest in creating the Workplace Project not only to her factory floor experiences with workers during those two years but also to her observations of the biases of the network of other immigrant social service and advocacy organizations that were active at the time. “Places like Centro Presente were giving out social and legal services and providing English classes but there was no sustained organizing going on...for a very clear reason, because they were political refugees. The sense was they were going to go back, not just on the part of labor unions—in the 80’s, few of the advocates or agencies were organizing with people for a stable, positive community life in the United States. The idea was this is a political migration, you provide services because people will return to Central America when the war is over.”

Gordon contrasts the treatment these political migrants from Central America received with that received by other economic immigrants. “With economic immigrants, there tend to be civic associations of these same immigrants or already established services to help them and when that group is ready to organize there are either outside or inside organizers. There is a tacit knowledge that these people are here as a wave of immigration and one valid goal is to settle here and to organize, to get housing...Better jobs are an important part of economic migration, people are here for the money.”

Gordon felt that the people lending a helping hand to the political immigrants from Central America in the 1980’s had a political stake in Salvadoreans returning home: “They were involved in the political left in El Salvador which had a stake in saying those people were going...

¹ Centro Presente hired her to work as an “organizer/advocate” to develop a response to the employer sanctions which were part of the federal Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The bill, sponsored by Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming and Congressman Romano Mazzoli of Illinois passed the congress in October of 1986 and was signed into law by President Reagan in early November. It had four major provisions: 1-employer sanctions backed by civil fines and criminal penalties for repeat violators, which prohibited employers from knowingly hiring, recruiting or referring for a fee undocumented aliens, 2-increased enforcement of immigration laws to be accomplished through increased funding of the INS and which mandated state participation in the INS’s on-line system which was supposed to allow instant verification of an alien’s immigration status, 3-allowing undocumented aliens who filed by May 4th of 1988 and who had continously resided in the country since January 1, 1982 to be eligible for temporary resident status which could then lead to permanent resident status as long as applications were filed before November 6th of 1990, and 4-agricultural sector provisions which created the Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) program that allowed aliens who worked as field laborers in perishable agricultural commodities for at least 90 days during the year ending May 1st 1986 to be eligible for temporary and eventually permanent U.S. residency as well as a provision for the future importation of foreign workers under the Replenishment Agricultural Worker (RAW) program which allowed farmers to import foreign laborers into the harvesting of perishable crops if the Departments of Labor and Agriculture agree there is a labor shortage. Rivera-Batiz, Sechzer and Gang eds., U.S. Immigration Policy Reform in the 1980’s: A Preliminary Assessment (New York: Praeger, 1991).
to go back home and were only here temporarily...and so instead of there being services that helped them get settled, there were services in the case of these refugees that also had a political agenda, to document their suffering and to document all the abuses carried out by the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments and to support this community in their attempts to temporarily settle until they could go home. But in the 80’s, stable jobs, long term housing and political power in the United States were not seen as an important part of the strategy because they did not fit with the political view that this was a temporary resettlement of refugees…”

As she grew increasingly dissatisfied with the treatment Central American immigrants were receiving, Gordon began to look around for alternative organizing models. It was at this time that she began hearing about immigrant worker centers elsewhere in the country that were working in local communities to organize immigrant workers for economic and political power and began to think seriously about this model for Central American immigrant workers.

When the Project began, it set up shop on the second floor of an old office building on Centre Street in the heart of downtown Hempstead. If Long Island is an unlikely place for an organized insurrection of the have nots, Hempstead is the unlikeliest town on the Island to host it. And a sleepier, more nondescript building than the one the Project chose would be hard to find. In 1993, it moved across the street to a similarly bland address on North Franklin Street. There are no storefront windows, and there is no real lobby to speak of. Inside the front door, one picks up the scent of fifties medical waiting rooms and “take a number” social service agencies. It is hard to imagine the office attracting much in the way of “street traffic;” clearly people find their way here through more wholesale means. Even when one is standing right outside the door, there is not the slightest hint of the movement that dwells within.

And then you open the door.

Workers seeking help with cases sit waiting to consult with Project lawyers while in several tiny offices organizers engage in excited conversation with members who have come in to plan the next picket line or confrontation with a targeted employer. There might be a board meeting in progress, or a meeting of the charter members of the landscaping or house cleaning cooperatives. There might be four dozen folding chairs jammed into the back meeting room to accommodate an overflow crowd of students in the workers’ rights course. Along with the ubiquitous butcher paper campaign charts of union and community groups, the walls are covered with inspirational posters and T-shirts from popular movements across Central America and the
United States. Amidst the joyful noise of excited conversation, telephones ring and the fax machine keeps right on printing until it runs out of paper and switches to intermittent beeping instead.

There were three main puzzles that framed my exploration of the Workplace Project. First, was ethnicity able to stand in for occupational or industrial identity, and was it able to do so in a way that facilitated class-consciousness and led to worker organizing? Second, was the organization able to stand in for a union? Which traditional union functions was it able to fulfill and which ones was it not able to carry out? Third, given the prevailing wisdom not just in the political science literature about collective action but also in the industrial relations literature about organizing transient workers, how was an organization like this one not only able to come into being but also to flourish? In addition to these central questions, a fourth one specific to place always lingered around the edges: Immigrants organizing in Long Island, of all places? What in the world were they doing in quintessential suburbia?

I began studying and visiting the organization in early 1996 and followed it closely through the summer of 1998 when the leadership passed into new hands. Although I have stayed in contact with the Workplace Project under the new Executive Director, my intensive period of engagement with the organization ended after the summer of 1998. Thus this chapter places special emphasis on a particular period of the organization’s history.

The Setting: A Short Primer on the Political Economy of Long Island

Immigration

An old story is told of an Italian immigrant in the late 1800’s who learned three things upon his arrival in New York: “First, the streets aren’t paved with gold. Second, they aren’t paved at all. And third, you’re expected to pave them.” Immigration to Long Island, and its itinerant issues have frequently been treated almost as a new phenomenon, or a phenomenon of the late twentieth century despite the fact that immigrants began arriving there as early as the 1870’s and 1880’s.

German factory workers and Irish nurse’s aids were among the earliest arrivals followed by Italians, Poles and European Jews who starting coming in some cases as early as the late 1890’s to work as laborers and increased in number through the 1920’s and 1930’s. In the
nineteen teens, thousands of immigrants found work in the sand mines on the Port Washington peninsula. The mines became Nassau County’s largest industry and provided the millions of tons of sand for the concrete essential to New York City’s widening boulevards and burgeoning skyscrapers.

Native Islander’s hostility toward the immigrant sand miners is evocative of some of the views voiced in the contemporary immigration debate. “Though townspeople didn’t want the jobs, resentment against foreign labor surfaced. In 1908, Italian workers staged a walkout demanding an increase of 25 cents over their $1.50 for a 12 hour day. The strike was broken in five days when the sheriff deputized 150 firemen and the sand companies hired 50 men from the Federal Detective Agency in New York City. Strikers were arrested, fired and fined $10 to $40, for “disorderly conduct.” Polish replacement workers were brought in.”

Much later in the Island’s history came a concerted effort by whites to keep Blacks out of their workplaces and out of their communities: the much-touted Levittown development built after World War II, included racial covenants barring non-whites from buying or renting homes.

What distinguishes the earlier waves of immigrants from their contemporary counterparts is skin color. While the Long Island historian Barbara Kelly points out that eventually the English “old guard” intermarried with Irish, German and other immigrants to become less distinguishable, these immigrants were all white. While a process of intermarriage and assimilation is also likely to take place among Long Island’s newer immigrants, race will always be a differentiating feature. Just as discrimination on the basis of race has long resulted in African-Americans lagging behind economically, racism has and will continue to impact the economic fortunes of Latinos on Long Island. This may provide an explanation for why Long Islanders so often complain that these new immigrants don’t speak English, which is, in fact true, but not unusual.

Almost none of the workers I interviewed at the organization spoke English. Most of them were between the ages of 25 and 50 and had been in the United States for at least three years.

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3 “...They are not only bringing alien ways and alien tongues, but they look different than the old guard...A hundred years ago, an Englishman could pick out an Irishman at 40 paces. The old guard have now all intermarried. Now both groups will pick out someone from the Middle East at 40 paces.” Somini Sengupta, “Our Evolving Suburbia/New ‘locals’ are immigrants” Newsday, November 5, 1995, p. 7.
4 ibid see 17
years. When asked, almost all of them said that they had tried to learn it but had not been able to. This portion of the interviews was always one of the most poignant—I could read the sorrow and embarrassment on their faces when I asked why they did not speak English. Virtually all of them said that they viewed this lack as a major liability in terms of upward mobility. So many of them said they had taken classes but were just unable to learn English that it made me wonder about the quality of the classes that are made available to them. On the other hand, the first generation’s lack of English is consistent with the research on immigrant language acquisition. 6 This scholarship says that the first generation doesn’t learn English, the second does, often continuing to speak their native tongue at home but using English at school and work. The third generation often uses English universally and is the cohort in which fluency in the other language is lost, unless either a special effort is made or they continue to live in an area with a high concentration of native speakers.

If the literature is right, than the Workplace Project members’ lack of English skills is to be expected—they are the first generation. And yet, their lack of language skills bothers people a lot. It stood out to me, and judging from the research I did there, it clearly stands out to Long Islanders. It is unclear whether the lack of English bothers some Americans more today than it bothered Americans during earlier eras of heavy immigration. Certainly the high concentration of Latinos in particular workplaces and communities makes them highly visible—shining a spotlight on both their linguistic isolation, and their “non-whiteness”.

Long Island is a study of our national schizophrenia toward immigrants. This is a schizophrenia that is reflected both in government policy as well as in the feelings and actions of businesses and families. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 made it a crime for employers to knowingly hire undocumented workers but the enforcement mechanisms either don’t work or aren’t implemented. Employers take the public position that they are opposed to illegal immigration, but one cannot observe the home-building, landscaping, retail, light industrial, hospitality or personal service industries on Long Island without being struck by the ubiquity of Central and South American immigrants. They are the nannies, the housekeepers, the factory workers, the dishwashers, the orderlies, the landscapers and the dry wall hangers.

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The contractors who patronize the shape-up sites are the most up-front about their hiring of undocumented workers. After all, they do it in public places under the noses of local police. In interviews with reporters, employers admit that they hire immigrant workers because they do the work that American-born workers won’t do, they work hard and accept the wages that American-born workers wouldn’t. Federal law doesn’t just prohibit businesses from hiring the undocumented. It prohibits families as well. And even though families often say they don’t want to hire workers who “don’t pay taxes” they too seem to follow a policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” because it suits them economically. They rely upon undocumented workers to clean their houses and tend their lawns and they entrust their children to their care but noisily object when these workers cluster on local street corners in search of work or move into local houses and apartments.

This is the current state of affairs on Long Island--no one has an incentive to turn undocumented workers in. Neither does anyone have an incentive to regularize their status or upgrade the quality of their jobs.

The Politics of Exclusion

Author Robert Caro’s description of the Island’s political evolution conjures a place historically hostile to the needs and interests of immigrant workers. “…For it was to Long Island that the robber barons of America had retired to enjoy their plunder…They were the men who had bribed and corrupted legislators—the Standard Oil Company, one historian said, did everything possible to the Pennsylvania legislature except refine it—to let them loot the nation’s oil and ore, the men who, building their empires on the toil of millions of immigrant laborers, had kept wages low, hours long, and had crushed the unions…if their displays of wealth were awesome, so were their displays of selfishness. The robber barons intended to keep their world for themselves…”

Early 20th century Long Island was comprised of three dominant constituency groups. There were the “baymen” who made their living from the wealth of the Great South Bay on the Island’s south shore, the farmers who farmed the center of the Island and the millionaires who favored the bucolic acres of the North Shore. All three of these constituencies had an interest in

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making the Island as inaccessible as possible to outsiders. With the help of their elected representatives, natives kept shell-fishing leases strictly within the family, and parks and bathing areas were restricted to township residents only. Roads were intentionally kept in a primitive state with all attempts to widen them, bring in highways or improve the Long Island Rail Road’s North Shore lines effectively forestalled.

Local government was the tool used most often to pursue these ends. Communities incorporated themselves in order to maintain their exclusivity. As Teaford explains, “In the nineteenth century communities incorporated to become cities; in the twentieth century suburban villages incorporated in order not to become cities…In the big cities which developed in the nineteenth century, municipal government existed to nurture growth and provide the services necessary for the city to expand and prosper. In Nassau the role of municipalities that incorporated in the 1920’s was quite different. It often was to preserve a lifestyle, to preserve the status quo rather than to create a dense urban environment.”

As a pioneer of the “Crabgrass Frontier” the Island was one of the first suburban areas in the country to evolve a radically decentralized political system in which each town, village and city was a separate political entity. According to Teaford, “While the suburban lifestyle was flourishing in Nassau, a suburban form of government was also developing. Whereas the big city was governed by one large government centered in a downtown city hall, the characteristic suburban government was a small municipality which provided government for a fragment of suburbia that was tailored to the special needs and interests of that fragment.” By the mid 1930’s, there were sixty-five villages and cities operating in the County, as well as 173 special district governments: fifty-three lighting districts, fifty-two fire districts and thirty-eight water districts. While a Nassau County Board of Supervisors (now called the Nassau County legislature) had been in place since 1899, it was not until 1936 that Nassau voters adopted a charter proposal that established an elected county executive position with centralized authority over health, welfare and tax assessment. Suffolk followed suit a few years later.

Until a recent fiscal crisis resulted in defeat for Nassau republicans (the County Executive as of 2001 is a democrat and the legislature, by a one-vote majority is also controlled by democrats), both Nassau and Suffolk county governments were controlled by entrenched...

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Republican party machines. To be considered for civil service positions in the Long Island of my youth it was taken for granted that regardless of one’s true political ideology, it was a necessity to be a registered Republican. The 2001 registration figures though less dramatically skewed than they used to be, still reflect a hefty republican majority. In comparison to New York City’s heavily Democratic enrollment figures, the electorate in both counties leans Republican: Nassau County has 353,463 Republicans to 259,240 Democrats and Suffolk County has 319,252 Republicans to 229,312 Democrats.

The Economy

Nassau County is well known in urban planning literature as one of the country’s first large-scale suburban areas to fully evolve beyond the idea of a “street car suburb.” Commuters to New York City settled there in large numbers as early as the 1920’s and 1930’s. In the post-World War II era, it became one of the first suburban areas to “graduate” from bedroom community status. From the 1950’s to the present day, Nassau County has evolved a complex economic life quite independent from of the City. Through the 1980’s, “post-suburban” Nassau teemed with its own retailing, manufacturing, and office employment sectors, underpinned by an enormous aircraft and aerospace industry. Grumman, Lockheed, Allied Signal, Unisys and Harris were major government contractors during the Cold War era. Thousands were employed directly by these companies and thousands more found work in suppliers and specialty services. Long Island’s experience of the national recession of the late 1980’s was made worse by its deep dependence on the defense industry as the major engine of economic growth. Between 1986 and the year 2000, Long Island lost approximately two-thirds of its defense related employment. The local economy reached its lowest point in 1992, but has since regained much of its former dynamism.

9 The Nassau machine’s famous alumni included Alphonse D’Amato, who served in various local positions including county executive before his surprisingly successful run for the United States Senate in 1980.
12 In the 1980’s, Long Island’s manufacturing sector, which was centered in the defense industry, experienced a marked decline, Grumman, the Island’s largest employer, declined from 25,000 employees in 1986 to 3500 by 1997. During that same period, the number of Long Island companies doing military contract work went from 70 to 25. In 1986, there were more than 80,000 defense-related jobs by the year 2000, there were just over 27,000.
Economic expansion since the early nineties has been built upon a much more diverse base of industries including high-tech manufacturing, business and professional services, biotechnology and electronics. These sectors, in contrast to the mammoth employers of the past, have tended to catalyze the growth of medium and small firms; thus five out of six jobs on the Island are in companies that employ less than 500 workers. As of May 1998, Nassau and Suffolk counties combined contained 1,145,600 non-farm wage and salary jobs. Economic prosperity has fueled a huge demand among middle class and affluent Long Islanders for housekeeping, landscaping, childcare, and food services.

**Latino Workers Struggling in Suburbia**

In El Salvador, between 1979 and 1992, a bitter civil war claimed the lives of seventy-five thousand people. In a country of 5 million with a land mass the size of the state of Massachusetts, 1.5 million were displaced from their homes. Of these, an estimated 600,000-700,000 people remained in El Salvador, either taking up residence in refugee camps or moving into barrios on the outskirts of the cities. About 200,000 refugees fled to Mexico, while another 150,000 went to other Central American countries.

By 1984 half a million refugees had left El Salvador and emigrated to the United States, fleeing the political violence and seeking work, many of them without immigration documents. They ended up largely concentrated in a handful of cities: Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Houston, San Diego and San Francisco. In addition to these urban centers, Long Island became one of the primary destinations for Salvadoran refugees. They chose the Long Island suburbs because friends and relatives recently settled in Hempstead and other cities and towns in Nassau and Suffolk counties, told them of the large number of jobs available, and touted it as a safer and cheaper alternative to New York City.

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14 By the late 1990's, one in every six, or an estimated one million Salvadorans lived in the United States, Mahler, p.37.


15 In her research, Mahler found that in contrast to the more urban and educated Salvadorans who tended to settle in the central cities, the Salvadoran immigrants who migrated to Long Island tended to hail from rural parts of the country. (These areas, the eastern provinces of La Union, Morazan and San Miguel were among the most impacted by the war.)
In Long Island at the time, there was a high demand for personal services like house cleaning and landscaping, but a tight labor market and the stigma of certain jobs meant that native workers spurned most of them. This created a wealth of opportunities for immigrants willing to fill these jobs.\(^{16}\) The thousands of undocumented immigrants who arrived in Long Island found a tremendous demand for their labor both in the informal sector—working for small contractors and private families—as well as in the lowest paying formal sector jobs: restaurant work, car washes, and light manufacturing—but none of these provided much opportunity for upward mobility.\(^ {17}\)

Between 1980 and 1990 Long Island’s Latino population grew by 78.8% in Nassau County and 49.7% in Suffolk County. By contrast, between 1985 and 1990, more than 90% of the 250,000 people who moved away from Long Island were U.S. born and the vast majority of these were white.\(^ {18}\) By the early 90’s, various estimates placed the number of Latinos living on Long Island at between 165,000-250,000 and, according to the 2000 census, 282,693 persons of Hispanic origin now reside in the two counties.

It was not only Long Island’s immigrant Latino population that exploded during the 80’s and 90’s—immigration in general and particularly from Asia and the Caribbean exploded as well. In 1995, a study conducted by Newsday found that one out of five children on Long Island was either an immigrant or the child of one. In the school district of Central Islip, over 50 different languages were represented. These immigrants also contributed to the breakdown of racial and ethnic homogeneity on Long Island. Whereas people of color had traditionally been concentrated in towns like Hempstead, Freeport and Brentwood, towns that had previously been

\(^{16}\) In the immigrant taxonomy of Portes and Rumbault, there are four main categories of immigrants: 1—"Labor migrants," foreign workers (both legal and undocumented) in search of menial and generally low paid jobs, 2—"Professional immigrants," according to the US visa allocation system "members of the professions of exceptional ability and their spouses and children", 3—"Entrepreneurial immigrants" self employed immigrants and , 4—"Refugees and Asylees" refugees who have been granted asylum by the US government which affords them the right to work legally and access to certain government services. Portes and Rumbault believe that labor migrants have represented the bulk of immigration in recent years. Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbault *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (California: University of California Press, 1990): Chapter One.

\(^{17}\) Saskia Sassen-Koob’s observations about New York City’s informal economy are applicable to Long Island’s as well: “Changes in the sectoral composition of New York City’s economy and in the organization of work generally over the last decade have brought about (1) an expansion of low wage and of high income jobs and (2) a proliferation of small units of production. Both trends contrast with what was typical in the post World War II era, when growth was characterized by the vast expansion of a middle class and ever larger scales of production. See “New York City’s Informal Economy” in Castells and Portes eds., *The Informal Economy: Studies in advanced and less developed countries*, (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

\(^{18}\) Sengupta,13.
largely white such as Great Neck and Elmont, by 1995 were found to be more than a quarter immigrant. According to the Newsday study, in more than two dozen other neighborhoods scattered around Nassau County and western Suffolk County, the immigrant population had grown to between 10 and 25% immigrant, mostly from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Although many Central American immigrants—especially Salvadorans—began as “political immigrants” seeking refuge from the violence in their home countries, once here the overwhelming majority of them have chosen not to return. They stay for the economic opportunities not available to them back home. Thus Gordon’s initial frustration with the Central America solidarity movement’s neglect of settlement issues and her hunch that employment-related problems would have to be confronted has been borne out. CARECEN, the social service agency most active on the Island in service to Salvadoran immigrants surveyed its clients after the signing of the peace accord in 1992 and found that only 25% said that they wanted to return to El Salvador.19

Long Island in the 1980’s and 1990’s was the perfect place for Salvadoran immigrants to find work. First, while there continued to be a significant manufacturing sector, it was characterized less by the old well-paying relatively skilled blue collar variety and more by low skilled, low wage, light industrial work.20 Second, while Long Island has seen an enormous demand for residential and commercial development, there has been a dramatic reorganization in the construction industry away from large, unionized general contractors toward small, non-union contractors. In a seasonal, cyclical market, rather than maintaining payroll obligations to a steady workforce of laborers, some contractors avail themselves of the “shape up” sites scattered throughout Nassau and Suffolk, where hundreds of Latino immigrants wait to be hired, off the books, at low wages, for short-term work. Third, the service sector came to dominate the labor market. In the year 2000, 86% of Nassau and Suffolk counties’ non-farm related employment was in service-producing industries.21

20 In the 1980’s, Long Island’s manufacturing sector, which was centered in the defense industry, experienced a marked decline. Grumman, the Island’s largest employer, declined from 25,000 employees in 1986 to 3500 by 1997. During that same period, the number of Long Island companies doing military contract work went from 70 to 25. While there was significant job growth in the service sector, the new blue collar jobs were often of inferior quality, Kirk Johnson, “A Revived Long Island Finds Life After Military Contracts” New York Times July 7, 1997.
Fourth, Long Island experienced a dramatic “baby bust” during the 1970’s and 1980’s. In fact, between 1970 and 1990, the 25 and under population declined by more than 25%. The number of teenagers decreased by 31% between 1980 and 1990. In addition, of the 252,500 people who left Long Island between 1985 and 1990, nearly 40% were working people between the ages of 23 and 44. As a result of this lack of availability of native-born workers to fill traditionally low wage jobs, there was tremendous demand for alternative labor sources. Salvadoran and other Central and South American workers, in many cases lacking legal papers or English skills or both, moved to fill these jobs in the Long Island labor market. Finally, along with the baby bust has come an increase in the population of elderly citizens requiring care and support. In the year 2000, more than 13% of Long Island’s population was over 65, in contrast to 1970, when it was less than 8%.

This wealth of employment opportunities for Central American immigrants should not obscure the low wage nature of most of the jobs themselves. When we compare the 2000 annual wage figures for Long Island’s technology intensive industries to those of the service, tourism and not-for-profit sectors, we begin to glimpse two extraordinarily different Long Islands:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Average Annual Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer Industries</td>
<td>$74,902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics Industries</td>
<td>$58,461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>$50,055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, Management and Research Services</td>
<td>$48,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bioscience Technology Industries</td>
<td>$42,513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing and Personal Care Facilities</td>
<td>$29,855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential Care Services</td>
<td>$23,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels and Motels</td>
<td>$21,908</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Health Care Services</td>
<td>$21,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gasoline Service Stations</td>
<td>$18,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Day Care Services (not-for-profit)</td>
<td>$15,494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating and Drinking Places</td>
<td>$15,304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*New York State Department of Labor, third quarter 2000, excerpted from the LIPA Annual Business Fact Book

As dramatic as the above numbers appear, one must bear in mind that there are restaurant and light manufacturing jobs that pay even less. In addition, many Salvadoran workers are

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22 Sengupta.
23 Mahler, 112-113.
employed in the “informal sector” earning even less as day laborers and domestic workers. Day laborers were earning between $50-70 per day, on days when they could find work. Assuming they could find work on average about 60% of the time, even at $70 per day, they would be earning $10,080. Live-in domestic workers with whom I spoke seldom earned more than $250 per week for a total annual wage of $13,000. Those with whom I spoke who worked in the manufacturing sector seldom earned much over the minimum wage, but even assuming an hourly wage of $7.50, an annual gross wage would come out to about $14,400. Few restaurant workers I spoke with earned more than $250 per week, which would come out to $13,000 per year. As Gordon wrote in 1998 “At first glance, suburban work seems an appealing alternative to the garment factories of New York City. But sweatshops followed immigrants to the suburbs...Business is transacted in cash, employers close and open under new names and workers are plentiful and cheap. The economy bears all the hallmarks of sweatshop labor except for its suburban setting.”

Here was the central problem that the Workplace Project was created to address. There were a phenomenal number of immigrants who, while able to tap into social networks of relatives, friends and acquaintances to find places to live and work, found little in the way of union, non-profit or governmental support for employment-related problems. The Workplace Project opened its doors in November of 1992 to fill this void.

During the late 80’s and early 90’s, some communities and governmental entities responded to the increase in Central American refugees and undocumented workers by promulgating local anti-immigrant measures.

- Emboldened by the federal welfare bill in 1996, Suffolk County passed a law that permitted county workers to provide the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) the names of undocumented immigrants seeking health and social services.

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24 “Workers involved in the informal economy tend to have very specific characteristics that can be subsumed under the general heading of downgraded labor...Most workers who receive fewer benefits or less wages, or experience worse working conditions than those prevailing in the formal economy, do so because this is the prerequisite for their entry into the labor market. Their vulnerability is not randomly produced. It depends upon certain social characteristics that allow companies (or intermediaries) to enforce their demands. The most obvious instance is that involving immigrant workers, particularly the undocumented.” “World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics and Effects of the Informal Economy” Castells and Portes eds., *The Informal Economy: Studies in advanced and less developed countries*, (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 26.

The Town of Freeport in Nassau County hired additional building inspectors in order to increase the number of raids on homes believed to be illegally subdivided or over-occupied.

The Town of Manorhaven began requesting identification from people seeking to enter a local park and established a new village court to prosecute housing cases.

In an effort to restrict access to day labor shape-up sites, Nassau County and local village police in Franklin Square, Glen Cove and Locust Valley launched an aggressive campaign to ticket drivers stopping at the sites to pick up laborers.

Both candidates in the Glen Cove mayoral race ran on anti-illegal immigrant platforms.

In Bayville, residents urged the boycott of businesses that hire undocumented workers.

Officials in the Hempstead and Uniondale school districts imposed strict proof of residency requirements in an effort to exclude children of immigrants.

The vast majority of immigrants on Long Island work in the private sector, with just 6% working in government. The decentralized nature of Long Island’s governmental structure and the declining presence of federal and state labor department monitors coupled with the long-term dominance of a Republican party strongly backed by big business, made beefing up labor market protections and regulations for low paid immigrant workers difficult. Thus the problems the Workplace Project sought to address are exacerbated by the decentralized nature of Long Island itself. The Project has to try to do its work in the context of a large number of individual towns and cities each with its own sets of rules and local governments. Despite the existence of county legislative bodies in Nassau and Suffolk, they seldom take up employment-related issues.

The Workplace Project has fought on several levels to improve conditions for immigrant workers. Defensive battles have been fought in the villages and towns over the right of day laborers to gather at shape-up sites in public places. County legislatures have been arenas of struggle over this issue as well as other perceived anti-immigrant measures including “English-only initiatives” and housing regulations designed to make living in many of the communities in

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26 In 1990, the City passed a law banning day laborers from gathering on particular street corners to wait for work, but the law was overturned after Hispanic organizations filed suit and the City agreed to a settlement.  
which they seek work extremely difficult. Ironically, the state legislature was the institutional setting in which the organization achieved its most important victory: a strong statewide unpaid wages bill.

The Labor Movement on Long Island

Although there are about 521 union locals in Long Island and Queens and an estimated 150,000-200,000 unionized workers living on Long Island, for the most part, Central American immigrant workers have not been able to look to labor unions for help in upgrading their wages and working conditions.

According to key observers, the Long Island labor movement today focuses few resources on organizing new workers and industries. John Ziv of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 342-50, “You rarely hear much about organizing on Long Island, even though there are a lot of non-union workplaces. Most goes on in retail and virtually nowhere else...” There are a large number of light industrial factories on the Island, but, Newsday’s Crowe says “You are hard pressed to find someone who speaks English and to find a union member.”

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28 a significant portion of course live there but work in and belong to New York City unions
29 There is one small independent union on Long Island, called the United Industrial Workers (UIW) #424 that says it has made private sector manufacturing a priority for organizing. The workforce in this sector is overwhelmingly Latino. Jaime Escalante, long-time activist in Latino community organizing and politics on Long Island, but new to the staff of 424 explained: “The organization doesn’t have a clear strategy at this moment for penetrating the Latino community on Long Island but is open to it...They had one Latino organizer on staff and were looking for another, when they hired me and allowed me to do my thing within the Latino community.” Not a member of the AFL-CIO, the union is a pariah among Long Island’s other unions because of its policy of raiding. But UIW prefers the term “rescuing” to raiding. When contacted by workers who are seeking help but are already members of another local union, UIW first works with them to try to make the union more responsive to their needs. If they feel that the workers have tried this to no avail, they then help them to decertify the union and bring in #424. One Latino organizer on staff told me “I have bought into the concept so much that if 424 ever got to the point where it changed its philosophy of rescuing, I might move on and go someplace else”.

Community Unions: Beyond the Politics of Particularism
While there has been a huge influx in the number of low wage workers into LI between 1986 and 2000, unionization numbers in these sectors have not increased.

In keeping with the suburban stereotype, one might assume a certain measure of "tameness" on the part of suburban unions-- but this turns out not to have been the case. A glance through the Harry Van Arsdale Labor History Project Archives at NYU's Wagner Library Archives, tells a story of militant unionism and strikes aplenty. A case in point is the Levittown school district, unionized since the 1950's, which holds the distinction of having hosted the longest running teachers' strike in New York State history, in 1978.30

Ken Crowe, keen observer of the Long Island labor scene as Newsday’s labor reporter from 1964 to 1998, argued that when trying to understand the Long Island labor movement, it must be understood as part and parcel of the New York City unions. “I don’t think of Long Island as separate from New York City, I see it as an extension. We may have trees and farms, but it is an extension, these are regional unions.” Many sectors of the Long Island labor movement, such as the building trades, supermarket, trucking and hospitality industries grew out of New York City union locals that followed the work in their industries out to the suburbs.

Some unions, like those that organized the supermarkets, were able to extend their contracts with employers to new suburban locations so they did not have to wage aggressive union drives in order to establish suburban bulkheads. Others, like those who tried to organize at Grumman were unsuccessful, in part because the employers were able to resist unionization through the provision of comparable wages and other benefits.

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30 Despite all of the activity, no local regulatory mechanism was put into place until 1963, when Departments of Labor were established in Nassau and Suffolk.
Certain unions brought their mob ties with them from the City. Over the years, Newsday’s Crowe wrote extensively about connections between a few Long Island unions, such as the Hotel Workers and organized crime. In March of 1992, Crowe wrote about a precipitous membership decline in HERE Local 100. Over an 8 year period, it went from 25,000 to 5,000 members. A Wall Street corporate investigator hired by the international union found that this decline was fueled by the local itself. The local accepted payoffs from restaurant owners in exchange for either agreeing not to organize workers or to sweetheart deals that exempted part or all of their staff from becoming union members.

In general terms, unionization on Long Island reflects national trends. The labor movement’s growth kept pace with the range of private and public economic activity up until the 1980’s, at which time both organizing activity and membership density in the private sector began to drop off precipitously. Railroad and building trades locals are among the oldest on the Island with various local union charters dating back to the nineteen teens, 20’s and 30’s, and grew apace with housing and commercial development as well as the increasing centrality of the Long Island Railroad for commuters. As suburban residential communities grew, New York City retail clerks’ and butchers’ locals organized the supermarkets, at about the same time as industrial unionism was taking hold in the defense and clothing industries during the 30’s and 40’s. Public employees organized a bit later--teachers beginning in the 1950’s, postal workers and letter carriers in the 1970’s (both began as associations and evolved into unions after the legalization of collective bargaining). During the 1980’s, as more and more production moved offshore, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) on Long Island lost more than half of its membership. As service, retail and hospitality jobs surged in the 80’s and 90’s, there was little union organizing in these sectors.

The Politics of Long Island Labor

The AFL Central Trades and Labor Council of Long Island was chartered in 1936 and the C.I.O Industrial Union Council a few years later in 1941. In tandem with the national merger, the Long Island Federation of Labor was formed in 1959, after close to four years of weekly discussions and negotiations between the two. It presently represents about 100,000 workers.31

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31 At the time it was chartered, the AFL Central Trades and Labor Council of Nassau and Suffolk Counties consisted of the following unions: Operating Engineers Local 138, Operative Plasterers Local 780, Hotel and Restaurant
The merged Long Island Central Labor Council never became a particularly powerful or effective organized voice for labor on Long Island. *Newsday* reporter Crowe believed that this was due to the fact that its elected leadership had full-time jobs working for union locals which meant they relegated their federation work to a backseat and sometimes placed the interests of their locals above the interests of the federation as a whole. But this was only a part of what ailed the federation—its top leadership was involved in organized crime.

Anthony Amodeo, the president of the federation from 1969 to 1992 was suspected of mob ties before he took office in 1969. He was convicted on minor charges in 1976. He was indicted again in 1984, by which time in addition to the Long Island Federation, he had become president of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local #100. Crowe wrote in *Newsday* at the time: “Last week, in indicting several major organized crime figures, a federal grand jury charged that Local 100 is controlled and dominated by the Colombo crime organization. Unlike national AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland, or New York City Central Labor Council President Harry Van Arsdale, who frequently hold press conferences, Amodeo is rarely accessible to the media and to questioning about union activities. He has been making himself even less accessible since the indictment was issued…”

In November of 1985, federal prosecutors presented evidence that the Gambino and Colombo crime families worked through Amodeo to control the 20,000 member HERE local. All of the ins and outs of the case were covered by *Newsday* and each article mentioned that Amodeo was not only president of the local but also president of the Long Island Federation of Labor. Amodeo was convicted but continued to serve as president of the local until 1992 when the U.S. attorney’s office agreed to a consent decree which allowed the HERE international union to cleanse itself of its mob ties. Local 100 was placed into trusteeship and Amodeo who had already been removed as president of the local was sacked all together. He served as president of the Long Island Federation until late March of 1993, when he finally resigned. The executive vice president, Rocco Campanaro, has held office since 1959 and has been the only full-time paid employee of the federation for most of its history.

Employees and Bartenders Local 94, Theatrical Stage Employees Local 640, Moving Picture Machine Operators, Local 340, Wood, Wire and Metal Laborers Local 46, and the Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers Local 30. At the time of the merger, it represented about 25,000 workers. At the time of its charter, the CIO consisted of the following unions: International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) Locals 450, 444 and 445, the Retail Clerks Union, the United Auto Workers in a “catch-all local”, the Service Employees International Union and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) and represented about 30,000 workers at the time of the merger.
Historically, the Long Island Federation has taken a pragmatic approach to building power. Jack Kennedy, President of the Long Island Building Trades Council: “How do you deal with a place like this, which has so many fiefdoms? Across the Island, we have relationships. Each town has got a supervisor, like in Huntington or East Hampton or South Hampton and most of them are good friends of our Council, and the reason is because of money and votes. We get involved in these local races, we will run phone banks for them, hand out literature at the railroad stations, go door to door and give them money and our endorsement.” The UFCW’s John Ziv described Long Island labor’s political approach this way: “...They never had a consistent plan or strategy for politics, that is mostly because of Republicans in power on Long Island. Especially for the Building Trades, that means work to try to get close to whoever is in power, especially if they are pro-development. They really are non-partisan in the old Gompers sense of the word—more than the state federation or the New York City labor council, they are non-partisan in the best opportunistic fashion—reward friends and punish enemies.”

Long Island unions and their immigrant members

There have often been problems with local union officials making immigrant members feel welcome and providing them with representation and support. Finally, on the bell curve of “activist” to “status quo” or old-fashioned business unionism, most Long Island unions tilt decidedly toward the right tail. It wasn’t only their immigrant members who were not approached to participate in union activities it was most members, period.

In the first three years of the Workplace Project, eight percent (70 out of 917) of its cases were immigrant workers who were having trouble with their unions. In some cases, the union representative was looking the other way when employers were not applying the terms of the contract to immigrant workers, in others, the union was not representing workers when they had grievances including unfair dismissal, sexual harassment, or non-payment of wages. Overwhelmingly, the unions had no bilingual staff or capacity.

When an immigrant worker who is a union member, comes into the Workplace Project with a grievance, the staff usually tries to get in touch with a union representative to see if they can explain the situation and get the union to take action. Often they must place several calls before one is returned, and often their calls are not returned at all. A long-time Workplace
Project volunteer, Jeanette Katz, comes from a family of union organizers. She is a retired teacher who was an active member and then on the staff of the UFT (United Federation of Teachers) in New York City. Speaking with Katz in May of 1996, she told me about her experiences getting unions to respond to her Project inquiries:

"I was very pro-union--more so than I am now, because of my dealings now. Many times I have to write 6 letters, call 10 or 12 times, before they call back... I could show you many cases where you would see 5 or 6 letters and no one calls back! ...There is a lot of disenchantment because we almost have to threaten them. Sometimes they don’t act much different than working with an employer...After a lot of letters we have finally gotten somewhere but I would not call it a good experience. Everybody laughs around here...(they say) you are going to write another one of your letters. I sign the letters ‘fraternally’ and I think I understand union culture but it doesn’t seem to make the unions respond any more quickly."

In a 1996 case, a group of 6 workers from Davis Vision, a company with a largely Latino production force that makes optical lenses, came to the Workplace Project because the company was unilaterally changing the rules of the contract. Changes included enacting a policy whereby workers would lose substantial overtime pay, be subjected to a speeded-up quota and for the first time be charged for mistakes on the job. Efforts to get their union representative to raise their concerns with the company and set up a meeting with management were met with total indifference.

At first, the Business Manager at the optical workers union was reluctant to get involved. He said that the changes were acceptable within the context of the contract and that he was told by the shop steward that only a couple of workers were voicing concerns. He insisted on meeting with management without workers present and several times accused them of “crying wolf.” The Workplace Project continued to pursue the matter with the workers in the shop, holding meetings and carrying on organizing work. After several meetings between workers from the shop and the Business Manager, organized and translated by staff of the Workplace Project he began to be more responsive. After five months of intermittent meetings, the workers called for elections for a new shop steward and requested that they be held at the Workplace Project. Benito Estrada, a leader of their group was elected shop steward.

32 These figures are from the Workplace Project’s database.
In another case, the Workplace Project helped Pedro Rivera, a janitorial worker from El Salvador, file an unfair labor charge against his union, with the National Labor Relations Board. His statement begins: "I, Pedro Rivera, employed by Total Community Management Corporation, member of SEIU 32B-32J, have been employed since March 1991. I secured my job by negotiating with the employer and earned $200 a week for my first two years. This salary was half the amount earned by other workers. For the past three years, I earned $242 a week, while the negotiated union contract guarantees a wage of $523 weekly. The union was advised of this unfair practice for the past years, but no action has been taken. I have paid union dues and been an active member." Turned down for help by the local business agent, the Project wrote to the local president and eventually to Andy Stern, International President of SEIU. Of course all correspondence is signed "fraternally".

While twelve out of the 42 Workplace Project members I interviewed were members of unions in Long Island, for the most part they did not consider themselves active in their unions. In several of the interviews I was struck by how similar their attitudes toward unions were to those of many American workers I had encountered over the years. For example, Vilma Chavez who had been in the United States for many years told me, "When I was at Bloomingdales we did not have a union and that was wonderful. Now I have a union and it never does anything. Bloomingdales was very kind with us, we had all the benefits we needed and we didn't need to ask for a raise of salary because they gave it to us...they gave us profit-sharing..." When I asked her whether the union ever communicated with her at work, she said it never did. She couldn't tell me the name of her union but pulled out her card and showed it to me. It was CSEA, the AFSCME affiliate in New York. "I don't carry it," she said, despite the fact that she had. She told me, "I put it in a drawer and have it at work."

Most of the Workplace Project members who were in unions in Long Island viewed union membership as helpful in terms of earning higher wages and better benefits but not as an outlet for their own political participation or community building. Sophia Betancourt worked in a union shop for thirteen years: "In the factory I worked with hot things and a nerve in my hand bothered me. I had surgery and the union helped me to get help and paid my bills. There were people who spoke Spanish, some were nice, some were not...Whenever someone needed help we got together and helped each other. The union was very, very good it got us a bonus every year from the company and a good amount of money when the company closed down."

Community Unions: Beyond the Politics of Particularism
Working in one factory in Freeport, Jose Diaz a union activist from Colombia asked about the contract but found that none of the workers had a copy of it. He was told that, “the contract was between the union and the company.” After requesting a copy of the union’s constitution, he found that the union was not following many of its own rules in terms of workplace representation.

Rony Martinez, pulled out his union card when I asked him if he belonged to a union. It was a teamsters local based in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. Working in a lab for more than 4 years, he said that he felt “...the union is not working the way they should be working for the employees. It works more for the employers than the workers, but it is also the peoples’ fault because they don’t go to the union meetings. I went to one meeting but it was very late and very far away. The shop steward is not honest, he is a sell-out to the employers and seems to be very naïve with regard to labor laws.”

Rene Arguello from El Salvador had belonged to several different unions since arriving in the United States, working in nursing homes as well as factories. He said “The unions I belonged to were not interested in their members...We got better pay and benefits because we were in the union but when there was a problem the union rep never showed up and when he came he would come and talk with the employer and not with us...But, the unions are not the problem, we need the unions.”

Angela Sarmiento contrasted the unions in Venezuela to those she had encountered in the United States. “The unions in my country do not give benefits to the workers. They fight for the rights of the workers and will do it until they succeed. Here? No...They only talk about the contract, not political issues. A friend of mine worked at the school cafeteria for fifteen years and was fired unjustly. The union did not defend her. In another case the union agreed to a cut-back in hours of compensation when the school attendance fell below a certain level. They don’t listen to what we say.”

Juan Carlos Molina had been a student and labor activist in El Salvador, and was a member of a union where he worked as a janitor: “They have very good social services, but they don’t try to get close to the worker. There is no closeness between the union and the worker. The shop steward doesn’t care about anything but giving out information. He gives the information but doesn’t explain it. He doesn’t give it out voluntarily, he waits for someone to ask for it. The unions in the U.S. have achieved so many things but they should educate people about their
rights, what they are entitled to, about social issues. They give us information—‘we want to try to get this law passed’ but we are just given the paper and they don’t give us any more information. The mail comes once a month and they say “hi, hi, hi” and that’s it. The other thing is the old workers do very well but the new workers are not doing well. The union is only working with the old laws and not trying to defend the people who are now coming to the U.S. The people have problems with immigration but you can’t ask the shop steward ‘what is the position of the union about immigration?’ or ‘what will happen when the INS comes to the workplace?’ The union should inform the workers about that.”

Although the shop steward is from Colombia and speaks Spanish, Molina said, “It is a traditional set-up, they pick one person who has been there for ten years. It should be rotated. There are only a few people allowed to become active in the union. We have been trying to break the ice and get the union to allow more people to become active in the union but they don’t allow it. I have been trying to become a member of the executive committee of my local, I have been clear with them. Some people say this is like the old communists, you just can’t speak up.”

In a follow-up interview with Benito Estrada, the newly elected shop steward at Davis Vision whom I discussed above, he told me about how things had been going since he had been elected. They had signed a new three-year contract with the company that was good but this was after he had put up quite a fight with the local president, business manager and international union to have the proposed contract translated into Spanish. He had initially been told that the contract was going to be the same as the old one, “but when I asked them to translate the contract so that everyone could read it and know what they were voting for that was when I discovered what we were really voting on.” When he finally got the translation he found they were eliminating important sections like holiday pay and triple pay on Sundays. They had also eliminated the Martin Luther King Day holiday and changed it to a “floating” holiday: “The black people were really mad because they thought that I was betraying them because the holiday was not there. I told them that the union and the company were lying and that if we stood together we could control things.

When the union came to us we all said that we would vote no on the contract unless it was changed, so they did. When we negotiated this time, there was a committee of Blacks and Latinos negotiating together. It was very different, when it was only me and one or two others, they didn’t listen as much, but when they see a bunch of us, they listen more. The union now is
aware that people are reading the contract and getting to know what is going on with the negotiations.” Estrada told me that for a little while the union had treated him better because of the threat of continued NLRB intervention. The NLRB was pushing them to deal with the Latino workers, but then the local started going back to its old tricks, changing the contract and sabotaging him with Black workers. One of the last points he made in our interview was “American unions do not work by themselves, but only if someone makes them work.”

The Organization: The Early Days: Recruiting volunteers, offering services, setting up programs

The organization had three main recruitment pathways: word of mouth, frequent mention in the Spanish-language media, community outreach at venues Central American workers were likely to frequent. These run the gamut from Spanish-speaking masses and soccer games to certain supermarkets and laundromats and targeted outreach to particular groups of workers by employer or “industry”.

In its first few years, the organization printed and distributed one page fliers that provided tips about how to behave during an INS raid. In 1995, it published a bilingual comic book called “Luchas Laborales” that gave information about employment rights as well as telling stories about worker organizing efforts. The Workplace Project estimates that, in its first four years, it reached 7,000 workers through community presentations and over 75,000 through the Spanish language media. During that same period, more than twelve hundred workers walked through the door seeking help from the organization’s legal clinic.

Word of mouth between people who know each other is always the most powerful medium of recruitment and works especially well in tight-knit ethnic communities. In contrast to the atomized world of the more upper income suburbs, word of the Workplace Project was able to spread widely among Central American workers on Long Island because they were tapped into ethnic networks and because they tended to live and work in highly concentrated areas. In my individual interviews with 42 members about how they heard about the Project, 19 of them said it was by word of mouth. Eight members, the next highest number, said they heard about the Project through the Spanish language media. Of course the fact that there was no other organization doing what the Workplace Project does, meant that, by and large, all demand was funneled toward it.
Setting up shop at CARECEN, the major social service agency for Central American immigrants, the Project offered a workers’ rights course as well as employment-related legal services for immigrant workers. It was quickly deluged with workers seeking redress for unpaid wages and other forms of mistreatment at the hands of local employers.

For immigrant workers seeking help with employment-related problems, there literally was no place else to turn. The Project was filling an important vacuum with the legal clinic, but the larger ambition was to build an organization of workers who would take action on their own behalf to improve the situation. “There I was, doing legal services, it wasn’t really working but we were getting a hell of a lot of money back for workers. In four years, we got $270,000, so in terms of money in people’s pockets, we did it…”

The first employee (after the director) of the Workplace Project was Omar Henriquez. He was a Salvadoran whose family had emigrated to Long Island as a teenager. He had been active in El Salvador solidarity work in the United States and was interested in organizing among Long Island’s immigrant workers. He was a natural leader and a talented strategist with a nose for what was newsworthy and was able to build very strong relationships with area media.

From the outset, there was a very strong focus on participation and democratic decision-making both in terms of external organizing as well as in developing its internal programs and practices. Henriquez developed a worker organizing committee called C-POL (Comite Pro-Organizacion Laboral or Committee for Labor Organizing), which became the nucleus of a governing body of immigrant workers for the organization. Most of its core members took part in one of the first workers’ rights courses offered by the organization and came together in order to encourage others to take the course and to become a member. They became active in conducting outreach about the course and the over-all organization, organizing events and developing presentations at churches and other immigrant gathering spots. C-POL helped to plan and carry out events, marches and organizing campaigns. Before the organization developed other committees, C-POL was its action arm.

In its first year, the Workplace Project garnered very positive media attention from Newsday, the New York Times, the Daily News and the Latino media. In the wake of major immigration-related stories including the deaths of Chinese immigrant workers who were smuggled aboard the ship “Golden Venture”, and the so-called “Nanny-gate” crisis during the Clinton administration with Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood, important New York newspapers and
television stations came knocking at the Workplace Project’s door. Immigrant workers and their work-life problems were portrayed extremely sympathetically—the articles portrayed the problem as exploitation of the vulnerable and did not dwell upon questions of their legal status in the United States. Jennifer Gordon was held up as a dedicated crusader with a Harvard law degree. The Workplace Project was hailed as an effective advocacy group.

A year and a half after the Workplace Project opened its doors, it separated from CARECEN, formed an independent board (in April of 1994) and opened up a separate office. Although CARECEN was the most important social service agency for Central American immigrants, the Project had come to chafe more and more against the agency’s social service culture. “I went into the C-POL meeting with a proposal that had several reasons why we had to leave CARECEN: we can’t only organize Central Americans, there’s no opportunity for building worker power, their board had only one token Central American on its board…” C-POL voted in favor of the change. The Workplace Project moved into its own space in September of 1994, and held its first membership meeting in May of 1995. 60% of the 170 members of the Project attended that first meeting or called to say that they were not able to. Subsequent meetings had a steady attendance of 35 people with another 10-15 calling because they were unable to attend.33

Service Provision as a Draw for Membership: The Legal Clinic

From the beginning, legal services were a tremendous draw for the organization. The Project was inundated with workers seeking information on their rights and assistance with a problem they had experienced with an employer. In 1993, in its first full year of operation, the Workplace Project got complaints from 267 workers. Close to 50% of these concerned unpaid wages, over-time or unemployment benefits. As a result of the Project’s intervention, $18,000 in back wages and $40,000 in unpaid social security was recovered. The cases ranged from non-payment of wages to health and safety problems. Abuses took place in factories as well as on landscaping jobs. See tables below for more information on the breakdown of cases.

33 From a grant proposal submitted by the Workplace Project to the Campaign for Human Development, January 1996.
### TABLE 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-payment of wages, unemployment or overtime</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filing for Unemployment Benefits</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Filing for Workers Compensation</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem with union</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benefits not paid/filing for disability unrelated to injury on the job</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and safety violations</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems with employers paying taxes or refusing to use social security numbers</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical and verbal abuse</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General questions about rights</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker accused of stealing</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4.3

(n=917)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workplace Type</th>
<th>Number of complaints</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Landscaping</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janitorial (office cleaning and maintenance)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laundry/Dry Cleaning</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Store</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Food Preparation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic/Machine Shop</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehouse/Distributor</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truck/Tax/Delivery Driver</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 4.4

(n=917)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries of Origin</th>
<th>Number of individuals</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between November 1, 1992 and February 13, 1996, 26% of the workers aided by the Workplace Project filed monetary claims. During this period, the Project filed $330,539 in
claims for 234 individual workers. A total of $216,119 was awarded and $154,695 was actually paid out by employers.

Notwithstanding its many successes, from the beginning there was a tension between individual case work, which is the bailiwick of legal services’ lawyering, and the collective and systemic approach that characterizes community organizing. Reflecting upon the first iteration of the legal clinic, Gordon wrote “Indeed, the Workplace Project’s legal clinic did much of what the Project hoped it would. But even a year’s worth of experience with its new role revealed the tensions behind the logic of service as a draw to organizing. The most pressing of these was the dilemma of how the group could provide effective short-term services to its members without undermining its core message that long-term change required organizing.”

Like Gordon, Omar Henriquez felt strongly that the provision of legal services had to be linked to membership building and taking action. Otherwise it just undermined efforts to organize. They decided to reinvent the legal clinic in a way that linked it explicitly to organizing. Instead of thinking of the clinic, community outreach and education and worker organizing as three separate programs of the organization, they tried to integrate them into one over-all strategy.34

The second incarnation of the legal clinic reflected this approach and made a code of reciprocity quite explicit: services would be provided to those who made a commitment to work with the organization. Workers seeking assistance would have to enter into a formal contract with the Workplace Project that required them to pay a small fee, and either enroll in a nine week course on workers’ rights and organizing or donate ten volunteer hours to one of the organization’s committees, campaigns or projects. Workers seeking assistance were told in advance that their cases would be dropped unless they participated in the work of the organization. In addition, “cases were handled by an “organizer-lawyer” team that emphasized organizing strategies in its efforts to resolve the cases that people brought into the clinic.” In cases where workers opted not to accept the Workplace Project’s conditions, they were offered counseling and referrals but not provided legal representation.35

In this second iteration of the legal clinic, Henriquez and Gordon designed and implemented a new intake process that emphasized collective action from the very beginning.

Workers arriving with individual problems would first meet with an organizer who would explain that “the Workplace Project is an organization of workers, not a legal services center.” They would explain the quid pro quo of organizing or taking the class that was expected in exchange for provision of legal services and then overview the organization, explain the Project’s various committees and give examples of how workers might participate in the organization. At that point, workers would meet with a legal counselor. In some cases, really all that was needed was information—about how to file for unemployment or workers’ compensation. In the more complicated cases, the worker would meet with the organizer, the counselor and the lawyer all together and discuss the problem. At the point when it became clear that legal services would be required, the worker was asked to sign the contract.

Often the first step after the initial intake meeting with a worker who had an individual problem, was to arrange a direct confrontation with the employer in question. After meeting with the worker and getting him/her to sign the legal clinic’s contract, the staff would organize the worker, a group of supporters, and occasionally a reporter, to go to the home or office of the employer and demand that they pay the worker what was owed. In one case of a domestic worker who was fired by an employer and sent away without several weeks’ wages, Henriquez, the worker and a group of supporters piled into a few cars, drove out to their house and knocked on the employer’s door with the news media in tow. A half hour and one police visit later, the group left triumphant. Not only had the domestic worker been given her back wages, but the town police, summoned by the family on the assumption that the officers would tell the group to leave, had instead intervened on her behalf.

Sometimes these actions were all that was necessary, but in other instances, they were not successful. In those situations, the next step was for the clinic to send a letter to the employer once again requesting that he settle the matter. If there was still no response to the letter or an unsatisfactory one, the staff would initiate a lawsuit, file a complaint with the Department of Labor and get other agencies involved in the case. For the Project “for bigger cases, these legal tactics are part of a larger publicity campaign against the employer. This campaign is waged through the press, pickets, leaflets and other conventional organizing techniques.”36 In cases involving a group of employees, the Project asks the individual worker to go back to her place of

35 Jennifer Gordon draft manuscript, Law and Organizing: June 2000,24.
work and recruit her colleagues to come back with her to the Workplace Project so that they can strategize as a group about what to do.

Gordon and Henriquez were pleased with the results of the shift in the model of the legal clinic. As a draw, they felt that it was still useful. They found that the conditions they placed on representation did not reduce the flow of workers into the clinic—about 250-300 people annually who might not have come through the door of the Project otherwise. Because they were quite effective at winning back-pay awards, the word on the street was very positive. In its first seven years of operation, the organization recovered over $562,000 for workers in back pay and benefits.³⁷ Media coverage of these victories helped to establish the organization’s reputation for effectiveness as well. Legal representation was a tangible benefit offered to members and they appreciated it.

Most of all, Gordon felt that they had nudged the legal clinic closer to functioning as a conduit for organizing. “Internally, the clinic supported organizing by moving some people who came in with individual cases toward active membership through the Workers Course. This feature of the Project’s “service-in-exchange-for-membership” approach is unusual in that it does not simply require that a worker seeking legal clinic help sign up for membership and pay dues. That would certainly have been a simpler system, swelling membership rolls considerably. But the Project board decided that it only wanted members who understood the obligations as well as the benefits of membership. Members who had signed up simply to receive services, they reasoned, would be unlikely to join campaigns, attend membership meetings, walk picket lines, run for office on committees or the board, all aspects of active Project membership. Instead, the membership decision was postponed until after the Workers Course, when participants were both well-informed about the meaning of membership and excited about the possibilities of group action.”

Gordon, Henriquez and the other Project staff carefully entered the information provided by each worker seeking legal help into a database that helped them to discern over-arching trends. From the data they could pinpoint problems specific to particular industries or related to inadequacies either in labor law, or labor law enforcement. The clinic and the database also became an important resource for the Project’s work in sensitizing area media to the problems

Facing immigrant workers; they could use specific cases to spotlight examples of abuse as well as generate statistics from cases in the aggregate. Most importantly, “organizing campaigns grew out of particular cases and broad patterns of abuse revealed through the clinic data.”

The organization moved into organizing not only out of principle but because even after employers were found guilty and ordered to pay settlements to workers, they often refused to do so. As a result the Project created the Justice Committee to organize Workplace Project members and allies to picket outside of the homes and business establishments of exploitive employers.

**The Justice Committee**

Coming onto the staff in January of 1994, Rhina Ramos, was the legal clinic’s second full-time lawyer after Jennifer. She was a Salvadoran who had fled the country with her family and emigrated to the US without papers at the age of 14, settling on Long Island. Ramos was a student intern for a year and a half and then received a public interest law fellowship to implement two new programs at the Workplace Project. The first, was a training program for immigrant workers representing themselves in Small Claims Court cases and at Unemployment Benefits hearings. Called “Poder,” (which means “power” or “to be able”) the program gave workers an opportunity to present their cases in a moot court setting in which Project staff played the judge and the employer.

The other new program was a Justice Committee that, through its organized pickets of employers, inaugurated a direct action organizing component at the organization. The Committee targeted employers who were not paying minimum wages, were refusing to satisfy legal judgements or who were actively opposing union organizing efforts.

“I started the Justice Committee with workers who have won in court but have not been able to collect the judgement owed them...We did the first one with an employer that owed over $1600 and it had been over 2 years, we had won in court and the Department of Labor had also ruled in our favor. So we had the first picket at the employer’s house. First we met here and the worker thought that all these people were meeting here for something else, not that they were here to support him. That was the first effect, seeing that all these people were going to come out and support him. So the employer was not at home, but all the neighbors came out, Nassau is very residential...to see 20 people there marching...We had big copies of the judgment order

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37 from the Workplace Project grant proposal to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, January 2000.
saying this is the reason we are here and we had signs with the amount he owed. It was construction work. When a neighbor told us that the employer was not around, we had to decide what to do, so we voted right there in the street and decided to stay 20 minutes more even knowing he was not around. The following week we called the employer and he was willing to pay, and we sent letters to workers who had been there and said how this had happened and it was a victory…"

The second picket was organized in front of a restaurant, on behalf of 3 workers who had not yet received a judgement but who had a very strong case. Demonstrators chanted and held signs that said things like “Eat, Drink and Feel Guilty”. The owner became so incensed that the police were called, and in a scene that would be replayed many times, the officers supported the picketers’ right to be there. Twenty minutes later, the employer emerged from his restaurant yelling about blackmail but taking out his billfold.

At one action at a seafood restaurant, workers held a sign that said: “A dishwasher here would have to work 5 and a half hours to earn the price of the filet of sole on the menu.” In another instance, workers showed up on the doorstep of a wealthy Long Island family with a sign that read “Wendy Wessler owes her domestic worker $3,227.”

In 1996, the Justice Committee conducted 22 pickets. These actions became a way for active members to regularly participate as well as for newcomers to begin to get involved. Because these tactics were so unusual for the suburbs, they were very effective, especially when they blocked the flow of commerce at retail venues like restaurants. They served other important purposes as well. First, they were enormously empowering not just for those workers directly wronged by the employer in question, but for many others who came to these actions. These workers were used to being treated as if they were invisible, and thought of themselves as having little recourse when an employer mistreated them. These actions, by virtue of their public nature and the strong reactions they elicited, demonstrated that they didn’t have to remain invisible. Also, learning that they could take part in a public confrontation without feeling that they were placing their lives in jeopardy was an important lesson about civic participation in their new home. Finally, the actions were newsworthy, and Newsday, Long Island’s paper of record covered many of them sympathetically.
The Workers' Rights Course

In February of 1997, the Workplace Project convened the first class of its fourteenth Workers’ Rights course. The course was divided into three sections: legal rights, organizing models and labor/immigrant social movement history. Each class, regardless of the topic always made the link to organizing.

By staff estimates, there were two kinds of workers who typically take the course. The first and smaller of the two is made up of those who have contacted the clinic because of an individual labor problem or as part of a group of workers struggling to organize at the workplace. The second is composed largely of aspiring activists, who might have heard about the class from friends or through the Spanish media and see the class as a way to become involved with the Workplace Project. According to Jennifer Gordon, while some of them are interested in organizing at their current workplace, many were activists in their home countries who are looking for a community of activists to join here. Among participants in the February 1997 course, 10 out of the 28 had cases pending; the other 18 had read about the course or heard about it from friends or relatives.

At the beginning of the first class, students are told: “We charge for these classes—not in money but in time. Each participant must be willing to devote at least ten hours of her time after she graduates to putting what she has learned into practice by participating in Workplace Project committees and organizing campaigns. We ask that anyone not willing or able to make this commitment not participate, out of respect for our ‘honor system’ of payment…”

As part of the introduction to the course, various staff members stress the importance of membership to the organization’s ability to build power and achieve improvements for immigrant workers. Others explain how the organization operates internally-- that there were monthly membership meetings as well as a Board of Directors on which all members had a right to serve. They explain the benefits associated with membership: access to legal representation, an identification card, notary public services, and bank accounts (something often hard for undocumented workers to set up).

During the first class, students are asked to state the country they are from, how long they have been in the United States, and how many and what types of jobs they have held since their

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38 see Workplace Project grant proposal to the Campaign for Human Development, January 1997, p.4.
39 from “Introduction the Workers Course” internal memo of the Workplace Project written by Jennifer Gordon.
arrival. Half of the students in the February 1997 class were from El Salvador, and the rest were from Guatemala, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic. Here is a sampling of the students’ answers: Rene from El Salvador had been in the U.S. for three years and had worked at factories and car washes. Roberto from El Salvador where he had been a school teacher, had been in the country for seven years and had worked as a gardener, in restaurants and in construction. Peter, also from El Salvador had been in the country for ten years and worked in factories and construction.

Very few of the 28 who spoke that night talked about specializing in one particular type of work. Most had worked in two or three different sectors and had held a number of different jobs. No one mentioned having worked a long time for one employer or in one industry. Almost no one spoke of their work in this country in occupational terms, with a few exceptions—one baker, one mechanic, one carpenter and one painter. In the end, 3 mentioned having performed domestic work, 18 factory employment, 2 car washes, 10 construction work, 10 gardening, 10 restaurant work. The numbers spoke for themselves: 53 different jobs had been held in at least 6 different industries by the 28 students.

The classes demystify U.S. labor and social welfare laws. For example, immigrant workers are told that the minimum wage and overtime laws apply to all workers, regardless of whether they have legal working papers. Workers are also taught that organizing at the workplace is protected under the law and that it is illegal for workers to be fired for organizing, again whether they are documented or undocumented.40

In each class, speakers are brought in from government agencies like the state Department of Labor and OSHA, as well as from unions, worker centers and local universities. All class sessions follow a popular education pedagogy and wherever possible draw insights and opinions from the students themselves. The Project always works to point out the discrepancy between theory and practice, between the law on the books and what happens to workers in reality. They always connect these disjunctures back to the need for organizing. The classes are structured so that before the students hear from the “experts” they identify their own experiences

40 The latest Supreme Court ruling in April of 2002 in Hoffman Plastic Compounds vs. NLRB, that undocumented workers are not entitled to the same protections as U.S. workers if they are wrongly terminated (for union organizing, for example), has imperiled the right to organize. The decision held that while it was illegal for the company to fire the worker for his union activity, he was not entitled to back wages. The absence of “meaningful sanctions” in the words of Justice Breyer, might encourage employers to hire undocumented workers since they could violate their rights with relative impunity.
with a topic, like occupational safety and health. They are asked to draw and discuss hazards at
their own workplaces and learn about the laws that are on the books in this context. By the time
the “experts” arrive, students are primed to put the tough questions to them, and not just to
accept their presentations at face value. In this way, the organization consciously follows a
“Frierian” pedagogy aimed at developing the students’ critical thinking skills.

At the penultimate class, members of each of the Workplace Project’s committees, C-
POL, the general organizing committee, Fuerza Laboral Femenina, the womens’ committee and
the Justice Committee (discussed above) make presentations about their work. In addition, the
work of more ad-hoc committees is also presented and offered up for consideration. Students are
then asked to sign up for a committee and on the last day of class, they are given a handout that
provides them a list of all the committees, their next meeting date, time and place, and a list of
which students signed up for each. The organization tries to ensure that the committees meet
within two weeks of the final class, so that students go right from graduating from the course to
actively participating in the life of the organization.

The Workplace Project hosts a formal graduation for participants who complete the
course, and one whole wall of the office displays photographs of each of the graduating classes.
The organization experimented with a variety of formats for evaluating the class including
holding one at the end of the course. Sometimes the organization formed a committee of workers
from that class to evaluate the course, offer suggestions for improvement and participate
in designing and teaching the next class. Staff worked closely with members on their presentations.

The course evaluation process is a good example of the Project’s commitment to active
participation and their understanding that there are valuable insights to be gleaned from the
workers who take it.41 Students have very astute comments and suggestions that are incorporated
into the next course curriculum and Project staff have the opportunity to learn about how the
classes have affected workers’ behavior on the job. Here are a few examples:

One worker named Oswaldo, after attending the course on workers’ rights, was fired after
sharing the information learned there with his co-workers. Not a single one of them was willing
to corroborate his story for an NLRB claim. He suggested that a warning be issued in the first

41 In my observations of the way immigrant workers are sometimes treated by social service agencies, government
workers and unions, there is a level of condescension that was just absent at the Workplace Project. They begin from
a premise that their most important function is empowerment and an operating assumption that workers know a lot.
You see it in everything they do.
session of each course in which the students are clearly told that if they take action on the basis of what they learn in class, they must be prepared for employers to react. To protect themselves, they need to have conversations with their co-workers about supporting each other if anyone is threatened or fired and to make sure that they keep records, diaries and copies of all communications.

Students appreciated the presentations on state and federal programs, but were frustrated by the elementary nature of some of the content. One student, in critiquing the OSHA representative’s presentation said “I don’t need a slideshow to know that I could fall if there is no guard rail.” On the other hand, students wanted more clarification of the differences between Disability insurance and Workers Compensation and how these programs interact with Unemployment Insurance. In presentations about unions and about other worker centers, students wanted to know more about organizational structure and how power was built.

Students who graduate from the course are then welcomed into formal membership in the organization. They are invited to a new member orientation that is held a half hour before the membership meeting so that having received some of the core information about membership dues and benefits and the operation of the Board, they can then go to the meeting.

As of February 1997, out of the 290 people who had taken the course and fulfilled the other requirements of membership, 100 were actively involved in the organization. In terms of core leadership, about 25 attended weekly meetings and participated in driving the work of the committees. At the time Gordon told me, “The majority of people who come through the class don’t stay with us, and the majority who have legal cases don’t stay with us. More people with legal cases stayed with us and became active no matter how their case was resolved than people who did not have legal cases. In addition, all the people who got involved with us through union problems are still active with us. I think it has to do with prolonged exposure and bonding...”

A Profile of the Membership

During an era when the decline of civic participation has become one of society’s deepest anxieties, encountering the Workplace Project is like stumbling into a Tocquevillian oasis. A place where, despite working two or three jobs at close to minimum wages, men and women showed up on a regular basis to take part. I wanted to ask every single person how they got there...
and why they didn’t just get the help they needed and bugger off. In addition to the other interviews I did with members of the staff and broader community, I conducted 42 interviews with Workplace Project members.

*Why they came to the United States*

The interviews were with a cross-section of the active membership of the Workplace Project; some were board members or extremely active committee participants, others were not involved at the leadership level at all. One striking finding of the interviews was that even members who came from war-torn countries were just as likely to have described their reasons for coming to the United States in terms of seeking economic opportunity as to escape the political situation in their home countries. Of the 37 Workplace Project members who were asked about the circumstances of their leaving home and coming to the United States, a majority of 20 indicated that they had emigrated for economic reasons. Twelve said that they left for political reasons and three said they had come for both political and economic reasons.43

Interestingly, while some members had certainly been involved in politics in their home countries, not all of them cited this as the reason they had come to the United States.44 Some of the most active members in the Workplace Project, whether or not they had been politically active at home, told me they had come for the economic opportunity, not in order to escape political persecution. Juan Calderon a constant presence at the Workplace Project told me, “I come from the central part of Colombia. I left because of the American dream--‘I will go to America’--mostly for economic advancement.” I asked whether he had been involved in politics at home and he said “No, only here because here there is freedom of speech, association. I came to the Center because I had a problem with unpaid wages related to overtime. …The Center made me political.”

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42 February 8, 1997 interview transcript.
43 The Salvadorans were the most likely to cite politics as their reason for leaving. The South Americans, even those coming from countries with long-standing guerrilla movements and right-wing paramilitaries (like Peru and Colombia) were much more likely to cite economic motivations.
44 Whether they came for economic or political reasons, most had entered the country illegally and most were still undocumented.
Why they came to the Center

From the responses to my question about why they initially sought out the Project, it seems that more members were drawn by the workers’ rights course than by the legal clinic. When I asked them about their reason for initially contacting the Workplace Project, the largest proportion, (18 out of a total of 43) said they had contacted the organization because they were interested in taking the class and learning more about their rights. Thirteen members told me that they had come to the Workplace Project because they wanted to help others with their employment problems and 10 came because they personally had a problem with an employer for which they were seeking legal assistance. While 9 members explicitly said that they had come because they wanted to be part of an organization that was fighting for workers’ rights, only 4 said they had come because they wanted to organize a union in their workplace.

The Nature of their work

Very few of the members I interviewed cited work in only a single occupation or industry since coming to the United States. In one of our early interviews, Jennifer Gordon told me:

“People keep saying ‘Well, what kind of workers are you organizing? Like, what is your industrial strategy for restaurant workers?’ Well, there is no individual strategy for restaurant workers, because people are flowing through day labor, restaurant work, factory work... They don’t have an identity as an “x” worker but as somebody who needs a job... there is no industry identification. They are not always or often going to move on in the same industry, so you have no sense of building up a pool in one industry. It feels futile to concentrate on just one industry in a traditional sense because these industries are revolving doors for workers.”

In terms of occupation, social class or economic position in their home countries, the vast majority of the members I interviewed had been downwardly mobile since they had come to the United States:

- Lilliam Araujo was the secretary and then manager of a coffee cooperative in El Salvador as well as a high school teacher and social worker. In the United States she has worked principally as a housekeeper but also as a cashier and receptionist at a beauty salon.
• Juan Calderon had been a mechanic and welder who owned his own shop with 3-5 employees in Colombia. In the United States he has been a day laborer and factory worker.

• Oscar Zuniga held a masters degree in theology in Peru and had worked as a high school and seminary teacher as well as director of a youth organization. In the United States he has worked as a day laborer, a factory worker and in asbestos removal.

• Jose Pacheco had been a merchant in El Salvador. He had owned a small ship and worked trading birds, fish and flowers between Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador. In the United States he has worked at a car wash and as a landscaper.

Some members of the Workplace Project had been factory workers or agricultural workers in their home countries and were engaged in occupations of similar social standing and education levels in the United States:

• Ely Zelaya had been an agricultural worker and factory worker in Honduras and was employed as a landscaper in the U.S.

• Jose Diaz had been a factory worker in Colombia and had worked in the U.S. in an auto body shop, a factory and as a landscaper

The Organization as Community

The Workplace Project, insofar as it is billed as a Latino worker organization, sounded homogeneous on the outside but on the inside it is anything but. It took only a few visits for me to figure out that although people shared a common language (and a common limitation in terms their inability to speak English) and a common set of experiences as low-wage workers, that was where the commonality ended. In my interviews, almost no one related to “Latino” as an effective descriptive term. People preferred to be called “Colombian”, “Mexican”, “Dominican” or “Salvadoran”. There were enormous differences by country and region as well as levels of education, social and economic class and politics. Jorge Coronel from Peru observed: “There is a lot of rivalry among the Hispanic community. Colombians fight with the Venezuelans, the Peruvians with the Ecuadorians. But when we leave our country, we shouldn’t think that way, we should just get together as Hispanics.”

Once I began the interviews, the differences that had been papered over by a common language seemed so dramatic that I became convinced that most of these people would have
never met, let alone been in a common organization if they hadn’t found themselves together in the United States. On the board and various committees of the organization during the time of my visits, just as I encountered former doctoral candidates and landless peasants, I also found former student and union activists in the Salvadoran left along with former Salvadoran army officers. Emigration and a lack of English had thrown them all together; but the Workplace Project had to find a way to forge them into a meaningful community.

The membership of the Workplace Project was made up of a combination of “joiners” and “non-joiners”. Nineteen had been active in organizations back home, but eleven had not. Of the nineteen who had been active, 6 cited unions as their primary organizational affiliation. When I asked about membership in organizations here in the U.S., 15 told me that they were not active in anything besides the Workplace Project. Eighteen mentioned the church as the other organization they belonged to, but 14 out of those 18 characterized themselves as inactive church members.

In conversations with members about what was important to them about their involvement with the Workplace Project, what I heard over and over again was that it restored to them a sense of individuality, connectedness and efficacy that had been lost in emigration. Although people usually chose Long Island because they had family or friends or countrymen already living there, the community and civic infrastructure of home was by and large missing. Organizational participation in the Project gave people a way to reconcile who they had been at home with who they had become in the United States. In an early conversation, Gordon used the term “cognitive dissonance” to encapsulate this struggle. “...Somebody who was a psychologist in Peru and then comes here and is cleaning houses and has no way to reconcile it because in their mind they are a psychologist cleaning houses, well, the unfairness of that will kill you. If I were me and just cleaning houses and had no way to explain that to myself that this fit into a larger scheme of where I belonged in the world and where my talents and brain could be put to use, I would eat myself up at night...I have seen that happen to people.” My interviews with Project members bore out Gordon’s points. Oscar Zuniga said “When I arrived at the corner it was a whole new world and a hard world because of my limitations with English. My work before had been intellectual and now it was manual. My body hurt. I felt alone and far away from
my family. It was hard to feel that, everybody I think feels that way. We are all coming here to make money to send to our families. What was different for me was that I hadn’t realized before that people come here and get lost. They throw their lives away and waste money, don’t think about the future, about saving. They are living for the day, don’t have goals, many become alcoholics. ...All human beings feel the need to belong. The Workplace Project is my reference group, I have the opportunity to share my vision as a worker and contribute here as somebody from the street corner. ...My work at the Center and what it does on the corners teaches workers to believe they have value in the world, not only for themselves...”

Participation in the Workplace Project provided an enormously important outlet for people and as a result they made significant commitments of their time and creativity to the organization. Over the course of her six years at the helm of the Project, Gordon came to the conclusion that for a lot of the activists, self realization was even a more powerful catalyst than class anger: “...The real reason people are sticking with it is that it makes their life make sense in a way their life didn’t make sense before.” As Jose Martinez, a union and student activist and an electrician from El Salvador and the former president of the Workplace Project board told me in 1997: “When I was living in El Salvador I used to do a lot things. Before I came to the Center my life was working too many hours and watching television or going around doing nothing. When I came to the Center, my life changed a bit, because the Center made me feel the way I felt back in my home country which was that I had a sense of purpose other than going to work and coming home.”

Most of the workers I interviewed were not so much resentful of performing menial labor per se. As Lina Castro of Colombia told me “I don’t think it (working as a housekeeper, factory and restaurant worker) is bad, because I see it as a ladder, go step by step, do certain things and better things happen later...” Immigrant workers had expected to start out working in the low wage labor market; what shocked them and made them seek out the Workplace Project, was their treatment at the hands of employers as well as the attitude of the larger society toward them. “...Any job is a job,” Lina Castro said “I loved cleaning houses and I like to do various things but what bothered me the most was the mistreatment. The way people treat you because you are doing this kind of job. They think you are stupid because you don’t speak English.” Like many

45 There were “community of origin” clubs and church-related organizations and activities, but with a few exceptions, people didn’t talk about their lives in a way that communicated a sense of a community embeddedness.
Workplace Project activists, Castro sought out the legal clinic first for help with an employer. She was told to her surprise that her problem did not have a legal remedy, but stayed anyway, and decided to take the course and become involved.

I sensed strong feelings of geographic limbo in almost everyone I interviewed. Not a single person told me that they had come to the United States intending to stay. The economic migrants said they had come to earn money to buy houses or stake businesses back in their home countries. The political migrants said they had come to escape persecution and violence and spoke as if initially they had been seeking a temporary refuge. Unlike Mexicans who cross frequently between their home communities and California, these immigrants do not return home regularly. In interview after interview, people spoke of the families, friends and communities they had left behind, and yet there was this palpable ambivalence about going home. In their stories, and the far away look in their eyes they were quite literally “neither here nor there”. I sensed that they had become more settled than they were comfortable admitting and that they were not sure they could go home again. Despite the discrimination and the low paid work, even the absence of family and community, they were not in a hurry to go home.

**Labor Market Organizing: Day-Laborers and Domestic Workers**

*Day-Laborers*

In the Spring and Summer of 1994, the Workplace Project launched a campaign to improve wages and working conditions for the many hundreds of day laborers who gathered at shape-up sites across Long Island to wait for work. They chose these workers for two reasons. Day laborers were suffering at the very bottom of the labor market, and acutely in need of help, often showing up at the Project’s legal clinic to complain of not being paid for their work. Second, because the shape-up sites were located in public, commercial places sometimes just on the edge of residential areas, angry civic organizations were trying to shut them down and local governments were grappling with what to do.

From the beginning, Gordon, Henriquez and the other staff knew they needed to pursue a strategy to improve wages and conditions at the shape-ups with caution. They understood that contractors made use of the shape-up sites because they could hire workers on a short-term basis and pay them low wages “off the books”. The Workplace Project’s challenge was to try to
improve the way contractors treated the workers, and to raise wages and conditions without driving the whole operation out of existence. The sites were places where undocumented workers could get work, no questions asked, and potentially be hired for jobs that might became full-time. For these reasons, it was not the Project’s goal to shut them down. In terms of the wages, they wanted to raise them but struggled with the question of how high they could go before there was no longer sufficient surplus to make the informal sector attractive to contractors.

The campaign began because of problems between workers and residents at one shape-up site in the town of Inwood, but grew into a campaign that targeted two of the larger shape-up sites: one in the city of Franklin Square and the other in Inwood. For several weeks, Henriquez and members of C-POL (many of whom had started out their immigrant work lives on the corners, and some of whom were still there) traveled regularly to the sites, observing the informal hiring system and getting to know the regulars who gathered there. Workers would collect very early in the morning and wait for contractors who would pull up in pick-up trucks and vans, unroll their windows and shout out their labor needs and the rate of pay they were offering. Workers would shout out their qualifications and, once chosen by the contractor, would jump into the truck cabs or backseats of vans and the contractors would roar off. Henriquez observed that very little bargaining took place: workers basically accepted what they were offered. In visits to the Legal Clinic, they rarely had any documentation about the hours they had worked and they often didn’t even know the name or address of their employers.

In observing the workings of the shape-up site, Henriquez concluded that it was mostly used by undocumented workers because they knew that they would not be asked for legal papers. It was also, in his view “a stepping stone” to gather information on the job scene. New arrivals would be referred to the corners as the easiest place to find work. It was also a social scene where newcomers could meet people and find out not only about jobs, but also about the broader community. Henriquez identified a hierarchy of workers: “Those most likely to get a job were the ones who had been at the corner the longest so were able to speak a little bit of English and who had some experience with the equipment and some skill at the jobs requested by contractors. The next most likely to get work were those who didn’t speak the language but had some skills and the least likely were those who were unskilled and had no English at all.” In addition to those who came every day looking for full-time work, he also found that some workers came to
the corners to supplement their incomes from part-time employment, including some who came only on Saturdays and were resented by corner regulars for stealing their work.

Oscar Zuniga, a Peruvian seminarian and high school teacher related his experiences on the corner: “At the beginning I did not get much work on the corner because I understood very little English. After that, little by little, I was listening and learning and picked up English and some skills. Now I get work everyday. There is no work in the winter, but from mid-March to December there is work. It is not that I get work every day on the street corner, but people who have come to know me on the corner call me up when they need workers.”

Over time, Henriquez and the volunteers from C-POL began to organize “corner committees” in Freeport and Westbury as well as Franklin Square and Inwood. The committees’ goal was to try to establish a corner-wide minimum daily wage as well as to put systems in place to ensure wages were paid and safety conditions were improved. The strategy was to go daily or several times a week to the corners talking up the need to organize and identifying potential leaders among the regulars, visiting them at their homes and winning their commitment to establishing a corner-wide minimum wage. Over a series of mornings, Omar would speak to workers as they arrived at the corner and call together impromptu meetings addressing the whole group about the importance of organizing and about their right to negotiate with employers for a decent daily wage. He would choose a date and work toward the establishment of a new, higher going rate for certain types of basic work on the corner.46

In addition, the Workplace Project began to intervene in a problem between the town of Inwood and the day laborers there which began in the Spring of 1994. Residents claiming disruption of the neighborhood, organized to have the workers removed from the corner eventually having the police blockade the street. For their part, the workers told of residents video taping them, yelling and physically threatening them, claiming that the workers disrupted the neighborhood. The Workplace Project, asked by the corner workers to step in, negotiated with the town for a different shape-up site. “We got one in a more visible, commercial area where they would be protected from harassment and supported by town government,” Gordon said. In addition, Henriquez worked with the workers to establish a corner-wide minimum wage.

46 This type of “whole market” organizing strategy, where community organizing techniques are used to reach out to all the workers in a particular trade to set a higher wage has been deployed by the Carpenters union in geographic areas or categories of work that are or have become largely non-union. Examples include organizing that went on
By the conclusion of the second season of organizing in the Fall of 1995, Henriquez estimated that about 150 workers had gone from receiving a daily wage of $45 to demanding and receiving $60 a day. But maintaining the higher wage was extremely difficult, especially during lean times on the corner when work was harder to come by and workers felt compelled to take what they could get. This was reflected in the comments of Juan Calderon, one of the C-POL members who assisted with the corner organizing: "...When we go to the corners we are restricting them in order to be organized and united to help themselves...For example, to impose a certain wage per day, seventy or sixty dollars, how are they supposed to eat and pay the rent?"

Also, there was no enduring organizational infrastructure at the corners—no organizer on the scene every day to reinforce the wage. In early 1997, speaking about a recent trip to the Corner at Franklin Square, Henriquez said “I saw an outburst of ‘don’t go, don’t go’ but I tell them that it has to be peer pressure ‘nadie se vaya’ that works even if I am not there...I gave them the leads on how to do it, how to have group peer pressure—if the majority agrees everybody will have to follow: ‘No regresa aqui manana’ Over all, the $60 wage is respected but it could go.”

“In terms of maintaining the wage at Franklin Square, and not having people undercut it” Henriquez told me in early 1997, “its very hard sometimes. Even though we are showing that it is in the best interests of the workers, it has to be reinforced on a daily basis. There has to be a presence there to show that it really works and the reality is that people need money to survive. Sometimes when I bring bread and coffee in the morning it is the only food they see during the day. Today was a good example. This contractor pulls up and he says ‘I need someone only for half a day’. We stepped in and started negotiating saying ‘you pay $40 and give him lunch’. The workers already knew this guy and said ‘he is lying’ he ends up working you more than half a day and you come out with $30. So the contractor said to one of the workers ‘You talk too much’ He was particularly looking for people who didn’t know how to speak the language and would be passive and not talk back. Finally, he accepted one of the workers who was insisting on the $40 plus lunch and I said ‘At one you stop working, and he wants you to work more, he has to give you more money.’ A few minutes later one of the workers got out of the car and came back to the corner. When I asked him what happened he said ‘He wanted to pay me $40 for a day of

among Dry-wall workers in Los Angeles and an effort that was initiated by the carpenters union in Tallahassee, Florida.
work moving boxes and painting and I said ‘No, give me $60 and lunch and he said ‘No.’ But two minutes later, another guy got into the car.”

In subsequent discussions on the campaign, Henriquez worried that “We are becoming the police of the corner. I don’t want to be the cop on the corner. They need a level of consciousness where they themselves will solve these problems, so they can put pressure on the workers who accept less money and have some structure...When I come, they say ‘there is the Center, there is the solution.” In addition, often the Project’s best “leaders” on the corners were the most proficient English speakers and among the higher skilled, thus they would get picked up early for work, leaving the corner without someone to enforce the minimum wage and keep up morale. Sometimes these workers would be hired for weeks or months at a time (or in under less frequent circumstances—for the length of the season) by contractors, and so they would leave the corners for long periods of time.

After the successes in Franklin Square and Inwood, Henriquez and another organizer planned to extend their work to a couple of other corners, assuming that it would take a year or so of work to succeed in increasing the daily wage. They began this work in the Spring of 1997. Efforts were also made to recruit men at the corners to attend the workers rights course, and to try to bring some of the leaders from the different corners together to meet as a group and form a committee. Their hope was to think more strategically about day laborer organizing in the context of the “industry” and they undertook to learn more about the contractors using the corners, about the “end users” of contractors’ services and about the workers themselves.

Gordon in particular expressed concern about how “organized” the corners could be before contractors ceased to use them: “We need to understand how raising wages...or formalizing the informal economy...would affect demand. A tight hiring hall or employment agency is going to formalize the sector. The attraction now is that it is informal...the contractors, no questions asked can pick up guys whey they need them. They can try workers out with no paper and no insurance. It allows them to meet changes in demand without having to carry workers you don’t have to carry and it is kind of a sanctioned way to break the law.” In addition, Gordon stressed that the workers knew that if you are on the corners, you don’t need papers. The question was how to create a campaign that could pressure contractors enough that they would improve conditions for workers but continue to use them.
During this time, the Workplace Project also undertook a research project to investigate the day laborer organizing strategies of other worker centers as well as social service agencies. They found 3 models of how the work was being done: hiring hall trailers often funded by the local government in exchange for getting the workers off the streets; coops, that involved a small number of worker-owners usually doing work directly for owners, not contractors and that for the most part did not include undocumented workers; and finally, “training businesses” which put workers through a training program which was an actual business and then placed them in jobs.

They spoke to nine organizations and the most striking finding was that the vast majority had not focused on organizing the workers and building a membership organization; they had instead focused on “organizing the work”. Almost none of them had created membership organizations of day laborers or seemed to have taken on their day laborer work based upon a larger industrial or geographic organizing strategy.

Like the Workplace Project, the various groups chiefly became involved with day laborers in reaction to problems between local residents, small business owners, the police and the laborers. In the best cases, Glen Cove, Long Island, Silver Spring, Maryland and San Francisco, trailers were donated by the town or city governments on vacant lots where contractors could go and pick up workers without creating a public nuisance or traffic problem. In some cases, workers were provided with some vocational and language instruction, and some services including the issuance of I.D. cards, and bank accounts. There was an interest in providing health insurance and ongoing investigations into how to do to achieve it. (For the most part, undocumented workers are not eligible for the state health insurance programs for the uninsured.)

Several organizations attempted to perform some of the functions of a construction union hiring hall: several places maintained a list that determined the order by which workers would be hired. All four of the organizations that had something approximating a hiring hall set-up said that they had been able to establish minimum wages. None of the organizations had a system of membership dues.

By the end of 1997, in the absence of consistent leaders on each of the corners, Henriquez’s strong presence (he was working on other projects and then left the organization at

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the end of the year), or any ongoing organizational structure (like a hiring hall) things slid back to a chaotic status quo. In addition, changes in immigration law in 1996 created a more desperate situation for immigrant workers. As a consequence, they were less willing to forego work under any circumstances. Once again, contractors were pulling up, calling out their needs and wage offers and workers were jumping into the back of their trucks. After an evaluation process by the board and staff, a decision was made to shift the focus away from day laborer organizing.

While the organization had selected the day laborer constituency out of a strong dedication to helping the worst off workers, the difficulties encountered underline the weakness of this approach. In American labor history, organizing the worst off has seldom succeeded. Workers have organized most successfully when they had leverage—either by dint of their own skills or their centrality to a production process and “irreplaceability” to employers or industries.

**Domestic Workers**

A more modest organizing campaign around domestic workers was initiated through Fuerza Laboral Femenina (FLF, and in English, the Women’s Labor Force) the women’s committee at the Workplace Project. FLF was created by a group of female graduates of the workers’ rights course in the summer of 1994. Its purpose was to organize a separate space for the women of the Project, to build community and to take up issues specific to immigrant working women. In addition to the monthly meetings where women shared their stories and participated in group activities and discussions, the committee conducted outreach to Latina workers and put on events like an annual Mother’s Day gathering.

In 1996, the Workplace Project hired its first long-term women’s committee organizer. She was Esly Umanzor, a ten year resident of the United States with a masters in social work from Universidad Evangelica in San Salvador. Umanzor said “Experience has taught us that more men are participating in our activities and women’s participation has been poor, so we need to focus on them to motivate them to participate...” In describing the specific issues faced by immigrant women, Gordon and Umanzor listed off: the isolated work settings in which housekeepers and piece-workers often toiled, the “double load” of working and caring for one’s

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48 These changes included the passage of Proposition 187 in California which sent shock-waves through immigrant communities across the country, federal welfare reform which excluded undocumented immigrants from many programs and the federal Anti-Terrorism Act. All of these added up to a palpable anti-immigrant climate. Rumors were rife about increased deportations.
own family, the tradition-bound family roles in which husbands often objected to their wives’ participating in activities outside of the family and the difficult mass transportation situation on Long Island which made it hard for women without cars to get to meetings. Esly’s charge was to recruit more women into Fuerza, to help the committee plan and carry out its programs, to get more women to take the workers’course and to involve them more generally in the Workplace Project. As part of this effort, in 1997, the group began a campaign to organize to improve conditions for domestic workers.

Although they don’t gather at shape-up sites for day labor jobs, Long Island’s “domesticas” are in some important ways, the female counterparts to the day laborers. They all work “under the table” in the informal sector where wages are paid in cash and no records are kept. Many are new arrivals, speak little English, and have no acquaintance with American labor laws. Steered by friends and family to one of several employment agencies that place housekeepers, the women are charged a steep fee in exchange for placement at the home of a Long Island family, either as live-in or live-out help. These women show up at the Workplace Project with terrible stories of unpaid wages, sudden dismissal, fourteen hour days and verbal and physical abuse by employers. Isolated in a workplace of one, with odd days-off during which they have to take care of basic personal business, the Project knew from the women who did make it to the center that domesticas needed support, but they weren’t sure how to provide it. Given these obstacles, involving the women was to prove a near impossible task.

In looking over the cases of domesticas that had been brought to the attention of the Workplace Project, Esly and the women of FLF identified a common set of problems. In addition to the cases of verbal and physical abuse and unpaid wages, there were certain structural problems in the way the industry operated. Women who sought employment through agencies were charged a high fee and sometimes, when their initial placement did not pan out for one reason or another, they were forced to pay the fee again. Contracts specifying the terms and conditions of work between the women and their employers were virtually unheard of. As a result, they had no set schedule of work including the number of hours and days per week, or a regular day off that they could count on. Often they were not paid the minimum wage and did not know that New York State labor law required it. Despite their long hours and inability to leave the house, they were not provided by their employers with 3 meals a day or compensated for the cost of purchasing their own.
The issues faced by a domestica varied depending upon whether she was a “live-in” or a day worker. The former was typically someone who had been in the country for less time and had fewer resources to fall back on, while the latter was likely to be more established, and to have family in the country already. Although the live-ins had no rent and fewer expenses, they worked many hours, seldom received the minimum wage, had very little personal privacy and were extremely isolated by virtue of the fact that they lived with their employers and not in their own communities. The day workers were much more independent, able to charge by the hour, to insist on being paid right away, to do more than one house in a day, and were much less isolated. Of course, both live-ins and day workers had important overlapping concerns: no health benefits, no job protection, and health and safety issues arising from the use of household chemicals. The women were placed by employment agencies but hired and paid by individual families, thus there were two potential targets of a campaign to improve conditions.

Over a few months, those involved with the campaign learned how hard domesticas were to find and then to involve. The group realized that the approach could not be one in which the message to domesticas was “stand up to your boss”. Because domesticas were dealing with employers who were individual families, the employment relationship itself was completely privatized. Relationships were very personal. Some of the Workplace Project staff described it as “marriage-like”; the women viewed the families they worked for as their source of support. They were reluctant to take on their employer in the same way that a battered wife often is conflicted about leaving her husband (“he may beat me, but he is my husband and I need him.”). For live-ins, losing their jobs also meant losing their homes. Expressing grievances or negotiating terms like wages or days off had to be done one-on-one with people who often viewed themselves as doing the women a favor in employing them, or as a “part of their family”.

The group realized that domestic workers were not able to be the “enforcers” in their existing work relationships. The recruitment message couldn’t be a hard, confrontational one, but rather a community-building approach needed to be taken, in which the FLF volunteers and staff would think about events and services that might appeal to the domestica constituency. The idea was to find the domestic workers and build relationships among them to the point where they would identify themselves as a group of workers with common problems that could be addressed. The recruitment “rap” to the women would need to be less about trashing the boss and more about respect, dignity, their feelings of isolation including missing their own children, the
idea that housework is hard work, and a basic presentation of their rights. The group decided to
consciously stop using the term “trabajadoras domesticas” because the women had a very strong
negative reaction to it. It evoked for them a sense of being members of the lowest of the low,
going back to how maids were perceived in their countries of origin. Instead, they decided to use
only the term “mujeres que trabajan en casa” (women who work in the home).

The group designed an outreach strategy based on where these women were likely to go
on their days off: laundromats, supermarkets and of course, to mass. They created a survey the
organizers could use to ask women questions and get them into a conversation. They also printed
up little gifts to hand out to the women like rubber gloves for dishwashing that were emblazoned
with a short list of workers’ basic rights under the law as well as the Workplace Project logo,
address and phone number. They talked about other creative ways to interest the women: like
offering free bus trips to shopping malls or casinos and looking for soap opera stars who might
be willing to help.

They also created a new four week class specifically for this constituency entitled “Ingles
Laboral Basico para Mujeres que Trabajan en Casa.” The English language skills to be taught
would emphasize the words that these women really needed to know in their work, and the
structure of the class was designed to maximize social time as a way to counteract their isolation.
The idea was, through skits and discussions to gradually introduce the women to the idea of
collective action. Rather than encouraging them to confront their bosses, the goal was to involve
them in as non-threatening a way as possible, perhaps by having them make presentations about
their travails as a group, to churches, elected officials or reporters. The outreach to churches,
supermarkets and laundromats was begun in earnest in March and April. The class was designed
during these same months and begun in May.

In conducting outreach to domesticas, the organizers and volunteers of FLF experienced
a lot of frustrations. The women were exceptionally hard to find—they didn’t congregate in one
particular place. The women of FLF eventually had some luck finding some domesticas at bus
stations and churches, but even when they found them, they were often reluctant to get involved.
Some were undocumented and afraid to do anything to risk their jobs. Others were hoping that
their live-in families would sponsor them for a green card and so didn’t want to make waves.
Even the women who said they were interested seldom returned phone calls, came to the office,
took the class or became actively involved in any way. The women had very low consciousness
of themselves as workers. When approached by an organizer who would ask something like: “Trabajas?” (“Do you work?”) domesticas were likely to answer: “No, trabajo en casa.” (“No, I work in a house.”) They tended to think of their work-related problems as their own personal afflictions and not as issues they could work collectively to resolve. Typically, the only domesticas who ever came to the Workplace Project showed up after things had become so unbearable that they had quit, or been fired and had heard the Project might be able to help them collect their unpaid wages.  

As the outreach proceeded, one issue that always resonated with the house keepers was going after the placement agencies. The women were often paying fees to the agencies that were far higher than the law stipulated. New York State labor law specifies that an agency placing women for domestic work can charge a worker no more than 10% of her first month’s wages and must allow for that fee to be paid over ten weeks. Instead the agencies were charging double or triple what the law allowed and demanding that it be paid upfront. In addition, although the law states that all live-in domestic workers be paid $4.75 per hour for the first 44 hours and $6.38 for hours worked above that 50, they were knowingly placing women in jobs that paid much less than the minimum wage, sometimes as little as $2.00 an hour. 51

Eventually the women decided to proceed with a campaign against the agencies which would combine the small group of housekeepers that had been recruited with the other women of FLF and the rest of the Workplace Project volunteers and allied organizations. In July of 1997, the organization kicked off a campaign to get Long Island agencies that referred immigrant women to domestic jobs to sign on to a basic “The Workplace Project Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights.” In the statement they agreed to charge fees in accordance with the law and to refer women only to jobs that complied with basic wage laws including the minimum wage. The idea was that the Workplace Project would create a “Good Agency List” that would be distributed through the media, area churches and synagogues to Long Island families who would be encouraged to choose only agencies that were on the list. Agencies that refused to sign would be subjected to negative publicity, demonstrations, and letter-writing campaigns from homeowners.

49 from author’s case notes and Workplace Project Domestic Workers Strategic Planning 2/19/97 and 2/21/97 notes.
50 New York State Department of Labor, Division of Labor Standards, “Labor Law Information For Household Employers and Domestic Workers/Summary of the Minimum Wage Order for Miscellaneous Industries and Occupations Effective April 1, 1990”.
51 From the Workplace Project leaflet entitled “Campaign Against Agencies that Place Domestic Workers in Exploitative Jobs”
letting them know that they would not be using their agency until they complied. Forty-two organizations were recruited to the cause and sent letters to each of the agencies urging them to sign and letting them know they would circulate the list.

The Workplace Project and FLF worked with the housekeepers they had been able to recruit, as well as other women’s committee members and community allies to conduct meetings with the employment agencies. Backed by rabbis, priests, and Workplace Project staff, the women told their stories. These included scouring an oven without protective gloves until their fingers bled; being attacked by employers attempting to rape them; and cleaning six houses in a single day without breaks for rest or food. They also included stories of being charged exorbitant fees by agencies and then being placed into homes with absolutely no idea what their rights were in terms of wages, hours, duties or conditions of work.

Rabbi Donna Berman, described the scene at one of the agency meetings she attended: “The meeting was presenting to Mr. Sorto, the man who ran the agency, the statement of principles and testimony of women who had been cheated by him. They left a seat for him on the other side of the table where he couldn’t just storm out and leave. It was so powerful and important to me that I had to wear earphones because this meeting was conducted in Spanish with simultaneous translation...I was really impressed and he did sign the statement.”

In October Fuerza had its first success after a meeting with an extremely angry employment agency. I received a call from a very excited Jennifer Gordon who said “I think we just signed up the angriest ‘Good Agency’ on Long Island!” By the end of the year, five out of the six agencies that specialized in domestic workers had signed on to the statement of principles and agreed to establish contracts between employers and employees to be used in job placement. What had they agreed to? Essentially, to comply with state labor law.

The campaign received very sympathetic media attention. It continued even after the agencies signed on. FLF and the Workplace Project continued to build the base of housekeepers and to publicize the problems they faced. In fact, the Project received its best media coverage of the issue after it had won its initial victory with the agencies. On March 15, 1998, the entire cover of Sunday Newsday was emblazoned with the words: “Immigrant Advocates Warning: Beware False Friends/Phony ‘experts’ and Shady Employment Agencies Are Ripping Off Vulnerable Immigrants”. Inside were a series of articles detailing abuse of immigrant workers by employment agencies, under headlines like “Easy Prey: Many immigrants falling into traps in
search for jobs” and “Dead Ends on Mean Streets: Workers often wander into scams…” The articles documented many cases of agencies in Queens and Manhattan charging illegal fees despite the law. Aan article entitled “Fighting for Workers Rights” ran a half page picture of Esly Umanzor, and highlighted the work of the Workplace Project in organizing to get the agencies to sign the Statement of Principles.

Also in March, a reporter for the Village Voice traveled on a Workplace Project-sponsored bus trip to Atlantic City for housekeepers. The article praised the Workplace Project for having compelled the employment agencies to sign the statement of principles but also noted how difficult it was to monitor compliance.

Although the domestic worker campaign on the agencies resulted in all of the targeted ones signing on, the victory turned out to be largely symbolic. It had little or no effect in practice because there was no way to enforce the agreement or to effectively monitor the agencies’ compliance. Frustrated with their inability to hold the employment agencies to their pledges, the Workplace Project and the women of the FLF became interested in trying to launch an alternative: a housecleaning cooperative which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Support for Union Organizing Drives

Aside from the problems between workers and union locals that would come through the legal clinic, the organization never had a formal program for dealing with unions. In conversations with Nadia Marin-Molina, then coop director, currently Executive Director, she voiced her concerns about this lack. “One of the things I worry about...is that we don’t have a very good way of supporting organizing like big organizing efforts. We don’t have a tactic for it, really...” A small number of unions were supportive of the organization, occasionally requesting help with translation, training, organizing campaigns and making infrequent, small donations. Although the Workers’ Course covered labor history in a very pro-union way, the Workplace Project did not have a strategy for its approach to union work and was not in any deep ongoing relationships with union locals.

One case beginning in July of 1996, involved workers at a paper factory in Happauge that employed about 120 workers who organized in response to difficult working conditions including forced overtime, unpaid wages, indiscriminate firing, discrimination against non-English speaking workers and racial discrimination. At first, the workers had approached the
Teamsters union and were working with an organizer from that union. They collected authorization cards in secret and had well over 50% when word was leaked to management and three workers, including one who had been a main organizer of the drive, were told that business was slow and laid off. Twenty-five workers walked off the job to protest the lay-offs and went to the office of the state Department of Labor (DOL). The DOL told them that they did not think much could be done, but when they explained the conditions in the factory, DOL suggested they pursue a discrimination case and sent them to their human rights office. The human rights office referred them to the Workplace Project. The organizer from the Teamsters had apparently been transferred to Miami and the local provided no help to the workers.

The Workplace Project worked with the laid off workers and others to organize a daily protest for a week outside of the factory located inside an industrial park. Management offered the workers their jobs back but made it contingent upon their signing over their rights to pursue legal cases against the company. The workers refused and continued their protest. Since they had already collected authorization cards from the teamsters but had never filed them, they switched to SEIU and collected new authorization cards.

The SEIU filed for an election but during the time between the filing and the date the election was held, a number of new workers were hired who were then eligible to vote. For the first time, the company did not hire exclusively Latinos for the jobs. Instead, they hired a large group of Iranian workers. In addition, the company began giving raises and providing special perks to workers including free meals at restaurants. Management also told the workers that if the union won, there would be no more overtime. When the election was held, the final vote was 30 for the union and 80 against. Over the course of the drive, several of the key leaders became very involved with the Workplace Project. The leaders of the effort took the course and went on to leadership positions in the organization. Despite their experiences first with the Teamsters union and then with losing the election with the SEIU, the leadership of the drive remained convinced of the utility of having a union. Samuel Chavez said: “I think it is always better working and organizing the union is probably the best benefit you can have. It is always better to have one than not at all…” The other leader, Alcides Omar Henriquez said “I think that if you work for a place that has a union it is a lot better than working at a place that doesn’t have a union and easier to achieve goals than without one.”
In another case that stretched between 1996 and 1997, a number of Latino employees of the Seal It company came as a group to the Workplace Project looking for help with problems they were having at work including firing at will, unreasonable workloads, forced overtime and hours being changed without consultation. The entire workforce was Latino, many undocumented and recently 55 workers had been taken away by the INS. They were advised by Omar Henriquez to organize a union.

Henriquez recommended the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and hosted the first few meetings between the workers and the union at the Workplace Project. They had a difficult time getting people to come to meetings because they said they feared losing their jobs. Eventually, the UFCW lost its election. In conversations with Omar Henriquez, it was clear that he felt the union had not done an adequate job of organizing the workers. He felt that the union did not work together with the Workplace Project in implementing the drive and did not do enough to create a vibrant campaign inside the plant to counter the anti-union campaign that was waged by management. The union organizer’s perspective was that Seal It had not been a good prospect for an organizing drive.

These limited forays into support for organizing campaigns pointed up one central problem: the lack of a strategy on the part of the Workplace Project for doing this work. As carefully as they had thought through other aspects of their organizing and education work, they simply had not developed an approach to union organizing drives.

Coops

Landscaping

In March of 1997, after years of hearing expressions of interest in the idea of worker-owned businesses, the Workplace Project launched its cooperatives program. In a funding proposal to the Campaign for Human Development, the program was described as “…our newest effort to fight hunger by building the earning capacity of low-wage workers. Through this program, we will help groups of immigrant workers to establish cooperatively owned businesses in the industries they know the best. In this way, we will introduce a model that breaks the cycle by which immigrant workers rise in the ranks until they own their own business and can exploit newer immigrant workers. Instead, immigrants will be trained and supported as they develop enterprises that respect both the social and the economic bottom-line.” Almost immediately
however, the Project ran up against a tension between its original vision and the reality of what was possible.

The coop project director, Nadia Marin—a bright young graduate of NYU law school (and the daughter of Colombian immigrants who grew up in Boston)—was very conscious of the need to create a model that could be applied to other industries as well. Marin and the staff of the Workplace Project had struggled with how to structure the coop so as to open it to as many immigrant workers as possible, whether or not they were documented. In conducting research, the organization quickly discovered that the trickiest issue was going to be the incorporation of undocumented workers as coop owners. In consultation with the Industrial Cooperatives Association (ICA), the Workplace Project considered two options for structuring the coop: a “for-profit cooperative corporation” and an “informal association”.

The “for-profit cooperative” corporation promotes entrepreneurship because it is composed only of worker/owners, but by federal law it is only open to documented workers. Marin explained “You are setting up a corporation and all workers who are employee owners of the corporation are employees of the association, so they have to fill out 1-9 forms which means they have to be legally in the United States.” The “informal association” model allows for the inclusion of undocumented workers because each worker is an independent contractor and not an employee. But it does not promote entrepreneurship in the same way as the other model because the workers cannot be owners. In addition, because the workers are independent contractors and not employees, they have no right to workers compensation, unemployment insurance, social security or other benefits. This limitation flew in the face of what the Workplace Project was trying to achieve for the immigrant workforce.

To some extent, these two models unfortunately pitted the two goals of the project: “improve the working conditions of all landscape workers” and “help landscape workers become entrepreneurs in such a way that they don’t exploit other workers” against each other. At first, the small committee working with Marin decided in favor of the informal association model. But after realizing the problems inherent in the workers status as independent contractors, as well as in finding financing, the committee changed its position. It decided “maybe the association model is right for another year when we have had more preparation, but at this point we have to

52 Although this is an important problem the coop grappled with, it may need to come out of the final version of this thesis because it could open the organization to charges of “harboring” undocumented workers.
stick with the small business version, even if it means excluding undocumented workers"\textsuperscript{53}, and voted in favor of the for-profit cooperative corporation.

The first cooperative created was CLIP, the Cooperative Landscaping Innovation Project. The initial team of four worker/owners consisted of experienced landscapers who had prior experience with cooperatives in their home countries and long histories with the Workplace Project as founding members of C-POL. Before that, Marin had pulled together a committee of interested Workplace Project members and was slowly researching and educating them about potential models, developing a business plan and looking for financing. Several of them began to argue for launching something small on a much faster timeline. "...When we talked to people in the community who started their own businesses and asked ‘how did you start, how much money did you start with, a lot started with nothing, borrowed a truck, had one crappy old machine, got some business cards printed up for thirty dollars, got five or six clients, did it as a job on the side and then built up clients to the point where they could buy more equipment and have a real business. Seeing how they did that convinced the group...that they could do it that way and start the business with very little capital at the beginning...”

The Workplace Project advertised CLIP through the media as well as through sympathetic churches and synagogues. The hope was that they could build a client base of liberal Long Island families, businesses and non-profits who would be attracted to the idea of hiring a worker coop to meet their landscaping needs. In the organization’s English-language newsletter that went out to contributors and allies, they ran a tag-line that read: “Don’t run a sweatshop in your own front yard...hire CLIP, Long Island’s first landscaping cooperative, to do your own ORGANIC landscaping, lawnmowing and gardening in 1997!” Within five months, CLIP was fully insured, owned its own truck and had over 40 clients. After two seasons, CLIP had developed a client base of over 50 customers and one church, was able to pay $12 an hour to its employee/owners, and in early 1999 became independent of the Workplace Project as a self-sufficient worker-owned cooperative.

**Legislating immigrant worker justice**

From the first day the Workplace Project’s legal clinic opened its doors to immigrant workers on Long Island, non-payment and under-payment of wages were by far the most

\textsuperscript{53} interview with Nadia Marin, February 6, 1997
common complaint it received.\(^{54}\) While state and federal law requires all workers, documented or not, to be paid the minimum wage\(^{55}\) enforcement of the law in relation to low wage immigrant workers is generally non-existent and the penalties for violators ineffectual. The New York Department of Labor (DOL) had approximately one investigator per 7,000 private workplaces; employers found not to be paying the minimum wage were subject to only a 25% civil penalty and repeated non-payment of wages carried only a misdemeanor, not a felony conviction. For an immigrant workforce in search of enforcement of the law and due process, Long Island was a wild, wild west of exploitative employers and hostile or at best, ineffectual regulators.

Hoping to find help, the Project took dozens of cases to the state Department of Labor\(^{56}\) only to be rebuffed. Undocumented workers or workers working under the table were told inaccurately that they were ineligible to file claims, cases were taking up to eighteen months to be investigated, and a Spanish translator was available for only 3 hours every other week. The DOL had unilaterally decided to go back only 2 years in its investigations despite the fact that the law provided for up to 6 and it was negotiating settlements with employers that allowed them to pay only 50% of what was owed and levied no penalties. Workplace Project staff and volunteers were appalled by the DOL staff’s cavalier refusal to accept the claims of housekeepers, restaurant workers and day laborers. Workers seeking assistance were instead subjected to lectures about illegal aliens not paying their taxes.

Beginning in 1993, the Project began to systematically monitor the DOL’s behavior with regard to its acceptance of cases, pursuit of those cases it did accept, the treatment of immigrant workers who went to the Long Island office seeking assistance and case outcomes. Gordon summarized their findings: “Our computer database contained records of over 900 Latino workers who had sought help from our legal clinic over the previous three years. It showed that

\(^{54}\) During the period between the Project’s founding and the end of 1995, 40% of the total labor complaints (accounting for about 360 workers) brought to the clinic had to do with non-or-under-payment of wages.

\(^{55}\) “Although perhaps counter-intuitive at first glance—how could a person who is not allowed to work be entitled to a minimum wage?—Congress has recognized that the only way to remove the incentive for an unscrupulous employer to hire undocumented workers and pay them sub-minimum wages is to punish those who do so. Gordon, “The Campaign for the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act”: 8.

\(^{56}\) According to Gordon, immigrant workers went to the state Department of Labor as opposed to the federal for two reasons. First, many of them were exempt from the federal wage laws because their employers had less than $500,000 in gross revenues a year and did not put goods into the stream of interstate commerce. Of course this included the vast majority of restaurants, contractors and landscaping companies for whom they worked. Second, because of the link between the federal Department of Labor and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, even those workers who were covered by the federal minimum wage laws preferred to deal with the state Department of Labor. Ibid: 7.
only two of the 72 cases that we had filed with the DOL over three years, or just 3% resulted in even partial payment to workers. By contrast, over the same period, our office, with only one person working half-time on these cases at any one point, accepted 234 wage cases for representation and resolved 71% of them, winning over $215,000 for 166 workers during that time.”

The State Comptroller, Carl McCall, released a study in 1994 that clearly corroborated the Project’s findings. His office’s study concluded that over a 3 year period, the state wage and hour division imposed penalties in only 2% of settled cases, sacrificing close to $6.7 million in revenues and that the division had limited ability to identify or deal with repeat violators of state labor law.57

To respond to these problems, the Workplace Project began to take affidavits every time a worker and a lawyer or a volunteer returned from the Department of Labor complaining of mistreatment. These affidavits documented a pattern of flagrant disregard for the problems faced by low wage immigrant workers. DOL investigators time and again turned away or tried to turn away immigrant workers on the basis of their own erroneous interpretations of state labor law. They told workers that without social security numbers they could not take their cases (not true). They told them that the sole testimony of complainants was not enough for workers to file claims (thus dismissing the cases of house cleaners for example who had no co-workers). They told them that without proof of employment (pay stubs, receipts or time cards) they couldn’t file claims (despite the fact that many employers paid in cash). They told them that they shouldn’t bother to file because they would owe more in taxes than they would recover in wages, and they insisted that they could only go back two years in claims even if workers had been underpaid for a much longer period and even though the law actually specified up to 6 years. The database and the affidavits proved to be instrumental to cultivating members of the media and eventually in persuading legislators of the depth of the problem.58

Frustration with the situation grew to the point that, in the final months of 1995, after deliberations at three monthly general membership meetings, a decision was made to launch a concerted campaign to dramatically increase the penalties against repeat violators of wage laws

58 This whole section is drawn from various documents, statements and affidavits provided by the Workplace Project staff as part of its files on the Department of Labor.
and force the DOL to change its ways. For many years, the New York State legislature, with its
democratic Assembly but staunchly republican Senate, has been considered all but impervious to
legislation of the kind they were contemplating. "Much more for the learning experience than
because we felt it was possible to win, we decided to do this by changing New York State labor
law," Gordon recalled.59

Having cultivated a strong relationship with Ken Crowe, Newsday’s labor reporter, a
decision was made to try to interest him in doing a major story about the unpaid wages issue. On
January 7, 1996, Crowe’s story and a full-page photograph of picketing workers ran on the
Newsday front page with the headline: "The Big Payback: Area Advocacy centers help Latino
workers battle employers who violate minimum wage and overtime laws.” The article contained
story after story of hard-working immigrants being taken advantage of by unscrupulous
employers. It was clearly written from a sympathetic point of view and it named names—of
restaurants and contractors and of state regulators. Crowe not only quoted Gordon, Henriquez
and individual workers associated with the Project, he also used statistics from the database.
Most significantly, by seeking comments from the state DOL as well as state legislators, the
article catalyzed key players to take action.

One of the most important developments was the forging of a relationship with the
federal Department of Labor. According to Gordon: "So this was just the first effect of that
newspaper article—a better relationship with the federal Department of Labor, who every time
there is an article knocking the state DOL they say you didn’t make it clear enough that they and
we are different.”60

A month later, in February of 1996, Assemblywoman Catherine Nolan, the chair of the
New York Assembly Committee on Labor held a public hearing in Long Island. The Workplace
Project turned out twenty-five of its members to testify in a blizzard and garnered excellent
media coverage that portrayed the plight of immigrant workers in quite sympathetic terms. The
New York Daily News ran a story under the headline “State Blasted on Immigrant Wage
Claims” that repeated the Project’s statistics on the state DOL, and positioned legislators to take
action. Gordon recalled that after the hearing representatives of the state Department of Labor
said “…”Let’s go talk outside.” And basically what they said was ‘Good God, is all that stuff

59 Gordon: 10.
60 Interview with Jennifer Gordon January 1997.
really happening? Another said ‘while you were talking I leaned over to the head of our local office and said could this really be happening? And she said yes.’ The state DOL officials tried to portray it as a local problem saying things like “let’s talk about how to get rid of those investigators.” But Gordon and the other Workplace Project members felt that the state DOL was missing the point: “The problem was discretion. If it were left up to discretion about what the DOL was going to investigate or what actions it was going to take, it wasn’t going to change. Nothing was written down.”

While Assemblywoman Nolan drafted and submitted a bill addressing some of the issues raised in the article and at the hearing, it languished during the 1996 legislative session. During this period, the Workplace Project staff and members began discussing the points they would want contained in a comprehensive bill, which included:

- raising penalties against employers who repeatedly violated wage and hour laws from 25% to 200%
- making repeat non-payment a felony instead of a misdemeanor
- requiring that repeat offenders pay a civil penalty of twice the amount owed to the worker.
- requiring employers who kept no records, or inadequate ones, to prove that a worker was paid the proper wages and benefits (rather than the other way around)
- requiring DOL investigators to go back the full six years permitted by the law, rather than the current practice of 2 years
- requiring that settlements of less than 100% of wages owed would not be negotiated without the worker’s consent
- requiring that workers be informed and kept informed about the process of their claim; and
- allowing labor unions to file wage claims on behalf of workers

In the summer of 1996, after extensive deliberations, the organization voted to mount a serious campaign to pursue passage of the “Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act” during the 1997 legislative session.

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61 Ibid.
62 Gordon wrote: “This decision took three months to make. Over a series of three Workplace Project monthly membership meetings, members discussed the problems they had been facing at the DOL and developed a list of additional information they would need to figure out the causes of those problems (for example knowledge about
The members of the Workplace Project believed that only by dramatically increasing the penalties, could unscrupulous employers be compelled to change their ways. Gordon referred to this as their “deterence theory”: “This tactic is premised on the idea that there is such a thing as a penalty high enough to deter employers from paying illegal wages without government or non-profit intervention.” As the organization saw it, employers were engaging in illegal practices because they not only thought they had a good chance of getting away with it, but also because the penalties if caught were so minor. They reasoned that the imposition of higher fines and criminal penalties would mean that employers might desist from these practices or, if caught, would be “much more likely to pay than to fight, because fighting could result in a financial and personal disaster.”

At this point in a more traditional campaign, the organization might have hired a lobbyist or contracted with one in Albany. Many organizations would have assessed their membership base district by district and matched it against voting lists to see if they had the requisite electoral power to attempt to pass a statewide bill at all. If they had come up lacking in such an assessment, most organizations might well have called off the campaign entirely, or to put all of their efforts into building a coalition of organizations that had more power than they had within their own membership base.

The Workplace Project did none of the above. They didn’t have the money to hire a lobbyist and were not inclined to do so in any event. They knew they were just one small organization in one part of the state and decided to try and pass a statewide bill anyway. They knew that, out of a membership of about 420, approximately 2% were citizens, 68% were non-citizen legal immigrants and 30% were undocumented. Thus they knew that most of their members were not voters but decided to have them take the lead anyway. They reached out to other organizations to endorse their effort, but did not build the campaign to pass the law on a coalition structure.

how the DOL was supposed to function, and about the New York State political system). We presented workshops with this information. Our members used it and their own experience to analyze the immediate and deeper causes of the problems that they saw, and to brainstorm short and long-term solutions. Looking at the solutions in light of the organization’s resources at that time, they decided to focus their energy on a legislative campaign.” Gordon: 10.

They worked with two other immigrant worker centers in New York City: the Latino Workers Center and the Chinese Staff and Workers Association, but they had no more of a base of power than the Workplace Project did.
The organization knew that passing legislation was an extremely remote possibility and viewed the campaign as a way for members and leaders to gain experience. When gaining experience and not winning became the most important goal, maintaining organizational leadership and control over the campaign became key—only in that way could Workplace Project leaders, members and staff really maximize their learning about the whole political process. Maintaining leadership over the campaign meant having the immigrant workers themselves and not the English-speaking staff or well-meaning allies take the lead. To say that they made these choices consciously could well give an impression of astounding naivete that would not be completely off the mark. They didn’t know exactly what they were doing and none of them had ever worked on a legislative issue before. On the other hand, if you know that in terms of traditional measures of political power, your bank account is empty you start to think about some alternative script. Although they never articulated it, their only hope for the bill’s passage was to maximize their moral power—to be viewed in the most sympathetic light possible, and strategic power—to run the smartest campaign possible.

When it came to strategy, they knew that to win over republican legislators and business associations the moral argument needed to be joined to a more pragmatic one. They knew that to win, Long Island’s legislative delegation not only needed to support the bill—they needed to sign on as sponsors. They also knew that the key to winning over the Long Island delegation was to keep the bill from being tagged with an anti-business label. The key to preventing this was gaining the endorsement of a key business association. Fifteen members worked with Gordon over a period of weeks to refine a message that would have the greatest appeal to Republican legislators and industry organizations. Here are the four points they arrived at:

- The bill would prevent unfair competition by strongly punishing employers who undercut legitimate businesses by paying less than the minimum wage.
- The bill would keep people off of public benefits, by ensuring that they were paid the wages they earned and did not have to turn to welfare to support their families.
- The bill would increase revenue to the state, by raising penalties against noncompliant employers by 800% and by scaring employers into paying taxes.
- The bill would be self-funding through the revenue generated by increased penalties.

Once developed, these points were used in all of their communications with legislators as well as the media. They ran a masterful media campaign, not only timing stories well (based on...
carefully cultivated relationships with key journalists) but also giving careful thought to how to frame the issue to the general public.

The staff designed trainings for the workers that included diagramming the entire legislative process in Spanish, and setting up role plays so that workers could anticipate arguments that would be made against the bill. Gordon remembered: "So we did our first legislative visits in the Fall and started training people both to ask in their community for letters and to talk to people who would be opposed to the legislation whose support we needed. For a lot of our people, the idea that there actually could be a dialogue or confrontation between themselves and someone who is against their very existence in this country, was a huge revelation..."

Gordon was also struck by how well immigrant workers could reel off the anti-immigrant arguments. It was when Gordon and the rest of the staff pushed them to take a shot at answering these arguments that some really powerful learning took place. "But then we said, okay what are you going to say back, and it was like a light went on—people realized there are arguments we can make, not just 'because I am a human being'! All of a sudden they caught on to a different way of thinking." As they discussed what messages would resonate with some sectors of the business community, Project members developed the argument that undocumented workers going to the DOL and reporting wage claims was good for those businesses that did not engage in unscrupulous practices because it eliminated the unfair competitive edge. This discussion really brought home the principle of self-interest, one of the most important if misunderstood concepts in community organizing. As Gordon put it: "Allies aren't just people who have sympathy with you, they are people who have interests in common and you can make that case to them." Through this process, members began to see that constituencies they assumed to be hostile, might actually be persuaded to be allies.

The Project drafted sample letters of support to legislators that could be sent by members of different constituency groups: immigrant workers in the same boat, "good" employers who adhered to wage and hour laws and believed others should as well and community organizations speaking on behalf of their membership. Going out to their family and friends to collect letters, Workplace Project activists were shocked by how much resistance they encountered. Many undocumented workers were afraid to sign and list their address on anything for fear that they would be providing information that would help the INS find them or members of their families
and deport them. Others, having experienced severe political repression in their home countries were just mistrustful of political involvement. More than a few members reported being severely taken to task by friends and relatives for engaging in activity that could expose them to risk. Despite this resistance, the organization still managed to generate 400 letters from immigrant workers.

The organization succeeded in getting the most important small business association on Long Island, the Long Island Association, to endorse the bill as well as the Long Island chapter of the New York Restaurant Association. The Long Island Association told Gordon that they supported the bill because it was “an equity issue.” According to its Vice President for Legislative and Economic Affairs, “a lot of small businesses on Long Island are impacted when other employers do not pay legal wages, so this is a matter of fairness that affects our members.” Also, “the economy is good, so people feel better about making sure everyone gets a piece of the pie. It would have been difficult for us to support this in hard times.” They also received the endorsement of a large and impressive assortment of religious organizations, unions, central labor councils and community organizations.

Over the course of the winter and spring of 1997, the Project conducted fifteen meetings with legislators. They held these meetings in lawmakers’ Albany or district offices, unaccompanied by any allies, in Spanish. Gordon recalled one such meeting, “We visited with a Republican Senator. We walked into his district office in Rockville Center with twelve immigrant workers, a box full of translation equipment, more people than they have room for and no one speaks English. And we say ‘Hello, Senator Skelos, here’s your headset...’ And the meeting takes place, and Senator Skelos because we have translation is hearing from all these articulate people who he normally sees on street corners. Here they are in their best clothing giving good arguments that show a clear understanding of how the political system works and his place in it and his needs and things like that, and this is a big deal.” The Workplace Project members who went on these visits absolutely loved taking part in them, often taking time off from work or paying someone to work for them, just to be able to participate in them.

One issue that came up was what they would say if a representative or senator asked about the immigration status of those at the meeting. “If the issue arose,” Gordon recalled, “our members decided to respond honestly by saying that only some of them could vote, but that they believed that as residents of the community being affected by a widespread problem within it,
they had a right to inform the senator of their views and they believed he would be interested in hearing their ideas about solutions.” Surprisingly, not a single legislator out of the fifteen ever asked the question.65

On Sunday, April 27th, 1997, Newsday again ran a front page story about the plight of immigrant workers on Long Island. Headlined “The Exploited” the cover featured a full-page picture of Jorge Humberto Bonilla, a worker who came to the Workplace Project after being paid approximately $0.30 a day for working twelve hours a day, seven days a week for 57 days, eventually even sleeping on the floor of the freezing restaurant at night. Alongside the picture of Bonilla were three sentences: “He was promised $15 a day.” “They paid him less than half, he says.” “At minimum wage, he was owed $72.” The article not only recounted Bonilla’s story at length, it featured the unpaid wages bill and contained a boxed section that listed the names of Long Island employers charged with violations of the state wage and hours laws.

By the end of June and over the objections of the 27,000 member New York Farm Bureau, the bill’s biggest opponent,66 ten republican senators had signed on as co-sponsors of the bill, including five from Long Island. Surprisingly, several of the senators that sponsored or co-sponsored the Unpaid Wages law had been at the forefront of efforts to pass virulent anti-immigrant legislation. Some were the chief architects of a New York bill that was nearly identical to Proposition 187 in California. Others had earlier championed an English-only campaign in the Senate. A year after the Unpaid Wages campaign concluded, Gordon interviewed several senators to try to make sense of this seeming duplicity: “Skelos, in response to a question about whether he saw any inconsistency between his support for legislation that would have denied public schooling and basic healthcare to immigrants, and this legislation (which had come to be understood as largely protecting undocumented workers), said ‘no, because what you have here is people that are trying to be productive and earn a living, and you want to protect people that are looking to be productive and earn a living.’”

On the day the bill went to the floor in the Senate, the Farm Bureau’s director of government relations told the New York Times, “I really question whether this is the proper way to address this problem. No matter what the penalties are, you’ll have unscrupulous individuals out there who may want to take advantage of workers. I would rather see stepped up enforcement

65 Gordon: 41.
66 the bill was also opposed behind the scenes by the state DOL until it began to look like a fait accompli
actions by the Department of Labor. If this becomes law, it will have a very punitive impact and send a negative tone through the employer community about what the state of New York thinks about employers.\textsuperscript{67} 

To the amazement of virtually everyone involved in the campaign, the bill moved through the Assembly unimpeded and fared similarly well in the Senate. On July 1\textsuperscript{st}, it passed both chambers unanimously. The Workplace Project along with its allies, including the state AFL-CIO, the Long Island Association, and the archdiocese spent the next ten weeks pressing Governor Pataki, a republican, to sign it. It was far from clear that he would. On the eve of Labor Day, the New York Times editorial board weighed in with a lead editorial entitled "A Holiday Idea for Mr. Pataki"\textsuperscript{68} that urged the governor to sign the bill. It read in part, "The Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act has a ridiculously obvious goal—making sure workers are not cheated out of their pay. But in an area where unskilled laborers are desperate for jobs, there are plenty of sad stories about men and women who are tricked into doing work by bosses who have no intention of paying the promised wages...The files of advocacy groups are full of depressing stories about day laborers hired by suburban landscapers who are dropped off at the end of the day and paid nothing. Busboys and waitresses work 40, 50, 60 or more hours a week for low wages, and then discover that their pay is only a fraction of what they were promised. The current penalties for withholding a worker's legitimate wages are so modest that employers almost have an incentive to cheat..."

The editorial went on to credit the Workplace Project and to dismiss the arguments made by the Farm Bureau. "The Workplace Project, a Long Island based advocacy group for Latino immigrants, did effective lobbying for the bill by rallying both Long Island business groups and the area's powerful cadre of Republican state senators to the cause. The only vocal opposition to the measure came from the New York Farm Bureau, which asserts that the answer to unscrupulous employers is better enforcement of existing laws. Unfortunately, the number of state inspectors continues to drop, and Federal laws do not cover most of the businesses that routinely pay workers less than they are owed."

\textsuperscript{67} Steven Greenhouse, "Bill Seeks to Make Sure Immigrants Get Paid" \textit{New York Times}, Monday, June 30, 1997. But Gordon also made clear that the Farm Bureau really never geared up a full campaign against the Unpaid Wages law. 

On September 17th, Governor Pataki signed the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act into law. With neither economic nor political power to wield, the Workplace Project succeeded in passing a law through the notoriously immovable New York legislature. The organization managed to parlay a strong moral claim, in combination with media canniness and a strong sense of political strategy, into a significant and unexpected victory.

The Board Comes of Age: Deliberation about the Organization’s Mission and Leadership Change

The spring of 1997 was a very successful season of organizational growth and accomplishment and the Unpaid Wages campaign represented a high water mark for the visibility of the organization up to that point. There was a growing strategic capacity inside the organization that was reflected in its careful targeting of employers in the case of the agency campaign and key legislators in the case of the unpaid wages campaign. There was some interest in conducting more intensive industry analysis both in the case of domestics and day laborers as well as in other key immigrant sectors of the Long Island low wage labor market. In addition, the organization had decided to join LICAN, the Long Island Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) organization and had sent several staff through its intensive ten-day organizing training. Finally, membership had grown to more than 300. Membership meetings were held regularly and a board of directors was directly elected by the membership to guide the organization’s work.

The organization had come to a juncture where the staff and board really needed to grapple with its strategic direction and focus. One pole of the debate was represented by Gordon, who had come to the conclusion that the organization needed to focus on building power through dramatically expanding the membership base and developing a more strategic approach to organizing immigrant workers. She wanted to encourage the staff and the board to look at all of the organization’s current programs through the lens of building economic and political power. The other pole, represented by some board members held that the Workplace Project should define its mission more broadly and not focus exclusively on worker organizing.

The organization’s relationship to unions had always been a lively topic of debate inside the organization. At its inception, the Project’s role model had been the Chinese Staff and Workers Association in Manhattan’s Chinatown, which took a very dim view of the existing labor movement and explicitly defined itself outside of it as an independent worker center. It
helped to form a short-lived consortium of independent worker centers that stated their critique of the existing labor movement in stark terms. The Workplace Project participated in the consortium, but it did not always agree with the positions espoused. While the organization had had its own negative experiences with unions in terms of the way new immigrants in the ranks were sometimes treated, it was always pro-union and as detailed above supported several union organizing drives over the course of its work.

In 1996 and 1997, Omar Henriquez expressed some interest in the Workplace Project forming its own independent union but this never got beyond the discussion phase. During this same period, Nadia Marin-Molina and Jennifer Gordon both expressed the view that the organization’s work with unions needed to be deepened but were more ecumenical on the question of exactly how. They were for example, more open to forming partnerships with existing unions. Gordon asked David Gartner, a Yale law student interning with the organization who had been a union organizer to research some different models of community organizations working with unions or forming their own unions. He conducted some research and put together a short paper on the topic.

An important meeting for the board and staff

In March and April, the staff and board held a two-day retreat focused on conducting an inventory of the organization’s political and economic power and discussing strategies for how this power might be increased. Gordon hoped these discussions would lead to a decision to focus more resources on labor market analysis and targeted sectoral organizing.

The issue of membership was directly implicated in the power discussion. As detailed above, the existing membership process required interested parties to take the class in order to become a member. While this process certainly produced a dedicated and well-informed membership core, the level of commitment required meant that many potential members were lost. As Gordon and others had come to the realization that greatly expanding the membership was essential to building power, they had grown to question the wisdom of the current process. The retreat provided time to explore the successes and problems the organization had encountered in trying to build its membership.

Gordon began the retreat with a recap of the organization’s history and accomplishments: in 1993, it had 2 staff, a budget of $72,000 and 25 members, by April of 1997, it had 7 staff, a
$325,000 budget and 330 members. She posed two key challenges: devising effective strategies for organizing among Latino immigrants and building power. She said: "The first four years of the Center were an experiment, we were trying many new things. But we are at a time when some things are working and some are not. We need to have victories that are not just symbolic. We need to demonstrate our power... It is enough to do something in the early stages and the newspapers will write about it. They will talk about how we got this one boss. But at the end of the day there are the same millions of problems, minus one. We are having a big impact, but we are not having a lasting, permanent impact. That is what we need to do. We need to have victories that build power and change the relations of power." Gordon linked building power directly to the size of the membership arguing that to begin to have power on Long Island they needed to think in terms of 2,000 or 3,000 members—and achieving this would require thinking about membership requirements differently.

In a group brainstorm about the current problems with the membership base of the organization, several key themes emerged. First, a number of people felt that there were not enough members over all, and not enough active members out of the existing membership base (for example, too few people voted in the election for the board of directors). They expressed the view that there were not enough incentives (membership benefits) to bring in new members. Many people also agreed that there needed to be alternative pathways to membership beyond the sole existing pathway of the course. Several people raised an issue that some immigrant workers perceived the Center as being only for Salvadorans—and then only for those who were part of the Salvadoran left. Logistical challenges were also raised like the decentralized nature of Long Island and the lack of really good public transportation for getting to and from the office, the lack of childcare and the fact that most meetings were held at night.

Small group discussions yielded a number of proposals about membership including: offering the course at more sites around Nassau and Suffolk counties; focusing on changing the "image of this is made of guerrillas" as well as the related perception that it was too Salvador-focused; recruiting people through other means besides exchanging participation for legal services and opening the membership to people who had not taken the course. Some people felt very strongly about the need to offer more membership benefits including health insurance, legal services for issues beyond workplace problems including immigration status, domestic violence and landlord/tenant problems, pension and retirement benefits, a credit union, job training and...
placement and worker cooperatives. Others also added English and literacy classes, small business support and establishing an independent union to the list. Ultimately the group engaged in a lengthy debate about opening up membership and voted to do so.

In all of the discussions, Gordon tried to place before the group the idea of moving into more disciplined worker organizing. She proposed engaging in a more in-depth analysis of low wage labor markets on Long Island and targeting specific industries or sectors for organizing based upon an analysis of immigrant worker presence and potential leverage in the industry. Such an analysis might lead the organization to shift the focus away from very low status informal sector workers in favor of targeting more resourced industries that relied heavily upon immigrant workers. This approach was not met with a great deal of enthusiasm by most board members who had a strong inclination toward targeting the most marginal workers. Emblematic of the resistance was the day laborer discussion.

Omar Henriquez posed the problem directly: “We have been doing this for 3 years, trying to establish a minimum wage on the corner and it hasn’t worked. We need to figure out should we keep trying to organize, or give up? Should we maintain some sort of presence or take some other form?” Drawing from the day labor study, Gordon made the point that no worker centers or other organizations were successfully organizing day laborers. Rhina Ramos argued for lowering the expectations of the campaign but maintaining a presence on the corners, “It is not possible to be permanent intermediaries between workers and employers on the corners. We would have to concentrate all of our energies in order to make it work. On the other hand, if we stop going to the corners all together, it will have an effect because the workers there won’t know about us and if they get hurt, they won’t know to come to us…” Others, like Jose Martinez, Board President, argued that instead of discontinuing the campaign they should put more resources into it: “It would be wrong to abandon the campaign, people would say ‘what happened to the Center?’ We have maintained a presence for three years and have not made any progress, the key issue is the money we would need to launch a campaign. I think we should launch a campaign to organize the workers…” Oscar Zuniga felt strongly that the organizing needed to go on: “I am a corner worker who became part of the center but still works on the corner. There is a benefit to doing education on the corners so they know they have rights. Having that knowledge is an accomplishment. It would be the center’s biggest error to abandon the corner…”

Community Unions: Beyond the Politics of Particularism
In the end, faced with the option of abandoning the corners, maintaining a presence or launching an aggressive campaign, the board and staff was too torn to come to a clear decision.

There was also a passionate discussion about working on immigration issues. While Gordon had discouraged this work both in terms of the legal clinic taking on immigration cases and the organization working on national immigration legislation, many board members and staff were not in the same place. There was very clear board sentiment in favor of committing the organization to working on immigration issues.

In our follow-up discussion, Gordon talked about the board’s resistance to developing a more specific industry or sectoral focus: “People’s attention wasn’t grabbed by the idea of one industry organizing campaigns. We have a membership that is all different. It is not like a union where everybody has a shared self-interest. What people share in our organization is being an immigrant on Long Island. If you are bringing people together and asking them to identify on the basis of their ethnic group...the problems that are most urgent to that ethnic group may not be labor. ...If you really want to do worker organizing it makes no sense to do it by ethnic group unless there’s a center for every ethnic group. And so given that people’s primary identification is by ethnicity and that in our community there is no real identity by job or industry, you end up having people who want to organize by what they have in common, which is the immigrant experience...”

There was clear tension in the organization between Gordon’s interest in focusing on worker organizing and power-building and others’ interest in having the organization maintain a broader set of activities and issues. The board ended up voting to make several changes in the mission statement that had the effect of broadening the organization’s mandate. Gordon told me: “I think people wanted that [the changes in the mission statement] because they were tired of hearing me say ‘we can’t do that, it goes against our mission’ because our mission is limited to labor work. But as people see organizing as more successful in getting them what they want in the labor arena, other things occur to them that they want to do. People wanted to take things on we should care about that were justice issues, not just labor issues.”

Over the summer, Gordon decided to step down as Executive Director of the Workplace Project. She knew the transition from the founder to new leadership is always a critical juncture in the life of the organization and committed to a very long transition process. She did not leave the organization completely until almost a year later, during the Summer of 1998. Gordon’s
decision to leave was motivated by personal issues including the impending birth of her first child and not due to disagreements over strategy. She had been director for six years and was feeling burned out on the day to day responsibilities of the job. If anything, she expressed optimism about the fact that the strategy discussions were taking place within such a deeply engaged leadership body and that people felt such ownership over the organization.

In follow up discussions that summer, Gordon predicted that after she left, the board was likely to choose to diverge from the organizational model she was proposing: focusing on immigrant workers’ work issues, going into more systematic labor market organizing and organization-building in favor of being a more general purpose immigrant organization. She believed that the board would choose to be something more akin to a “central american-style” meaning that it would be more dispersed in the community, and more focused on changing consciousness and less on achieving a single goal or on specific winnable outcomes.

Gordon made clear that she did not necessarily think the board would be wrong to do so. For a variety of reasons, the correct strategic path for the organization was not clear-cut. While doing more sophisticated sectoral or industry-based organizing made sense in the abstract, it was very difficult to apply it to the actual situation on the ground. “One of the problems you run into with a particular sector of workers is people don’t identify that way or divide up the community that way, so to strategize that way doesn’t make intuitive sense. As soon as you talk about restaurant workers, you are talking about a category so temporary that as soon as you got the organizing campaign off the ground they would be half factory workers...If you do the organizing in the traditional way, you lose people because the category doesn’t make sense to them. If you do it broadly, you lose the ability to strategize, and I haven’t figured that out yet.”

In a follow-up retreat in November of 1997, all of these tensions came even more dramatically to the fore and the outcome was as Gordon had predicted. The board voted, despite Gordon’s disagreement, to put less emphasis on being a worker center per se, and to become more of an immigrant center. Gordon was not sure exactly how much of a difference this would make in terms of changing the actual practice of the organization, but saw that it clearly made people feel much better about being a part of the Workplace Project.
The Organization under new leadership: growth and change

That winter, despite Gordon and the board’s hopes of hiring a Latino director, the two finalists for executive director were both White. Her first replacement, chosen by the board, was a U.S. Central America solidarity activist who had spent years doing political and economic development work in El Salvador and moved back with his family in order to accept the position. While Jennifer and the staff had backed the other candidate, the board strongly supported the person who was hired and the staff accepted the decision. There were signs of trouble almost immediately. Michael Hoffman seemed overwhelmed and uncertain of his role most of the time. He had spent many years soliciting international support on behalf of the Salvadoran left, and took direction for this work from a particular wing of the Salvadoran guerrilla movement. In our conversations he seemed flummoxed by how different the organizational and political context in the United States was from the political terrain of El Salvador. He also seemed more comfortable in the role of political cadre, taking direction from a central authority, than in providing direction as an executive director. He just never talked or acted like he was in charge.

After nine months of floundering, Hoffman accepted a position working for a foundation back in El Salvador and resigned. Jose Martinez, the board president and a founding member of the landscaping cooperative, resigned in protest and left the organization during this period. Fortunately, the rest of the staff remained in place and the board eventually accepted the staff’s proposal that Nadia Marin and Randy Jackson would lead the organization as Executive and Associate Director respectively. Nadia was a dedicated and talented lawyer and organizer who had developed the organization’s cooperative program and had been on the staff for several years. Randy was a young progressive organizer who had done a very good job as development director. They were a good team. Nevertheless, Marin in particular and the organization in general, came in for much more criticism from the leadership of the board and some of the active members than Gordon ever had. When Marin fired an organizer who had been working with day laborers, the woman continued to work with them and set up a competing organization. She undermined the Workplace Project with the leadership of Catholic Charities to the extent that long-standing foundation support (from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development) was placed in jeopardy. The biggest issue external to the organization that Marin-Molina and Jackson faced was the growth of virulent opposition to the day labor shape-up sites in Suffolk County.
Shape-up sites under attack

In the early summer of 1999, “in response to the growing attack—both legislative and physical—on immigrant day laborers...” the organization returned to day laborer organizing, in reaction to a series of efforts to close down shape-up sites. This time the campaign was more focused on defending, through the public policy arena, day-laborers’ right to seek work and responding to a rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment in Suffolk County. Legislators in Suffolk County were attempting to pass an ordinance that would fine employers for picking up day laborers on street corners and Workplace Project leadership feared that, unless they stopped it in its tracks in Suffolk, it would spread to Nassau County.

Previously, the Town of Brookhaven had passed prohibitive housing legislation calculated to make it difficult for day laborers to live there and local anti-immigrant groups in Suffolk County, in league with far-right national anti-immigrant organizations, had begun actively mobilizing against the presence of immigrant workers in their towns. In some cases workers were followed to their homes, verbally and physically threatened and shouted down at public hearings. The organization initiated a new Day Labor Organizing Project and identified three goals: 1) winning day laborer participation in local political decision-making processes that affect them 2) winning worker control of hiring conditions on shape-up sites and 3) unifying day laborers with other workers around a broad-based platform of fighting exploitation on the job and winning better working conditions.69

Beginning in 1999, the organization focused on 3 communities: Farmingville, Farmingdale and Freeport where more than 650 day laborers regularly gathered on eight different street corners. Organizers began visiting the corners three times a week to talk to workers about their concerns and prepare an organized response to the towns’ attempts to abolish the shape-up sites.

Due to the sharp escalation of anti-immigrant activity there as well as its ties to national anti-immigrant groups, the organization eventually honed in on organizing day laborers in and around Farmingville, where the largest of the shape-up sites in Suffolk was located. Every day, 400 workers in the winter and 700 in the summer gathered to seek work. The Project worked to

69 Workplace Project grant proposal to the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, January 2000: 5.
develop leadership among the day laborers so that they could speak for themselves in meetings with town officials, members of the media, and others and build an organization of their peers.

The local group in Farmingville called the Sachem Quality of Life Organization, had a nasty history of harassing immigrant workers, picketing in front of the shape-up site, throwing things at workers as they drove by, spitting on them, and distributing xenophobic literature in the community. They led the charge on behalf of a bill before the Suffolk County Legislature that would have prohibited employers from hiring workers in public places. The Workplace Project organized a peaceful demonstration by more than 220 day laborers, and called upon the community to support their right to seek work without fear. On the day the Suffolk bill was to be voted on, 100 day-laborers staged a demonstration in front of the county legislative building and succeeded in blocking passage of the bill. Similarly, 120 day laborers and supporters attended a meeting at the Brookhaven Town Hall to block passage of a town bill that would have severely limited the possibility of their finding housing in the area.

The organization continued to build worker committees at the other Corners and then began to bring them together across various sites in Nassau and Suffolk, eventually organizing a Long Island-wide coalition to organize on behalf of the approximately 2,000 day laborers. By the end of 1999, it had the ability to mobilize 265 workers and a core leadership of 30 active leaders involved in organizing house parties, participating in Workplace Project activities, attending trainings and planning meetings.

In the Spring of 2000, the Village of Farmingdale decided to shut down the corner where workers had been gathering. They changed the village traffic ordinance so that it was now illegal to stop or stand in the area around the corner and placed two village code enforcement people on-site to ticket every contractor who stopped there. The Workplace Project responded by working to organize the day laborers. The mayor, concerned that the workers’ demonstrations might be bad for his reelection campaign not only agreed to meet with them, but also proposed a specific site on a piece of Village land to which the shape-up site could be moved. The workers agreed to move there, the contractors were informed and continued to “patronize” the day-laborers at the new location, and the workers and community allies considered the result to be a great victory.

In August, a bill was filed in the Suffolk county legislature that would require the county to sue the INS for not doing its job of reducing the number of undocumented workers living in...
the county. The bill’s sponsor argued that illegal immigrants were the reason behind the county’s rising crime rates. That September, two Mexican workers were picked up on the corner in Farmingville, by what they thought was a contractor hiring them for the day. Instead they were taken to an isolated area and severely beaten and stabbed. Their attackers were eventually caught and it turned out that both had white supremacist tattoos and one had ties with the Posse Comitatus. Things had come to a boiling point.

Three nights of vigils attended by 300-500 workers and their allies were organized. Each time they were confronted by racist counter-demonstrators who yelled at the marchers and tried to block their way. Eventually, a Suffolk County legislator proposed a new shape-up site for the workers and filed a bill to allocate $80,000 to make it possible. The Workplace Project and the day laborers’ group supported the effort and it passed by 12 votes—-a veto-proof margin. When the County Executive vetoed it, it went back to the legislature and several of the votes melted away. One newly seated legislator—the head of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) on Long Island—held a press conference to say he was against the site because it would hurt union people. The bill never came to fruition.

The Long Island Coalition of Day Laborers has continued to meet but it has had to deal with so many defensive battles that it has not pursued a newer version of the “whole market” organizing strategy to raise wages that was tried in 1995-97.

The Housecleaning Cooperative

After more than a year of discussion, market research and preparation, the organization launched UNITY Housecleaners Cooperative, initially composed of twelve immigrant women. Based upon market research, outreach to potential clients through local churches, organizational allies within close proximity to the town of Hempstead, and excellent early media coverage, ten families became UNITY’s initial clients during January, February and March of 1999, providing employment for all twelve members of the cooperative. With this initial client base, UNITY placed ads in a local newspaper and received a strong response. By the end of the year, it had 40-

70 The Workplace Project is a member institution of LICAN, the Industrial Areas Foundation faith-based group in Long Island which is comprised of more than 50 congregations made up of thousands of individual families, many of whom would be potential employers of house cleaners. The Project also works closely with the Long Island Progressive Coalition which has a mailing list of 10,000 Long Island residents concerned about progressive causes.
50 clients and need to hire a receptionist to help with fielding client calls and administrative tasks.

UNITY sees its core mission as raising consciousness among, building the leadership of, and providing greater economic independence to housecleaners. There is a very strong emphasis on leadership development throughout the cooperative’s activities: trainings are often held and members are also sent to specific leadership development workshops. Through biweekly meetings and other cooperative activities there are multiple opportunities to learn organizing skills from how to set an agenda and run a meeting, to public speaking.

Members of the coop go out and speak in area churches and other venues where they hope to find house cleaners and interest them in joining the coop. After Channel 41, a Spanish-language television station aired a segment on the coop, more than 50 house cleaners called to request information about how to join and 30 women attended an orientation session. As it markets the cooperative in the larger community through talks at congregations, community organizations and in the media, it also raises the consciousness of opinion-makers, local leaders and potential customers about the problems immigrant women workers face.

The women of UNITY were all required to participate in a special course developed by the Workplace Project on cooperatives and each participate in one of the coop’s committees (Finance, Marketing, Rules and Education) which meet every two weeks. Each committee elects a coordinator who serves on the central coordinating committee and all the members vote together to elect a coop president. The Cooperative Course that is a prerequisite for membership is now taught by coop members. After participating in the first coop class in 1999, members of the Education committee engaged in an extensive evaluation, revised the curriculum and have taught all subsequent courses.

The coop developed a system for distributing jobs to members that is based upon the level of each member’s participation in the cooperative’s activities. “The most active members are the first to receive new jobs. Subsequent jobs are distributed to members with decreasing participation. Once every member is assigned a client, the cycle starts anew from the beginning of the sequence.” Members earn $15-16 an hour and contribute 10% of their wages earned through the cooperative to help cover operating expenses.

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A March 14th 1999 story in the Long Island journal section of the Sunday New York Times entitled “Teaching Do’s and Don’ts of Housecleaning” featured the nascent cooperative and spotlighted its training component. The September 21, 1999 issue of Newsday heralded the new cooperative on the front page of its living section with a story headlined “A Clean Start: Zonia Villanueva belongs to Unity Housecleaners, a fledgling cooperative for domestic workers that’s helping immigrant women fight for fairer wages-and more respect.” The story highlighted the difference between the employment agencies and the cooperative: “…Her year old group’s efforts are a jab against employers who refuse them decent wages, working conditions and hours. Against employment agencies that charge application fees that can eat up a day’s pay—and that demand a share of domestics’ earnings up front while sending them to homes where the reception can be far from welcoming: ‘They would see me and say “Oh no. You’re Spanish!” I no like it. It hurt so bad.’” Witnessing a meeting of its general membership, the author took note of the organizing work that was taking place behind the scenes to make the coop function: “If the women appear driven—what with the frenzy of peeling off agendas, passing in dues, engaging in rapid-fire dialogue about their goals—it is because they have been forced into battle on the employment front.”

By February 2000, the coop had grown to eighteen women. The third class graduated in March of 2000 and by May of that same year it had grown to twenty-five and was involved in helping a new core of women start a cooperative in Suffolk County.

Programmatic changes under the new leadership

It was a bumpy transition from the founding director but the organization weathered the storm. Its funding was stable throughout the transition and Marin and Jackson (who has since left the organization) successfully stabilized the situation internally and worked to strengthen its effectiveness. They have made major changes to several aspects of the organization.

Change began with the legal clinic under the leadership of Saru Jayaraman, a newly hired staff attorney. From September through December of 1999, the organization engaged in an intensive analysis of the six and a half years of the work of its legal clinic. In an internal memo, they summarized their findings: “…the program was more than satisfying the function of providing a service to workers in the resolution of particular work-related problems, especially...
recuperation of unpaid wages. However, the high level of resource input into the program was producing low returns in worker commitment to building the organization and organizing for systematic change in general. In the majority of clinic cases, workers disappeared without a trace once problems were resolved and wages regained.” In addition, Marin and Jackson concluded that tying acceptance of a worker’s case to participation in the workers course often had not resulted in ongoing participation in the organization. They also felt that despite all the legal work that had been done, the well never seemed to dry up, workers kept right on walking in the door with the same problems the clinic had seen from the beginning.

Essentially, they decided to radically restructure the legal clinic. One-on-one consultations with project staff and attorneys were replaced with Friday night group orientation sessions to workers who have contacted the organization due to work-related problems (the idea is that these would be groups of workers from a particular workplace). The groups are kept relatively small--8 or 9 participants-- and there is a focus on providing information to workers on the range of issues they are most likely to be walking in the door wanting to know about: unpaid wages, firing, workers compensation, health and safety and negligent unions. According to Marin-Molina, the goal of the session, besides transmitting basic information about the next steps workers can take to resolve their own problems and answering specific questions is to place the workers’ individual problems in a broader context and “begins to develop consciousness about the need to organize”. Workers who attend these sessions and express an interest in organizing are encouraged to join “industry teams” of other workers (a minimum of 3 workers are required in order for a new industry team to be formed) who are interested in organizing in their particular sector. The teams that have been the most stable have been restaurants, janitorial and factory.

At first, workers brought their problems to the team and then the team took on the individual workers’ problem as a group. Marin said: “Teams did work on people’s individual problems like not being given vacation time at Friendly’s or whatever. The whole approach was to make sure it was always a team. If they write a letter to Friendly’s, the whole team had to decide to do it. We had law students and volunteers working with the teams but they could never do anything on their own, so they had to have the worker there to write the letter.” Eventually, the organization concluded that there had to be a limit to how long the industry team would work

72 “Changes to our Legal Program—Alliance for Justice” internal organizational memo.
on an individual worker or group of workers’ problem. They decided to set a limit of 8 weeks after which the group would be sent through a day and a half training that would cover some of the material covered in the workers’ rights course on wages, and health and safety but also added a component on organizing and strategy. At that point, this group of workers would be encouraged to join industry teams and think about long term strategies for change in their industries. The rule in place now is that workers new to the teams cannot immediately seek help with their particular workplace issue. They are required to attend 3 team meetings before they can bring their issue to the group. The teams are provided with technical assistance from the Alliance for Justice as well as from staff and a network of law students and pro-bono attorneys.

While assistance on legal issues and research was being provided upon request to the workers in the teams, there was no pro-active industry analysis or strategy development being done. “Right now the teams are focusing on outreach, the factory team is the best. A number of people are coming consistently, but all feel they are too small and want more support. But the question is where we headed in the long term...There are thousands of factory workers on Long Island. It doesn’t seem to make any sense to have an organization that is just starting and say it is going to organize all factory workers on Long Island together, so I think it has to focus somehow. How to do that is our question. It doesn’t make sense to focus on one factory, and I am not sure if doing it geographically makes sense either. That is exactly where we are...”

In answer to a question about whether the industry teams were partnering with labor unions organizing in their industries, Marin said “With regard to the industry teams, we did not think of sitting down with unions. Our focus was thinking about how to work with people coming out of the legal clinic. With the unions that have talked to us, our focus has been on if they have an organizing campaign, how can we help them, or if they want us to, how can we help them.” At a meeting during the day laborer problems in Farmingville, the local carpenters union opposed the creation of hiring sites for day laborers but expressed interest in recruiting the day laborers into the union. The union told the Workplace Project staff that even though they had jobs available, they had about 500 members out of work because they refused to work for the $21 an hour that was being offered by a group of the contractors. These workers were used to earning at least $30 an hour, so the union was setting up a program to recruit carpenters into their

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Besides the Carpenters union, the Workplace Project’s other major union interaction was with the restructured New York City/Long Island SEIU janitors local 32B/32J. After years of corruption, the local had been placed into receivership by the international union. Efforts by the Workplace Project to work with the union local on behalf of union members who had come to them out of frustration with their working conditions and problems with the union staff on Long Island were rebuffed and resisted. Despite having heard good things about the new local leadership, no one returned their calls until they filed a lawsuit against the local.

When they finally did get a meeting with some of the new local staff people, what they were told disappointed them. “We asked for things in the meeting that were so simple: copies of the contract in Spanish to be given to workers, to have a contact at the union who spoke Spanish, to have a particularly terrible union representative fired, to have the union help them address issues of abusive supervisors and excessive workloads, to get a shop steward who was responsive to them. All of these things the union could have been good at addressing.” Marin went on, “Everyone tells us that SEIU is so great, but they were not very good. They told us that right now they were translating the contract for apartment buildings and wouldn’t get to the one for commercial buildings until the beginning of 2000 and should have it by the end of 2001. They thought it would take a year to have the contract translated! We asked how it could take so long, and they said it was expensive, just a bunch of crap! Shop stewards are not elected but appointed, recommended by the corrupt business agent we were asking them to fire. They said ‘this is just our system that is the way we work.’ And they pay their shop steward so they said they couldn’t afford to have another one. We said, why don’t you not pay them, they are shop stewards, and they said we can’t do that.” Eventually, the Workplace Project succeeded in compelling the union to transfer the business agent and hold a new election for shop steward.

The restructuring of the clinic had a negative impact on enrollment in the workers course, and was one of the factors that catalyzed a re-thinking of the utility of the course as well. Marin and the staff were trying to figure out how to use the course and the newly structured clinic to support the establishment of an organization-wide campaign that would include all the different industries in one effort: “We believe as an organization there are issues that affect everybody and want the entire organization to be acting upon, because we as a staff are finding that our work is
very divided. The day labor organizer does day labor, others are doing other areas, but we are very divided with little connection. Even if we try to have joint events they are not well coordinated, you don’t feel like as an organization we are acting as one.” In addition to the changes in the legal clinic and the workers course, the old standing committees of the Workplace Project were discontinued around the time Marin-Molina took over as executive director. “They were dying and we didn’t officially discontinue them but we didn’t put any effort into making them continue and they died on their own. We were happy to allow that to happen because we (staff and board) didn’t feel they were going anywhere.”

Workers who join the industry teams and go through the mini-course then become members of the organization. This is the only other pathway to membership besides participation in the full workers’ rights course. In the Fall of 2001, Marin estimated that 10-20 people came each Friday, and there were all together about 30 people very actively involved in the industry teams and the day labor organizing work in Farmingville (although they had signed up more than 50 day laborers as members, 10 were actively involved). In terms of over-all membership in the organization, Marin said “The board is still seven people and the membership on the books is 550…but because we have never had a way to get people off of membership even if they disappear off the face of the earth, we have an “in” but not an “out” anybody who graduated from the course is a member. Right now we have a commission revising the bylaws and addressing the membership issue…including how to maintain membership, part of that is paying dues and we need to improve dues enforcement.”

At the end of Jennifer’s tenure, the organization had gone ahead with what they called “core members” those who graduated from the course, and “associate members” who were allowed to join without taking the course. The organization had tried to create a benefits program that would attract associate members to join. They signed an agreement with Costco and also offered a vision plan, but then ultimately had to discontinue it because “People would sign up for them and wouldn’t continue to pay their membership dues, so we would have paid all this money upfront and then not get the reimbursement from workers’ dues. So after one or two years we discontinued those benefits.” In terms of associate membership, Marin-Molina said: “The associate membership has continued to exist, but we haven’t recruited people actively. A lot of times somebody might want to become an associate member in order to get a membership card.
so they can take it to a credit union and set up a bank account, that is one area where it is useful for someone to be an associate member.”

Conclusion

How effective the changes that were made to the Workplace Project’s program will turn out to be, is still unclear. Only time will tell. But certainly the fact that the organization is still regularly analyzing its work, grappling with weaknesses and making changes is a testament to its continued vibrancy. The issues the organization has struggled with illustrate the key challenges community unions in general, are faced with. These include: first, developing an organizational model that succeeds in building and stabilizing a significant membership base among low wage workers; second, improving the regulatory environment for low wage workers; and third, devising strategies that are effective in synching up the mobilization of ethnic identities with worker identities to achieve improved conditions and job quality in specific sectors and for a significant number of low income workers. As outlined in Chapter One, community-based community unions evince greater strength at leadership development, altering the terms of debate and achieving public policy change than at direct large-scale labor market intervention.

The Workplace Project will turn ten in November of 2002. In its first decade of work the organization has had five major accomplishments. First, it firmly established an organization among Latino workers on Long Island with active membership and a strong board of directors. It also has an enviable set of individual and organizational allies upon whom it can draw.
Second, it succeeded not only in establishing the organization as the major voice on immigrant worker issues among Long Island opinion makers and the media but in using that voice to frame their struggles in a sympathetic light (see chart three). Third, it provided immigrant workers with a place to turn for legal help with employers and won hundreds of thousands of dollars in back pay and other awards. Fourth, in establishing the cooperatives, it has built two successful businesses. Fifth, in passing the Unpaid Wages Act, it won a significant political victory on behalf of all low-wage workers in New York State.

So far, the organization has enjoyed greater success in the political arena than in the economic arena. Beyond filing lawsuits on behalf of individual workers and establishing the cooperatives which were successful on their own terms but not in impacting the larger labor market, its attempts to intervene directly in the labor market have so far been limited to two constituencies. The success of the work on behalf of raising wages for day laborers was sporadic and temporary. The campaign on behalf of the domestic workers achieved some modest success with placement agencies, but had a very weak impact on earnings and working conditions. The organization has chosen neither to create its own labor union nor to develop a model of close cooperation with a union partner in targeting workers for union drives.

It would seem that there are three basic prerequisites for significantly impacting immigrant labor markets in different industries: analysis, power and strategy. In-depth analysis by industry and employer would help with targeting because it would yield information on which employers are in a position to raise wages and improve job quality as well as which employers are heavily dependent on Central American immigrant workers. The organization has not so far engaged in an in-depth analysis of immigrant presence by industry and employer. Neither the Workplace Project, nor the industry teams now in place have the requisite skills in house or concrete plans to seek the assistance that would be required in order to conduct this analysis.

In terms of power, although the continued existence of the organization is itself a success, membership, at 550 or so, is too small to be able to have a direct economic impact on the labor market.74 Neither the legal clinic nor the benefits package has been enough of a draw to attract a large number of workers to join in order to take advantage of them. In addition, dues collection

74 This is a clear example of the dramatically different yardsticks of community organizations and unions. 550 members is respectable for a community organizing effort, but, as a force of organized workers it is very small. This smallness is exacerbated by diffuseness—members are not concentrated at particular employers or even in particular industries.
has never been systematized so the membership base has not been stable. Finally, in terms of strategy, beyond the day labor and domestics campaigns and the coops (which involve fewer than fifty workers), the organization has not yet developed clear strategies for having an impact on industries in which low-income immigrants are concentrated. But this does not mean that it can’t, or that it won’t in the future.

I will discuss the implications of the Workplace Project case for community unionism in greater depth in my concluding chapter, now let us turn to a description of the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee of Baltimore, Maryland.
The essence of the work on behalf of raising wages for day laborers was spreading and temporary. The wage theft on behalf of the domestic cleaners addressed some social issues with potential solutions, but had a very weak impact on earnings and working conditions. The determination of the amount needed to create its own labor union was to develop a model of similar co-operation with a union purpose in targeting public and private clients.

It would seem that there are three basic presuppositions for significantly impacting immigration and work-related issues in the context of analysis. Preservation strategy: In-depth analysis by industry and employer would help with targeting decision. It should be led to inform the employers that they are in a position to form unions and improve job conditions as well as which employers are highly dependent on Central American immigrant workers. The negotiation has not been fully engaged in an in-depth analysis of immigrant workers by industry and employer. Having done the Worker by Worker Project, we see the inability to assess one to place have the requisite skills to negotiate the accurate plans to seek the assistance that would be required to develop an optimal strategy.

In terms of power, although the agreement reached in the negotiations has in itself a meaning, membership, at 250 or so, is too small to have a direct economic impact on the labor market. Neither the legal clinic nor the benefits package has been enough to attract a sufficient number of workers to join in order to take advantage of them. In addition, there is

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101 This is an initial example of the ethnically different and unique of community organizations and unions. These local

members are responsible for a continuously evolving effort, but, as a result of organized workers it is very small. The

insults is exacerbated by threats - namely, not to assist in policing employees or even in particular behavior.
CHAPTER 5. CLIMBING JACOB’S LADDER: SOLIDARITY AND BALTIMORE

Introduction

Like the Workplace Project, this too is a story about dominant paradigms, and of organizing among the dispossessed. In this story the terms of debate around jobs and urban economic revitalization in Baltimore were completely altered by a very unusual organization of low wage service workers. Founded in 1993, the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee was a joint venture of BUILD, the local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and AFSCME, the national public employees union. Combining the power of political organizing, prophetic voice and personal testimony, BUILD, AFSCME and Solidarity won ground-breaking public policy fights. The ideas they generated inspired scores of organizations in cities across the country to do the same.

Unlike the Workplace Project, Solidarity was built on a strong foundation of organized church and organized labor. It made visible the struggles of low wage African-American workers in a post-industrial city with a long legacy of racism and cast their economic plight—and doing something about it—in moral terms. But its achievement went beyond shining a light: Solidarity was a font of ideas about what to do about urban poverty at a time when it seemed that the rest of the country had run out of them. And it understood that light must be accompanied by heat. When it comes to winning social change, ideas, while necessary, are insufficient unless they are fused with political power and clever strategy. Solidarity developed all three. How the organization was able to intervene in the context of a down and out local economy, and interject fresh ideas that fundamentally transformed the debate is one of the most fascinating and satisfying parts of this story.

Chief organizer Jonathan Lange used to say that Solidarity was “a little bit of church, a little bit of union, a little bit of social service and a whole lot of politics.” The organization pursued its strategy by organizing workers not only through workplaces, but in their
neighborhoods and houses of worship as well. “Doing politics” for Solidarity members did not mean working through local political parties. Neither did it mean endorsing candidates for office. On the contrary, positions were adopted by the organization that elected officials were then pressured to adopt, at large and highly visible public meetings and actions. Non-partisan, but vigorous voter mobilization was carried out strictly on the basis of support for Solidarity’s work and wage agenda, and not on behalf of individual candidates.

The results were impressive. In the five-year period between 1993 and 1998, Solidarity fought to reconstruct a set of labor market protections for low wage workers who had been denied them by the effects of privatization. It restored their right to organize by denying contracts to union-busting employers. It stabilized their employment somewhat by establishing a “right of first refusal” which allowed workers in good standing to keep their jobs even when the contractor of record changed. It provided some two thousand or more contract workers with a “living wage,” several dollars higher than the federal minimum wage. When advocates for the poor were reeling from the passage of the 1996 federal welfare reform bill, Solidarity brought together its base of low wage workers with welfare recipients who were shouldering new work requirements and got the Governor of Maryland to promulgate a “non-displacement policy” through executive order, whereby government agencies were barred from replacing regular paid positions with sub-minimum wage workfare positions. It was one of the first organizations to recognize the flexibility state governments had in implementing the federal law and also one of the first to exploit that flexibility to the advantage of its constituencies, as it did when it compelled the governor to sign onto its “School Counts” campaign to count attendance at community college as fulfillment of the law’s work requirement.

These victories are all examples of Solidarity’s successes in the political sphere. But Solidarity’s founders had not set out to build a political organization alone. Unlike the Workplace Project, Solidarity aspired to become a union from the beginning. It wanted to organize large numbers of low wage workers into a new model union which, in its organizing strategies and structures, would be more suited to the realities of the service economy. The public policy campaigns, groundbreaking though they were, were always viewed in instrumental terms by the organizers. Living wage, the Right to Organize, non-displacement of full-time workers -- all these campaigns were viewed as a means to the end of organizing a union, and not as ends in themselves. Just as they had many smart policy ideas, Lange and Graf devised several
extremely creative strategies for unionization that avoided the traditional NLRB election route.
In terms of building up a significant membership base, however, none bore fruit.

The Workplace Project did not have significant success in direct labor market interventions because it didn’t have a clear analysis or a strategy for building power. It didn’t have experience doing labor organizing and it didn’t have a close relationship with a union. Solidarity did have a clear analysis, did think in sophisticated terms about labor markets, did explicitly set out to become a union and had a union partner. It began with power because of the power of the institutions behind it and, unlike the Workplace Project, most of its members were potential if not actual voters. Yet it still failed at direct large-scale economic interventions in the labor market and failed to establish itself as a union. Why the organization was ultimately unable to bridge the work/home divide to create a new kind of labor union is a central puzzle of this chapter.

Several related questions will also be pursued in this chapter. One is an exploration of the ways that Solidarity’s political organizing, by bringing class directly into the community-based pursuit of political change, bridged the traditional work/home divide.

Another concerns the descriptive typology provided in Chapter One. The Solidarity case study is an example of a community/union partnership in which the community organization is the dominant partner. The organization was housed at BUILD, overseen by BUILD and had much more of a community organizing sensibility than a labor organizing sensibility. The ways in which the community organization’s dominance impacted Solidarity's organizational culture and the approach it took to its work is an important focus of this story.

Finally, as with the Workplace Project, most of the low-wage workers in Baltimore did not identify as members of a particular occupation or industry. Neither did they belong to mediating institutions. But they did see themselves as poor and Black and overwhelmingly Christian, and the ways in which these identities were able to stand in for occupation and industry and entice them to join and actively participate in an organization, are a key lesson of community unionism.
Bringing Together Church and Union

The story begins with the work of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) an Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) affiliate, which was founded in 1977 by ten local churches. BUILD was dedicated to improving the lives of inner city residents through a strategy of community organizing as articulated by Saul Alinsky, the American father of direct action community organizing and author of the famous community organizing treatises Reveille for Radicals and Rules for Radicals—the first tenet of which is the Iron Rule of Organizing: “Never Do For Others What They Must Do For Themselves.” Alinsky argued for the construction of community organizations as political institutions which operated according to three over-arching principles: giving people a sense of their own power, winning concrete improvements in people’s lives and altering the relations of power in the community. He believed that there were essentially two forms of power in society: organized people and organized money and that although citizen’s organizations needed to have some organized money in order to operate, their greatest potential to wield power lay in developing the power of organized people. As Warren notes, Alinsky purposely contrasted his approach to organizing with the more ideological approaches of the New Left and the Black Power movements arguing that “community organizations must base themselves on the self-interest of individuals and communities in a pragmatic and non-ideological manner.”

But Alinsky was in some ways a better rhetorician than organization builder. His successor at the helm of the IAF, Ed Chambers, really developed the organization’s trademark approach to congregation-based organizing and organization-building. Through long-term contracts with local organizations, Chambers also turned the IAF into an enduring institution that could provide them with organizers and ongoing training as well as membership in a powerful network where ideas and strategies were shared. Unlike Alinsky, who really viewed working with churches as a convenient means of accessing members and resources, Chambers “thought their ideas and traditions might provide important values to sustain participatory politics.”

1 The Industrial Areas Foundation was founded by Saul Alinsky and provides training, staff and ongoing technical assistance to city-based organizations made up of churches and other institutions fighting for economic justice.
3 “When Reverend John Egan, a Chicago priest who became a long-term supporter of the IAF, advocated more discussion of religious values within the IAF organizations, Alinsky responded, “You take care of the religion, Jack, we’ll do the organizing.” Warren: 45.
The IAF’s “wholesale” approach to organizing, of building a membership base made up of institutions rather than individuals contrasts with a more “retail” approach of going door to door to build an individual membership base from scratch as is done by ACORN and many other community organizing groups. But there is nothing wholesale about the relational culture and organization that is built through one-on-one meetings. In the words of IAF organizer and author, Michael Gecan,

The dynamic of the relational culture is created by leaders who initiate and deepen and multiply effective public relationships. These leaders know...that their ability to act depends upon the number and quality of relationships that they and their colleagues can muster and sustain. They see themselves as recruiters, talent scouts and trainers...Their bottom line is not profit or loss, or clients served, but expanding pools of reciprocity and trust among people who can act with purpose and power.⁴

Over the years, BUILD evolved into the only social justice institution in the city of Baltimore able to turn out thousands of people to large public actions. By 1990, it had grown to include 46 churches and was the major community institution driving a policy agenda for the City of Baltimore. That year, BUILD’s Municipal Agenda was a blueprint for housing, education, employment, city services and healthcare. By 1992, the organization was responsible for over $50 million dollars of funding from state, city and private sources being channeled into programs of its own initiation, including a college scholarship fund, an affordable homeownership project, and an after-school program in the Baltimore public schools. But the staff and leadership of BUILD were frustrated by the limitations of what they had been able to accomplish. Arnie Graf, of the IAF national staff and former lead organizer of BUILD during this period, recalled:

I pointed out that in 1989 and ‘90, BUILD organized about $52 million dollars worth of [government] subsidy [into the local economy]: $28 million for a Nehemiah Homeownership Housing Trust, $25 million from the corporate community for college scholarship gap financing...I pointed out that if I had said when I came to BUILD in 1980, ‘ten years from now we would be able to move $52 million dollars of subsidy to create 300 new homeowners and guarantee financial assistance to any individual who needed it in the city’, you would have thought we were shouting from the rooftops. But if we look around, the city is

deteriorating even more, even though we have built the political strength to accomplish these things...

Graf knew that in spite of how well they had organized and how successful they had been, things had gotten worse, not better. He told the staff and leadership of the organization, “The rate of social deterioration around us is more rapid than when we began.” He insisted that to cure what was ailing the city it would take more than fighting for more government money. “We will not be able to organize enough subsidy to get the city out of this situation,” Graf said. “We couldn’t just go back and try to get more subsidy. We had already pulled out $52 million in 18 months.” This led to the question: “Why do we need so much subsidy? Why do people who are working everyday need this subsidy to send their kids to school or buy a home?” If they were going to rebuild Baltimore’s neighborhoods, the organization concluded, they were going to need to go beyond wringing funds from the public and private sector. Graf felt strongly that “We couldn’t subsidize our way out of it, we had to get to the root of this. We had to deal with people’s work and wages and the economy.”

In spite of how effective BUILD had become, Graf felt that it could not achieve the sweeping change it was seeking in Baltimore without working with the labor movement. He had been thinking for years about organizing in partnership with local unions around work and wages and had worked with unions as the lead organizer of the IAF’s worker organizing experiments in the South. In addition to winning improvements in the Baltimore labor market, Graf wanted to contribute to rebuilding the labor movement. If cast as a social movement as opposed to a special interest group, a revitalized labor movement could change society and change “the political understanding of people about the value of work and who should share in the largesse.” In this way "what happens to people eight hours a day doesn’t just become a labor issue, but it takes hold in the broader community based on an understanding of what it takes for human development.”

The question in his mind was whether unions could make the fundamental changes not just in tactics but in philosophy that would be necessary to succeed in attracting large numbers of new members.

After discussions with the BUILD leadership, Graf hired Jonathan Lange, an experienced labor organizer with IAF training to lead the new effort in Baltimore. Lange had worked with...
Graf in the South on IAF/labor experiments from 1985-1992. He had started out working for the Brown Lung Association in North Carolina and then spent many years as a field organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU, now part of UNITE) in the South. He began working with Graf and the IAF in 1985 when the union contracted with the IAF to do some training and joint work including the development of a new organization in Knoxville. Finding they had a common perspective on what ailed the labor movement, over a period of years Lange and Graf worked together on a series of experiments in non-traditional approaches to union organizing. They struggled to combine the philosophy and strategies of community organizing with a commitment to “minority unionism” eschewing the traditional model of union organizing in favor of signing up members and creating a union without holding a representation election through the National Labor Relations Board.

Graf and Lange's personal interest in new models of union organizing dovetailed with BUILD's need to impact work and wages in Baltimore. BUILD was clear it wanted to organize on work and wages and wanted to do so with a union partner, but in the City at that time, there was virtually no union organizing going on among low wage workers. Baltimore was not a city that SEIU was actively organizing in, 1199 had organized some hospitals and nursing homes several decades earlier but was viewed as having largely stalled in its efforts to organize more widely in the city. The hotel workers union (HERE) was also not actively organizing and was widely viewed as corrupt and eventually placed into trusteeship by the international. The AFSCME city workers' local was not activist, had not mounted an effective effort to resist privatization and its local president was reputed to be the recipient of a no-show job from the Mayor. In light of the absence of a local union dedicated to organizing low wage service sector workers, BUILD felt there was no place to look locally for a union partner.

BUILD approached the union they felt to be the most natural fit for the project they were contemplating--the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)--to explore a partnership in organizing service workers in Baltimore’s inner harbor. With a small contract from SEIU, Lange began commuting from his home in Knoxville, spending three days a week in Baltimore getting the project off the ground. Just as he was preparing to move his family to Baltimore, negotiations with SEIU broke down over questions of control of the project. SEIU was insisting on putting its own person in to direct the project, and BUILD wanted it to be co-directed by

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5 Interview with Arnie Graf, East Coast Director of the IAF, November 1996.
Lange with an SEIU organizer. BUILD leaders were tremendously disappointed, both because they felt SEIU had acted badly and because they believed the union to be the best partner for the project. Nevertheless, the IAF decided to fund Jonathan’s work directly and to find an alternative union partner to work with.

In the Summer of 1992, Lange moved to Baltimore and succeeded in interesting AFSCME in the project. AFSCME, the nation’s largest public sector union, with a national membership of 1.3 million had been a significant presence in Baltimore for many years with a municipal membership of approximately 10,000 drawn from municipal and state agencies. At the time Solidarity was getting started, the union was not thinking about organizing among private sector low wage service workers, but it was planning to expand its membership ranks by launching a major campaign for collective bargaining rights for state workers. It won this campaign in 1996 and has since built the state membership to 30,000, with the actual authority to bargain for 50,000. Stung by the increasing practice of “contracting out” city services in Baltimore, as well as across the country, the international union was interested in exploring strategies to halt and reverse privatization at the local and state levels including organizing the contracted-out workforce. According to the Assistant to the President, Paul Booth:

We had a national and a local reason for getting involved in Baltimore. The national reason was that we were looking for entry into the low wage workforce where there was a direct juxtaposition to our traditional membership due to the way privatization was spinning out. We had a multiple level effort to combat privatization and concluded that we needed to have a variety of efforts that involved ‘following the work’, a position adopted by the International at our convention in 1994. So the national logic was that it was a way of doing some organizing in light of the main organizational problem we faced in the whole country which was privatization...

The local reason was that AFSCME was launching a major fight to secure collective bargaining rights for state workers. “When we run a major organizing drive we become a force

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6 Exact numbers are difficult to come by, as AFSCME does not organize its membership exclusively by city. Some of the locals that have Baltimore city members are statewide locals. According to the Director of the International Union Area Office, Local #44, the city workers union has about 5,000 members, Council #67 has a number of other Baltimore city locals including the housing authority, and there are 5 or 6 other locals that include municipal employees, there are also a large number of state workers who live in the City.

7 June 17, 1997 Interview at International Headquarters.

8 The National Labor Relations Act and later amendments excluded public employees: “the law shall not include the United States, or any State or political subdivision thereof...” As a result, public employees at the federal, state and municipal level have had to seek special legislation. International unions such as the Service Employees...
in competition with other forces, be they rival labor or business organizations, so we are in the life of the community in a huge way and anybody else who is in a big way is of extra significance to us for that chunk of time... We viewed BUILD as allies in many respects, in Annapolis in terms of dealing with Baltimore City legislators, the get-out-the-vote efforts for non-partisan voter mobilization and in the over-all sense.” The national leadership of AFSCME was also under pressure from forces within the union who felt they were not doing enough to develop strategies for taking on privatization and viewed the partnership with BUILD as one way to signal a commitment to developing creative strategies toward the reversal of privatization.

Despite their strong interest in organizing among low wage private service sector workers, and their knowledge that AFSCME was dedicated to public sector organizing, Graf and Lange really wanted to pursue the project. In the hopes of over time being able to interest AFSCME leaders in the broader service sector constituency, and in the absence of a private sector union partner, they decided to go forward with a partnership.

AFSCME and the IAF signed a formal agreement to work together in the Fall of 1993. The agreement read, in part:

AFSCME and the IAF along with the BUILD organization are committed to organizing working women and men in the service sector in the City of Baltimore. It is our goal to combine the strength of the labor movement with the power of the church based IAF/BUILD organization to win justice for the working poor and end the exploitation of workers in Baltimore.

To this end, AFSCME and IAF/BUILD will begin a cooperative project to organize a new organization, affiliated both with AFSCME and BUILD, comprised of workers employed by contractors supported by tax dollars or otherwise heavily subsidized by the city, state, or special authorities. In addition, we will organize employees who are working side by side, and in many cases, performing the same tasks as public employees.

It is our goal to end thoughtless privatization and the resulting injustice to Baltimore working men and women. Our purpose is not just to organize workers, but to empower workers so they have a voice in their community which will result in strengthening the community in which they live.

International Union (SEIU) and AFSCME often engage in political efforts to attain these laws and then follow them up with major organizing campaigns either seeking to affiliate pre-existing employee associations (this was an important reason for SEIU’s growth in the 1980’s) or to organize the newly eligible employees into their local unions. See chapter 14 in Unions, Workers and the Law by Betty Justice, BNA Press, 1983.
In the contract, AFSCME committed to cover the costs of a lead organizer and two other organizers, as well as to cover the lost time of grassroots AFSCME members. They agreed to involve their local affiliates to the full extent possible and to pay the IAF $65,000 directly, some of which would go to BUILD and some of which would go to the IAF regional director to provide consultation and supervision. The initial thought was that the project would be co-directed by the lead organizers assigned to Baltimore by the union and the IAF.

The contract included a clause that allowed either party to terminate the agreement for any reason with 60 days written notice.

From the beginning of the project and continuing to the present day, the relationship between the union and BUILD has been with the international staff and leadership, not with the local AFSCME affiliate. The AFSCME public employees local was not interested in a partnership and BUILD strongly mistrusted the local leadership. Graf and Lange viewed the two cultures as incompatible to such an extent that they felt cooperation would be out of the question. Thus, while Solidarity was formally chartered as an AFSCME local and was given office space at the District Council headquarters, it was overseen entirely by BUILD.

Thus began a community-labor alliance that over the next 10 years would change the dynamics of politics in Baltimore. To fully appreciate the local political, economic and cultural challenges faced by such an effort, we must first turn to a consideration of Baltimore's history, and in particular, its history of racialization.

**Setting the Stage: Baltimore’s Contemporary Political Economy in Historical Perspective**

*The Economic & Labor History of the City*

Over the last 200 years Baltimore’s economy has followed the typical trajectory: shifting from an economy based on agriculture and trade, then to one based on industrial production, to one based primarily on services. These shifts were mighty upheavals, forcing deep transformations in infrastructure, production, and labor markets. Through all these transitions, however, certain deep patterns in Baltimore's economic history -- persistent racialization of labor markets, its location in-between the North and South economic zones, and second-class "branch-office" status to its larger neighbors, New York and Philadelphia -- have marked and continue to influence its development. This history and these patterns have helped to set the stage for the work of the Solidarity Support Committee.
Aided by the British blockade of Philadelphia, colonial Baltimore became a major commercial center during and in the decades after, the Revolutionary War. The city's economy was based upon tobacco and grain cultivation, and trade tied to its seaport. Grain and tobacco were exported to the West Indies and Europe. Sugar and coffee were imported from the Caribbean and Latin America, and then shipped abroad. Baltimore also became involved in shipbuilding in the service of the new American state and its war with Britain.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, there was a slump in the City's position relative to New York and Philadelphia in terms of maritime trade because of the two cities' closer proximity to European ports. According to Fee, Shopes and Zeidman, this disadvantage catalyzed Baltimore's elders to develop the infrastructure necessary for the city to exploit its own comparative advantage: proximity to inland markets. City and state funds, along with major private investments made possible the construction of canals, roads and railroads. In fact, the first public railroad in America, the Baltimore and Ohio, was chartered in Baltimore in 1827 and enabled the city to greatly expand its commercial opportunities. Major coastal trade developed between the City and the south: “While Southern planters cultivated cotton, tobacco and rice, Baltimore merchants provided them with fertilizer and the processed food, drygoods, household items and hardware necessary to sustain their plantations. Linked by its railroads, the city thus became a hub for connecting markets in the West and South and a distribution point for manufactured goods from the Northeast.”

The city's economy was hurt by the curtailment of trade with the South and damage to trade with the North that occurred during the Civil War. This damage was mitigated, however, by Baltimore's role as a military depot during the war. Reconstruction was a time of great economic prosperity as the City began to evolve industrially. From 1860 to the turn of the century, garment factories as well as fruit, vegetable and oyster canneries increased in importance to the City's economy.

In the late nineteenth century, spurred by enormous population growth, nascent industrial development, the addition of electrical power, and infrastructural improvements in transportation, Baltimore made the transition from a commercial center tied to one of the

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nation’s great ports to an industrial city. As cited in Argersinger,10 the 1890 census reported that for the first time, the total value of manufacturing had overtaken trade as a percentage of Baltimore’s over-all income stream. The vast majority of those working in the city’s emergent industrial sector from the 1880’s through the First World War were laborers or assembly-line workers. This was especially true for white ethnic immigrants, blacks and women. The City’s remaining craft workers -- in apparel, metalworking, construction, publishing, and food and beverage production -- fought de-skilling, struggled to retain greater control over the production processes in their industries and formed the backbone of the City’s labor movement. These artisans organized themselves by trade, formed unions, built union halls and set up skills training programs.

In the 1890’s, the City’s most highly-skilled garment workers (cutters and trimmers) organized a craft union called the United Garment Workers of America (affiliated with the American Federation of Labor) and struck to win a ten hour workday and weekly payment of wages.11 Many other craft unions formed among construction workers, plate-makers, printers and bookbinders, metalworkers and others during this period.

At the turn of the century, most of the craft unions in Baltimore were either affiliated with the Knights of Labor or the American Federation of Labor. The local history of these two labor federations unfolded in Baltimore in parallel with their national history, as described in Chapter Two. In 1869 the Knights of Labor formed as a secret society in nearby Philadelphia. Baltimore’s craft workers joined the Knight’s assemblies for the first time in large numbers following the relaxation of the Order’s secrecy rules, beginning in 1881. There was another large influx of membership five years later during the campaign for shorter hours across area-industry. Workers either became members of specific craft assemblies that represented particular trades or “signed on with mixed assemblies or the citywide District Assembly, both composed of skilled and unskilled workers from various trades.”

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Knights promoted a vision of industrial democracy that they imagined would eventually eclipse the wage labor system. The national leadership strongly opposed the use of the strike, preferring consumer boycotts and arbitration of industrial disputes.

The Knight's local assemblies were organized across traditional lines, bringing together craft workers with unskilled and semi-skilled workers, native-born white workers with immigrants, black workers and women.

During the depression of 1893 the Knights collapsed under the weight of 50% unemployment in the local construction, iron and garment manufacturing industries. As the pace of mechanization quickened and skilled workers lost their labor power, the assemblies -- unwilling or unable to strike -- had little choice but to acquiesce to the industrialist's demands. Thousands of workers quit the Knights and the national organization folded by 1900.

The same year that the Knights began to gain membership in Baltimore (1881), twenty independent craft organizations formed the Baltimore Federation of Labor, which in 1889 affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. The Federation differed strongly in philosophy from the Knights, believing the wage system was an enduring feature of American society and advocating for the use of the strike to counter-balance the power of capital. The Federation, however, was much less inclusive than the Knights. Some local union charters explicitly excluded blacks and women, and there was much less inclusion of semiskilled and unskilled workers in the ranks of AFL unions. The craft unions affiliated with the AFL used the weapon of the strike effectively, surviving the major economic downturn in 1893 and growing steadily after 1900. As industry continued to expand over the next several years, scores of new local unions emerged.

During this period, the City's clothing industry expanded significantly and the major portion of it moved out of home-based manufacture. At the onset of the First World War, Baltimore ranked third in garment manufacturing nationally and was dominated by five major firms. The City became one of the major manufacturing centers of ready-to-wear clothing and one of the central battlegrounds of the new apparel union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW).

Production was carried out through two separate but inter-dependent systems: 1) large and mid-sized firms called "inside shops" where all steps of production were completed under one roof and 2) small contract shops or "sweaters" where a smaller number of functions were

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12 By 1915, these five firms accounted for three quarters of the city’s production of men’s clothes and employed more than half of the City’s 14,000 garment workers. Argersinger, *Making the Amalgamated*: 3.
performed. Again, according to Argersinger "Whereas the inside shops resembled factories, the contract shops operated more as workrooms. Typically the contractors collected bundles of cut cloth from wholesale manufacturers and took them to their own small rooms, where their employees performed the various tasks necessary to complete the suit, coat or vest. The contractors then returned the finished garment to the manufacturer for a fixed price." But the recession of the 1920’s and the Great Depression a few years later led to a weakening of the large manufacturing component of Baltimore’s garment industry. By the 1930’s, sweatshops once again came to dominate the industry and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers shifted its focus to other cities whose markets were still dominated by large manufacturers.

By the late nineteenth century, heavy industry grew to occupy a substantial place in the city’s economy. This sector included “foundries and machine shops, railroad construction and repair shops, and factories for the manufacture of tinware, cooperware and sheet ironware.” In 1893 the Pennsylvania Steel Company built the massive steel mill and shipyard in Sparrows Point which was later purchased by Bethlehem Steel in 1916.

By the First World War 580,000 people resided in the City and 148,000 of them worked in industry. One hundred local unions belonged to the Baltimore Federation of Labor. Locals were organized among the piano makers, clothing workers, cannery workers, meatpackers, brewers and stonemasons. No single industry dominated the scene. Some industries were dominated by certain ethnic groups. Most of the brewers, furniture and piano-makers were German. About 70% of garment workers were Jewish. Poles were dominant in the fertilizer and cannery industries.

As industries increasingly mechanized and turned to techniques of scientific management, many crafts began a slide toward obsolescence. Craft unions resisted these shifts doggedly, but unsuccessfully. Some crafts such as can-making by hand, box-making and horseshoeing were all but gone by the turn of the century. By 1910 machine-tenders had replaced most of the skilled members of the garment and confectionary trades. A few years later, construction workers were using precut materials in place of those produced by themselves or other artisans.15

14 Fee, Shopes and Zeidman: p. xiii.
When the City rebuilt after a devastating fire in 1904, it constructed a much improved and modernized infrastructure of streets and sewers. During the 1920’s Baltimore’s industrial region expanded to the south and east, with several significant consequences: First, a number of the key industries were outside the jurisdiction of the City government. Second, more and more workers began commuting significant distances to their workplaces and “industrially-linked neighborhoods were increasingly undermined.” Before 1925, 55% to 80% of industrial workers in Baltimore lived within a 2-mile radius of their workplaces. In the years after 1925, large numbers lost this neighborhood-based workplace connection, resulting in “a less community-based, more city-wide proletariat...”

By 1940, most industries in Baltimore relied upon assembly-line production processes, and craft workers comprised only about 15% of all industrial workers in Baltimore. The garment industry became highly mechanized, and the construction trades lost their monopolies on training as public schools began offering vocational education. In response to this reorganization of work and expansion of industry, a new labor movement of industrial workers arose. New CIO locals in the shipbuilding and steel industries emerged to become a force in the Baltimore labor movement. Sparrows Point was an important target for the Steel Workers Organizing Committee which won a union election in 1941. 15,714 votes were cast, 10,813 of them in favor of union representation, with the 5500 African-American steelworkers at Bethlehem Steel most likely critical to the victory. In the 1950’s and 60’s the City’s major supermarkets were organized by the butchers and the retail clerks unions. In the 1960’s, 1199, the union most closely associated with the civil rights movement, began organizing among the predominantly Black and female hospital and nursing home workers in Baltimore. In 1969 these efforts bore fruit as the hospital connected to Johns Hopkins was organized and served as catalyst for the organization of 6 other hospitals and close to thirty nursing homes.

17 Ibid: 30.
18 Ryon: 118.
20 Zeidman: 194.
Baltimore never became a top industrial city, nor did it become a “central office city” as did Pittsburgh and New York. By the early twentieth century, as local firms were bought out by large corporations, the city became a “branch town” with its financial fate tied to the interests of outside investors. Baltimore was the first business community in the country to establish an association. The organization, called the Industrial Bureau, was created in 1919 to persuade branch plants of national corporations to set up shop in Baltimore. During the 1920’s these efforts succeeded in attracting many new industrial plants including Western Electric, Proctor and Gamble, Lever Brothers, McCormick Spice and of course, Bethlehem Steel. To a great extent, the City’s economic fate grew more and more to depend upon Northern corporations—a fate it shared with a number of other southern cities—and “another expression of Baltimore’s “southern” position within the emerging Northeastern megalopolis.”

The Second World War gave a big boost to the City’s defense industry and related unions. The post-1945 period, however, brought a prolonged decline to many Baltimore industries including textile manufacturing and shipbuilding. By the 1980’s, the port of Baltimore, which had boomed during both World Wars as well as Korea, was in severe decline. Manufacturing jobs, which had peaked during the period between the Second World War and the Korean War, declined dramatically thereafter and by 1980 accounted for only 15% of all employment in the City.

The recession of the early 80’s was very severe and not just confined to the manufacturing sector. The Baltimore Sun published a list of job cutbacks in manufacturing and retail companies during the period 1980-1985. Adding up twenty of the key companies on the list, 22,792 jobs were lost. Baltimore’s economy has changed dramatically over the past quarter of a century. Up until the 1970’s, over half of the city’s employees worked in manufacturing and other blue collar jobs, but between 1970 and 1985 Baltimore lost almost 40,000 manufacturing jobs -- a decline of 45%. Over the five-year period between 1979 and 1985, employment in the key industrial sectors of transportation equipment manufacturing, primary metals and shipbuilding and ship repair declined by 50%. From an estimated workforce

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21 Skotness: 21.
23 Cities of the United States First Edition, and David Harvey, “A View from Federal Hill” in The Baltimore Book. These paragraphs are also drawn from an interview with David Harvey, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore June 16, 1997.
of 25,000, employment at Sparrows Point declined to 16,500 in 1980 and half of that by the end of the decade. Increased foreign competition from Asia and Western Europe as well as budgetary cutbacks for aid to cities during the Reagan years added to the cities woes. In general, the eighties marked a period of heightened deterioration in Baltimore’s neighborhoods as not just industrial, but also financial and commercial capital, fled the City.

The past twenty years has seen major growth in the service sector including finance, law, health and medicine. Retail business has increased by 87% since 1977 and Baltimore is among the top twenty national markets for food, drug and general merchandise stores. By the late 1980’s, white collar workers outnumbered blue collar workers two to one. At that time 30% of local employees worked in the service sector; another 24% in federal, state and local government; 22% in wholesale or retail trade; and about 12% in manufacturing. In 1997, of the top ten private sector employers in the Baltimore area, only two were manufacturing firms: Northrop Grumman Electronic Sensors and Systems Division with 7300 employees (down from 8800 the previous fiscal year) and Bethlehem Steel with 6,250 employers. Johns Hopkins University, with 15,516 employees, and its healthcare division, with 10,302, were the largest and third largest private employers, respectively.

Once highly unionized, the union density of Baltimore’s hospitality sector declined dramatically in the 80’s and 90’s. Although organizing opportunities came along with the wave of new hotel construction in the City that was part of the redevelopment of the Inner Harbor, these workers were not organized into the hotel workers union. Hotel and Restaurant International Union researcher Nick Weiner recounted,

The Baltimore local didn’t organize the new hotels, and many of the old ones that were already organized couldn’t compete and went out of business. None of the service sector unions really had a seat at the table when the redevelopment was going on, and we weren’t organized enough to demand one either. In its hey day, Baltimore was one of the most unionized cities in the country, but now we are behind the eight-ball and having to catch up.

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24 Harvey: 190.
In 2000, the local was trustee by the International Union for failing to meet its per capita obligations to the International and the Central Labor Council, and because of its failure to organize.²⁷

Between 1988 and 1998, employment in the City of Baltimore declined by about 70,000 jobs while employment in the Baltimore suburbs increased by more than 136,000.²⁸ Service was the largest employment sector in the state of Maryland, accounting for 34% of total employment with close to 800,000 jobs. This sector also saw the greatest job growth increasing by 38.4%, adding 218,400 jobs. With 23% of total employment, retail and wholesale trade is the next largest sector. The third largest, albeit considerably smaller than the other two, is local government at 9% of total employment. The largest job losses during this period were in manufacturing and construction.²⁹

Income disparity in Baltimore is less extreme than in the earlier Long Island case, but employment statistics still tell a tale of two cities.

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**TABLE 5.1**

**AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGE, SELECTED INDUSTRIES, BALTIMORE, 2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Average Annual Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer and Mathematical</td>
<td>$57,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture and Engineering</td>
<td>$54,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Occupations</td>
<td>$54,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare Practitioners/Tech. Occupations</td>
<td>$51,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production/Assembly</td>
<td>$27,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Related Occupations</td>
<td>$27,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office and Administrative Support</td>
<td>$27,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare Support</td>
<td>$21,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Care and Service</td>
<td>$19,170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building, Grounds Cleaning/Maintenance</td>
<td>$19,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Preparation/Serving-related Occupations</td>
<td>$16,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


²⁷ Interview with Nick Weiner, October 23, 2002
²⁸ The City of Baltimore accounts for about 17% of total statewide employment.
²⁹ Figures for this paragraph were provided by the Corporate Affairs Department of the AFL-CIO as part of their Maryland Profile in 2000.
### TABLE 5.2
**AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGE, SELECTED OCCUPATIONS, BALTIMORE, 2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Average Annual Wage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer Software Engineers, Applications</td>
<td>$72,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemical Engineers</td>
<td>$69,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician Assistants</td>
<td>$62,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered Nurses</td>
<td>$57,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School Teachers (except sp. Ed.)</td>
<td>$49,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensed Practical Nurses</td>
<td>$35,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Counselors</td>
<td>$32,270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrical/Electronic Equipment Assemblers</td>
<td>$26,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus Drivers, Transit and Intercity</td>
<td>$26,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction Laborers</td>
<td>$24,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Entry Keyers</td>
<td>$22,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing Aides, Orderlies and Attendants</td>
<td>$21,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooks, Institution and Cafeteria</td>
<td>$21,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus Drivers, School</td>
<td>$20,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Salespersons</td>
<td>$20,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security Guards</td>
<td>$20,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landscaping and Groundskeeping</td>
<td>$19,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel, Motel and Resort Desk Clerks</td>
<td>$18,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care Workers</td>
<td>$17,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal and Home Care Aides</td>
<td>$17,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Health Aides</td>
<td>$16,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janitors and Cleaners, (not Maids/Housekeeping)</td>
<td>$16,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parking Lot Attendants</td>
<td>$15,370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined Food Preparation/Serving, including fast food</td>
<td>$14,730</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Like in many other regions of the country, the labor movement in Baltimore was able to achieve high density in the industrial sector, but was unable to keep pace with the exploding service sector — as the following numbers clearly show.

In 1999, out of a total of 2.4 million workers employed in Maryland, 367,000 belonged to unions, with the Baltimore region accounts for more than half of them. This proportion of total workers employed to union members was higher in 1984, when out of 1.9 million, 351,000 belonged to unions. Union density declined from 18.3% in 1984 to 15.1% in 1999; it fell most
rapidly between 1984 and 1991 when more than 40,000 members were lost. During this period, while the Maryland economy grew by 516,000 jobs, union membership grew by only 16,000.\footnote{Corporate Affairs calculated that if Maryland union density remains at its current level of 15.1%, membership will increase from 367,000 members in 1999 to 412,000 in 2006, but if density declines at the rate it did between 1984 and 1999 (1.3% per year) it will be at about 377,000 members and 12.1% density. If union density of 18.3% in 1984 had been maintained, Maryland would have had 447,000 members in 1999 and 499,000 in 2006.}

The graphs on this page depict changes in union membership for the City of Baltimore between 1986 and the year 2000.

The United Food and Commercial Workers, with 15.7% and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers with 10.5%, are the two largest unions in the state, followed by the Teamsters at 8.3% and the Service Employees International Union at 6.8%. The American Federation of Teachers, Communication Workers of America and the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) form the next tier, each representing between 5-6% of all active AFL-CIO members.

Since 1984, the Teamsters and the United Food and Commercial Workers have organized the largest number of workers, at 21% and 15%, respectively.

While data on National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections do not reflect all union organizing activity that has taken place over the past twenty years, it gives the most complete picture.
available. According to the Corporate Affairs Department of the AFL-CIO, the number of NLRB elections in Maryland as well as the number of workers involved in those elections was much higher during the period of 1962-1981 than in the years since then. During that period, the state saw an average of 140 elections per year involving an average of 11,000 workers. Since 1981, the number of elections has fallen to 50 a year, involving a total on average of 3,000 workers. In 1998, the last year for which data was available, there were 49 elections involving 2600 workers. The NLRB win rate that year was about 61%, nine points higher than the national average. The Baltimore region accounted for 75% of the workers involved in all elections from 1962 to 1998, although in the eighties and nineties suburban Washington grew in importance, as did Western Maryland.

Most elections held in Maryland since 1984 have been in the nondurable manufacturing and service sector, each representing about 16% of the total. The nondurable manufacturing and healthcare sectors, have involved the highest proportion of workers, at 21% and 17%, respectively.

Baltimore is not only a tale of two cities, one rich and one poor; it is also a tale of two races, one white, and one black.

The Radical Racialization of Baltimore's Labor Markets and Neighborhoods

Unlike many cities where significant immigration of Latinos and Asians have added great nuance to discussions of the influence of race and ethnicity on the local political economy, Baltimore today is still an overwhelmingly black and white city. To gain an understanding of the historical development of the political economy of Baltimore one must begin from the premise that a persistent, systematic racial bias is the most important underlying condition. The City’s economy and physical geography are heavily segregated by race and have been for a very long time. For much of it’s history, African-American and white workers in Baltimore occupied separate labor markets with whites predominating in much of trade and manufacturing, black men consigned to laboring jobs and black women to domestic service. As a result of more than a century of strongly racially-biased local, state and federal housing and zoning policies,

31 "With the exception of a few middle-class professionals, most African-Americans experienced emancipation principally as a move from slave labor to cheap labor. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most black men were low-paid, irregularly employed laborers and personal service workers. Black women, about half of whom
neighborhoods became dramatically segregated. Blacks were crowded into certain neighborhoods by design and these neighborhoods were red-lined, disinvested, and in the most extreme but certainly not unusual cases--even demolished.

In Baltimore for more than a century, race has been the key factor in determining one's place in the labor market and in the city's neighborhoods. While struggles for labor market access, neighborhood development, and political equality might have been pursued in different arenas, they can be traced to the common root of racial oppression. If race has been the key operational category for economic and political repression in Baltimore, it also became the key organizational category for fighting back. Baltimore, where the problems of work and community have been so closely linked, presents the ideal laboratory for Graf and Lange to explore the possibilities of community unionism.

For many years, historians, sociologists, political scientists and geographers have debated the true cultural essence of Baltimore and the degree to which the racialization of its economy can be traced to its southern-ness. On the one hand, Baltimore has always been part of the "northeastern coastal economic subsystem," and has shared the fate of other old industrial cities of the northeast corridor. On the other hand, the City is the southernmost outpost of this system and has always had the most direct and extensive commercial ties to the South. One could argue that the racial segregation of Baltimore's economy is a reflection of the nation and not just of the south, but it would be impossible to tell the City's story without reference to the fact that it is the only northern city that grew up "situated within a strongly Southern cultural zone—the only one where the color bar was systematically articulated throughout the economy, politics and culture in a manner 'more southern than Virginia.'" 32

Baltimore was settled in the 1600's by English farmers and agricultural workers seeking a new start in America in the aftermath of the enclosure of common lands. From the 1630's on through the next several decades, many came as indentured servants who had to work off their passage -- sometimes for as long as seven years -- during which time they were subject to abusive treatment and, in some cases, even sale. Up until the 1680's, Maryland agriculture was heavily reliant upon indentured servants. In fact, during the period 1674-1679, these workers outnumbered slaves by a four-to-one ratio. Eventually some Maryland tobacco growers worked, were overwhelmingly laundresses and domestics.” Karen Olson, “Old West Baltimore: Segregation, African-American Culture and the Struggle for Equality” in The Baltimore Book: 61.
switched from indentured servants to the acquisition of slaves, and Maryland’s slave labor system emerged during the late 1600’s and first decades\(^3\) of the 1700’s.

From early on, Blacks were a significant constituency of the City of Baltimore, and by 1820 comprised 23.4% of its population. Although slavery had a strong hold on other regions of Maryland, it was never pervasive in the City of Baltimore. At the onset of the Civil War, only an estimated 1% of the city’s population was slaves and the city sustained the largest free black urban community in the country.\(^4\) According to McDougall, this community of free blacks was the result of manumission (masters freeing slaves) and the system known as “hiring out” whereby slaves in the city were allowed to hire themselves out to employers in exchange for a percentage of their earnings.\(^5\)

The degree to which the City was made up of non-slaves is quite striking: 20.4% were non-slaves in 1790, 70.3% in 1820 and 92% in 1860. Of course this is not to imply that there were not significant limitations on the freedoms of blacks in the City—there were. The legislature repeatedly tried to pass laws that would expel free blacks from the state and although these laws did not pass, many other discriminatory measures did. Slavery continued to exist in Maryland, and law and social custom strongly limited the rights of blacks. On the other hand, as Barbara Fields has argued, the existence of so many free blacks in Baltimore served to undercut the entire institution of slavery in the State.\(^6\) In the years before reconstruction, Baltimore’s Black community managed to buy the freedom of family members, establish its own schools and learn a variety of trades. Historian Linda Shopes argues that in the early eighteenth century, Blacks in Baltimore worked in a broader range of occupations than perhaps anyplace else in the nation: “In addition to the caulking trade, they outnumbered whites as hod carriers, barbers and brickmakers. They worked as tanners, coopers, butchers, blacksmiths, machinists, wheelwrights, plasterers, painters and in other skilled and semi-skilled occupations.”\(^7\) As we will see, however, despite Baltimore’s early beginnings as a bastion of Black economic and political

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\(^{32}\) Skotnes: 19-20.
\(^{33}\) Fee, Shopes and Zeidman: xiv.
\(^{35}\) McDougall: 25.
\(^{36}\) Barbara J. Fields *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
\(^{37}\) Shopes: 128.
development, it was not to stay that way. Segregation and racism would become the dominant economic and political order.

During the 1880's and 1890's, new black migration to Baltimore came primarily from rural regions of the state and Northern Virginia. McDougall notes however, that rural blacks were “different from the free population established there before the Civil War…These ‘new’ blacks were rural, unskilled and too poor to live in other but abject conditions.” It was after this influx of rural blacks that more pervasive and rigid patterns of racial and ethnic as well as class segregation took hold in the City and Baltimore's first black “ghetto” came into existence.\(^{38}\)

Prior to 1850, while most Blacks lived in the southern, eastern and central sections of the City, there were no predominantly black areas. Blacks and whites lived in the same neighborhoods throughout most of the City. This pattern began to change after the Civil War when German and Irish immigrants began establishing all-white neighborhoods in northern Baltimore and other more successful native whites moved out of the City for the suburbs.\(^{39}\)

Between 1870 and 1900 the City’s population went from 250,000 to 500,000 and there was a severe shortage of affordable housing for the European immigrants and rural Blacks who were arriving in search of work. The severe economic depression that hit in the 1890's hit both the white immigrant and Black communities hard in terms of unemployment, depressed wages and poor housing, but

...African Americans bore the added burden of discrimination. Three times before World War I, the Baltimore City Council passed ordinances forbidding blacks from moving to white neighborhoods. Although the courts overturned these ordinances, they nonetheless reflected the social practice of housing discrimination that became entrenched after the turn of the century...African-Americans were imprisoned in overcrowded and isolated slums from which there was no escape.\(^{40}\)

In keeping with the process of ghettoization of Blacks that began in many cities between the Civil War and the 1920's, geographers identify three phases of the process in Baltimore. Black “enclaves” appeared before 1880, “emergent concentrations” took shape between 1880

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\(^{38}\) McDougall: 38.

\(^{39}\) McDougall: 34.

\(^{40}\) Olson: 61.
and 1900 and “expanded concentrations” occurred from 1900 on.\textsuperscript{41} In the Great Migration of African-Americans post World War I, Black migration from countryside to Baltimore increased markedly albeit at a much lower rate than in the northern and midwestern cities. In the 1920’s, the City’s black population grew 31.2%—five times as fast as the white population.\textsuperscript{42}

Germans, Irish and Russian immigrants arrived in Baltimore in great numbers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a smaller number of Italians, Poles, Lithuanians and Bohemians also arrived during this period. Germans were the largest immigrant group, although within the ten year period between 1890 and 1900, the Russian population grew dramatically--almost trebling from 5.9% to over 15%. Many of the Germans and the Russians were Jewish immigrants driven out of their homelands by anti-semitism. In comparison with other northeastern cities, Irish emigration to Baltimore was proportionally quite small. While they were involved in City and Ward politics, the Irish never achieved the same level of political importance in Baltimore as they did in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Nor were they the dominant ethnic group in the Catholic Church.

Some historians of Baltimore immigration have argued that the reason fewer Italians and Irish immigrants settled in the City than in other northern cities, was the existence of an entrenched black community available to fill the unskilled occupations.\textsuperscript{43} For the same reason, later waves of European ethnic groups like the Poles, Bohemians and Lithuanians were also under-represented. Significant struggles over both the skilled as well as unskilled work did take place between the City’s Blacks and some of the ethnic immigrant groups who did come to Baltimore. Over time, this struggle resulted in the forced expulsion and exclusion of blacks from many skilled occupations and their almost total consignment to unskilled occupations. In the shipyards for example, the dominance of black caulkers was challenged by some of the shipwrights who hired lower skilled white immigrant workers for lower wages. While black caulkers had the initial support of the newspapers, police and employers, the racialization of the issue eventually led the employers to expel the remaining workers from their jobs and replace them with whites.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41}Paul A. Groves and Edward K. Muller, “The Evolution of Black Residential Areas in Nineteenth-Century Cities” Journal of Historical Geography 1 (1975), 169-191, as cited in Skotnes.
\textsuperscript{42}Skotnes: 78.
\textsuperscript{43}Skotnes: 45.
\textsuperscript{44}Linda Shopes, “Fells Point: Community and Conflict in a Working Class Neighborhood” The Baltimore Book: Community Unions: Beyond the Politics of Particularism 192.
Historically, Baltimore politics have "paralleled the city's economic and social development, reflecting both its power alignments and underlying tensions." While initially prevented from voting by property requirements, white males were enfranchised by the early 1800's. Although active in the Republican party even before they could vote, Blacks did not win the right to vote until the fifteenth amendment granted suffrage to black men in 1870. City elections were often marred by violence and municipal administrations were characterized by graft and corruption. During the Civil War, Baltimore was officially a Union state, but there was significant sectional tension which eventually led to the occupation of the City by federal troops after local citizens attacked a company of Union troops passing through the city on their way south. After the war, the Democratic Party was able to leverage resentment of the federal occupation and fear of the City's newly empowered Black voters to bring together business and professional constituents with white ethnic voters and begin its long, although not completely uninterrupted, dominance of Baltimore politics.

As the party of emancipation, the Republican Party held the loyalty of most Blacks in Baltimore. Blacks were active in ward politics and Black Republicans held office on the city council from Reconstruction up until Progressive Era "reforms" resulted in a restructured council with many fewer city council seats. In fact, efforts by the Maryland legislature to disenfranchise Blacks in 1904, 1908 and 1911 were defeated by referendum and in the 40 years from 1890 to 1931, six black Republicans held seats on the City Council, winning seats in thirteen out of the eighteen elections held during this period. During the 1930's, Blacks by and large left the Republican Party for the party of the New Deal and President Franklin Roosevelt.

The City's Democratic Party machine, organized through neighborhood-based ethnic ward organizations, functioned more or less effectively until opposition to New Deal reforms undermined its credibility with voters while also undercutting its ability to dole out patronage. Further weakened by the movement of its white ethnic base out to the suburbs, the machine had lost much of its power by the end of the Second World War. In the 1960's, reform democratic coalitions that had their origins in community organizing against highway expansion and other

45 Fee, Shopes and Zeidman: xv.
46 Skotnes notes "Unlike many Southern and Northern cities, the city Democratic Party did not dominate Baltimore politics, as Robert Goldberg has argued, real party competition survived in Baltimore. In fact, Baltimore had a Republican mayor, William Broening, from 1919 to 1923 and from 1927-1931." A Republican was elected mayor in 1943 and again in 1963.
47 McDougall: 36-37.
fights, became involved in running candidates for city offices. Two black candidates ran for mayor in 1971, but split the vote, and William Donald Schaefer was elected. In the hope of stemming the tide of increased black voting and electoral activism, the city council amended the City Charter to require redistricting after each census in an effort to dilute the black vote in as many districts as possible. During the 1970’s and 80’s, an effective political machine was reconstituted by Mayor Schaefer who was able to utilize some of the City’s strongest neighborhood organizations for political ends. By 1980, Baltimore had a 60% black majority but was still electing only six of the 18 city council seats. The City’s first black mayor, Kurt Schmoke, was elected in 1987. In 1991, the seven black members of the City Council joined by three white members anxious to protect their own seats in a now overwhelmingly black majority city, moved to carve out five of the six districts as black-majority districts.

Social historians of Baltimore have noted that from the 1860’s and 1870’s through the turn of the century, the City’s black community had a highly evolved and engaged civic infrastructure of churches and voluntary organizations that formed the backbone of an extremely effective black freedom movement. Segregationists were thwarted repeatedly in their efforts to enact Jim Crow style discriminatory voting measures by a mobilized and united black community at times allied with white Republicans and immigrants. In 1910, the community defeated several residential segregation ordinances, although one finally passed and was upheld in 1913 and was cited as a model by segregationists nationwide. While during the 1920’s, the Black community was able to achieve important breakthroughs in public education, winning

48 Mary Pat Clarke remembered those days: “It used to be that local politics were neatly organized into political groups with bosses by ethnic group, by geography but that was ethnic group geography. The changes began not because of African-Americans so much because of people like Mikulski and to some extent, myself, who after the 60’s riots decided the city government was nonfunctional but that the city was worth saving, at least our neighborhoods were and we were all over the city began forming umbrella groups. There were like 20 neighborhood organizations banding together. Barbara’s southeast association was to stop the road from going through Fells Point, basically the neighborhoods took over and began to change city policy to be more responsible to us and to rebuild. Federal policy helped--block grants and the like--and the Vietnam War and Civil Rights movements all of which led to break up of the old guard and emergence of community-based political power. When Schaeffer was mayor, all of this was reaching its peak and he who had come out of the old political organizations saw this was happening and embraced it as his own. African Americans had no political clout except in West and East Baltimore, which was where those populations were clumped to the degree they had some representation on the council. One of the things I presided over was the redistricting of ’91, in which we radically redrew the local city council district lines to provide for the emergence of fair representation on the city council. By this time the population of the City was overwhelmingly African-American but the district lines were drawn in such a way that African-Americans could never get a majority of ten. We have six city council districts, each one elects 3 councilors, we redrew those lines.” Interview 1998.

better quality instruction and facilities and increasing enrollment among Black children quite dramatically, extreme patterns of labor market and neighborhood segregation were the norm.

By 1930, Baltimore's Black population was as large as 60% of all immigrant Europeans and first generation Americans combined—in fact it was twice the size of the German-American community, the City's largest white ethnic group. While blacks unquestionably comprised the City's largest ethnic community, their lives by this time "had become totally circumscribed by racial restrictions. Blacks were segregated by law into separate schools, hospitals, jobs, parks, restaurants and railroad cars. . . .In 1920, the Maryland public schools spent $36.03 per year for each white child; only $13.20 was allotted for each black child." 50 There were very high rates of infant mortality, poverty, disease and crime and very low rates of home ownership.

Throughout the 1930's and 1940's, utilizing racial rental and sales covenants and "slum clearance" measures, banks, local elected officials, realtors and homeowners were part of an effective system of keeping Blacks confined to deteriorating central city neighborhoods. 51 Even the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 which was considered a positive step for the social welfare of the poor, with its focus on slum clearance and improvement of blighted areas became a tool in the hands of local officials to engage in massive demolition of housing units in Baltimore's Black neighborhoods. The demolished units were only very partially replaced by new construction. As implemented in Baltimore, New Deal era programs and those enacted under the Truman administration also operated in a decidedly biased manner. Both the Federal Housing Administration and the Veteran's Administration housing program, created to bring homeownership within the reach of larger numbers of the working class including returning war veterans actually required racial covenants in order to preserve property values of the homes they insured. These programs also refused to insure houses in Black neighborhoods of the City. Thus, during this period, thousands of white families took advantage of federal programs that helped them to purchase homes in the Baltimore suburbs and maintain them as white enclaves.

Suburban development was aided by federal policy in other ways as well, as McDougall explains: "Expanded federal taxing and borrowing after World War II and the Korean War subsidized the development and decentralization of industry, and as plants moved out of the city, the construction of suburban housing nearby and the roads needed to travel between these newly

50 Olson: 67.
developed areas and the Port downtown...” The movement of industrial plants out of central cities and into surrounding suburban areas, also stimulated housing demand. Because suburban land was cheaper than city land, investors reinforced the pattern—largely abandoning investment in center cities in favor of the suburbs. While prodigious amounts of new housing were built in the suburbs during this period, due to both labor market inequalities and biased lending practices, Blacks for the most part were denied entry.

Even during WWII when military production heightened the demand for labor, blacks arriving in the city faced housing discrimination. Thirty-three thousand black people flocked to Baltimore between 1940 and 1942 in search of work in Baltimore’s booming defense industry. While this huge influx taxed the already over-crowded black neighborhoods of the City, Black workers did benefit from the economic boom catalyzed by the Second World War and were able to use their enhanced labor market power to demand equal treatment, pay and promotion. For the first time, Baltimore blacks found employment as clerks, bus drivers, fire fighters and police officers but they still faced tremendous opposition. According to Olson “As late as 1943, when Bethlehem Steel attempted to train 15 black riveters, 7,000 white employees went on strike, insisting on their traditional monopoly of skilled work.”

Post-war attempts by local government and business organizations to reverse the gains made in the workforce were resisted by the organized black community. Thurgood Marshall won a suit on behalf of Black teachers for pay equity in the Baltimore public schools. During the civil rights movement, Baltimore was highly mobilized: bringing together the black churches and civic organizations with CORE and SNCC as well as the ACLU and AFL-CIO.

During the twenty year period between 1951 and 1971, the City embraced a set of urban renewal policies. Spearheaded by the Baltimore Urban Renewal and Housing Agency, these programs resulted in the displacement of an estimated 25,000 black households to other black neighborhoods in the City or into public housing. This displacement touched off a sequence of events that had the effect of worsening, instead of improving conditions for Baltimore’s blacks. Instead of distributing low-income blacks to different neighborhoods integrated by class and race, they were shoe-horned into public housing projects which exacerbated their social and economic isolation, especially as the white middle-class, fearful of declining property values and

51 Approximately 90% of the people displaced by slum clearance were black and the same percentage of the City’s public housing tenants are black as well. McDougall: 47-54.
urban crime, moved out of the contiguous neighborhoods in droves. As McDougall recounts:

“Urban slum neighborhoods were marked by dilapidation, overcrowding, substandard housing, tension and violence. Failing buildings and inadequate city services went hand in hand with ineffective schools, alcoholism, traffic in drugs, unwanted pregnancies and a high rate of juvenile delinquency.”

According to McDougall,

From a population of just under a million people in the late 1940’s, Baltimore lost a quarter of a million people in a single generation. People left the city at rapidly increasing rates: 11,000 withdrew between 1950 and 1960; 30,000 between 1960 and 1970; then nearly ten thousand a year.53

According to the U.S. Census, the population of Baltimore in 1970 was 905,787, by the end of the decade it had fallen to approximately 786,775 and by 1986 it was estimated at 752,800. By 1997 it stood at 675,000. There was a corresponding shrinkage of the tax base over this period.54

Whites began leaving the City in substantial numbers beginning in the 1950’s. Between 1950 and 1964, 145,000 whites left while 133,000 non-whites moved in. The exact opposite situation prevailed in the suburbs where, during that same period, 16,000 blacks moved in while the white population increased by 440,000.55 The 1970’s continued a significant decline of the white middle class within the city limits. Between 1970 and 1980, 28% of the city’s white population moved to the suburbs and during that same period, the city’s median income as a percentage of the SMSA median declined from 74% to 63%. As of 1980, the city of Baltimore was approximately 55% black and 45% white, and by 2000, it was 64.3% black and 31.6% white. Baltimore County is a text-book case of city/suburb segregation: in 1980, Baltimore City was 55% black while Baltimore County was 8% black.56 All told, between 1949 and 1998, 300,000 people -- close to one out of three City residents -- left Baltimore.57

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52 See Olson: 61.
53 McDougall: 99.
54 City of Baltimore, Summary of Adopted Budget, FY ‘98, Letter to the President and members of the City Council from Mayor Kurt Schmoke, May 14, 1997.
55 McDougall: 98.
By the late seventies Baltimore had lost a great deal of its white, ethnic middle class to the suburbs. With fewer financial resources to bring to bear on its problems, the city’s schools and neighborhoods continued to decline.

With "urban renewal" of the 50's and 60's a failure, and a great deal of its white, ethnic middle class lost to the suburbs (and thus far fewer financial resources to bring to bear on its problems), the city’s schools and neighborhoods went into a severe decline. This decline was only to worsen during the downtown-centered urban revitalization efforts of the 80's and 90's.

A Depressed City Looks To Its Harbor

Beginning in the early 1950's, and kicking into high gear in 1971, the city embarked upon a strategy of economic development and urban revitalization founded upon the redevelopment of the downtown into “the corporate center of a new Baltimore economy based on advanced services and tourism.” The linchpin of this strategy was a menu of financial incentives and public subsidies to private developers calculated to entice them into investing in office and hotel development as well as convention centers, stadiums and upscale commercial and residential projects. The prime mover of downtown redevelopment was the Greater Baltimore Committee, an organization of 100 corporate executives formed in 1954. At the behest of the Committee, consecutive city governments, from 1971 on, have pursued this strategy aggressively, at first with the reluctant support of the black community and later despite the opposition of an increasingly large and vocal part of the community including the BUILD organization and its ministerial leadership. From the beginning, there were voices from within as well as outside the city administration that wanted to take urban renewal in a different direction - toward neighborhood revitalization -- but they did not hold sway. City government became the facilitator of business' redevelopment agenda.

Initially, the City of Baltimore was not a part of any Maryland county and combined the functions of city and county government under one institutional umbrella. It had an elected mayor, a bicameral city council and an elected judiciary. During the Progressive Era, in an attack on ward-based machine politics, city government was considerably restructured. The city council became a unicameral body and the number of districts was reduced from seventeen to six, so that by 1932 there was no Black representation on the Council. At this time the City also
established the powerful Board of Estimates to oversee the city's finances. It was also during this time that the city government, working closely with the business community, set up a number of quasi-public agencies. Created to oversee economic development in the private sector they included the Industrial Corporation, the Industrial Bureau, the Export-Import Bureau, the Traffic and Transportation Bureau and the Maryland Development Bureau. In 1924 all of these bureaus were consolidated under the rubric of the Baltimore Association of Commerce which played a central role in guiding economic activity in Baltimore and wielded enormous power in the City government itself.  

The political geographer David Harvey notes that since 1900 Baltimore has been a branch plant manufacturing city with few notable corporate headquarters. Harvey argues that this has been a defining feature of the city's history. As a result, the city's business interests have historically been determined much more by the financial sector and the imperatives of mobile capital than by a consortium of Baltimore-based corporations and the imperatives of pinned down capital. Thus, banks have had an increasingly strong interest in real estate development and a more distant relationship to manufacturing. This alignment reinforced the move into suburban development and made reinvestment in the city itself unattractive to the financial sector unless heavily subsidized by government.

Assessing the "better business climate" strategy in the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, the urban historian Marc Levine argues:

> Despite the favorable publicity accorded Baltimore's transformation, systematic analysis of social and economic trends suggests that corporate-centered business climate redevelopment has done little to boost uneven patterns of growth and exacerbated urban dualism. Baltimore has become 'two cities': a city of developers, suburban professionals and 'back to the city gentry' who have ridden the downtown revival to handsome profits, good jobs and conspicuous consumption; and a city of impoverished blacks and displaced manufacturing workers, who continue to suffer from shrinking economic opportunities, declining public services and neighborhood distress.

Levine sees Baltimore's downtown redevelopment strategy as comprised of two distinct phases, the first running from 1954 to 1970 and the second running to the present day. The first period, focused upon two projects--the Charles Center, a $180 million dollar, 33 acre complex of offices,  

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58 Levine: 1.
retail shops and hotels and the more expensive and much longer-term Inner Harbor project to
redevelop the city’s downtown waterfront into 240 acres of hotels, offices, stores, residences,
entertainment facilities and shoreline promenades. While bonds were issued and federal funds
secured in the late 1960’s, the election of Mayor William Donald Schaeffer in 1971 on a
platform of “aggressive implementation of an entrepreneurial corporate center strategy” moved
the Inner Harbor project onto center stage.

Mayor Schaeffer implemented a fiscal policy of austerity that cut municipal spending by
20% while real expenditures on economic development increased by 400%. Not only did this
send a strong signal to the business community, it also enhanced Baltimore’s standing in the
municipal bond markets that would be so important to underwriting downtown redevelopment.
The mayor minced no words when it came to wooing business, at one point telling potential
corporate investors: “Baltimore wants you so badly, we’ll let you write your own terms.”

The jewel in the crown of the redevelopment of the inner harbor was the highly
commercially successful Harborplace, a Rouse Company project that included shops, markets,
restaurants and two pavillions and became a strong visitor magnet. This success resulted in a
tremendous increase in the amount of private investment in the Inner Harbor redevelopment area.
Levine reports that between 1960 and 1984, a total of $540 million dollars in private capital was
invested in the area. At the start of 1985, however, an additional $700 million dollars worth of
hotel, office and commercial construction was underway, only 10% of which was comprised of
public funds.

Unquestionably, the inner harbor redevelopment catalyzed an enormous boom in tourism
for Baltimore and a concomitant hotel boom literally tripling the number of hotel rooms
between 1980 and 1986 as well as tourist visits and expenditures. Inner Harbor redevelopment
reached its apogee in 1985. All available land was either developed or targeted for development
and private investment began flowing to communities east and south of the inner harbor. These
neighborhoods evolved according to a similar pattern: a rise in upscale commercial and

59 See Skotnes, pp. 25-27.
60 This general approach to state and city fiscal policy is explored in depth in James O’Connor, The Fiscal Crisis of
University Press, 1983).
61 Levine: 108. The original quote comes from R. Goodman The Last Entrepreneurs: America’s regional wars for
jobs and dollars (Boston: South End Press, 1979).
residential development linked to new marinas and shoreline promenades. Increasingly, however, questions began to be raised about the beneficiaries of all of this.

The tax base in the central business district has quadrupled since the early 1960’s. Fourteen thousand jobs were created downtown. There were ripple effects in the surrounding neighborhoods which saw significant commercial and residential reinvestment. But the gap between per capita income of city residents in Baltimore as compared to the eleven cities of comparable size across the nation, increased over the period of this golden era of redevelopment. Baltimore had the highest poverty rate among all of the eleven cities--23%. Studies of the boom year period document a decline in poor, largely black neighborhoods. The percentage of residents living in poverty increased in the majority of Baltimore’s neighborhoods and housing conditions continued to be among the worst in the nation. 62

Between 1971 and 1985, public education was cut by 25%. Some studies found tax flows from the inner harbor to be barely matching public expenditures, and one city study found that Baltimore spent $17 million more per year servicing the downtown and inner harbor than it got back in tax revenues. In addition, most of the jobs created for city residents were low-paying service sector jobs. David Harvey argues that while redevelopment has brought money into the city, there is no evidence that it stays in Baltimore. “A great deal of it flows out either as profits to firms or payments for goods from Europe, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, England or elsewhere.” 63 It was in the face of this glaring and growing contradiction -- of a thriving corporate center in the midst of increasingly depressed city neighborhoods -- that the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee was founded.

Going Beyond the Walls: The Origins of the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee

In the Fall of 1992, the Maryland Food Bank conducted a study of the people using its affiliated 140 soup kitchens and food pantries. It turned out that 27% of them worked every day, many of them in downtown Baltimore. For pastors like Reverend Doug Miles, the study confirmed what many of them had long suspected: "One of the things we saw was that workers were not benefiting from all of the new development in the area: wages were stagnating, jobs

63 Harvey: 239.
were part-time with no benefits." The study reinforced the disillusionment Reverend Miles and fellow pastors felt about downtown redevelopment as an economic strategy. "That is when a small group of 8-10 BUILD pastors developed the idea for a new pastoral theme for our churches that we called ‘Beyond the Church Walls...’ The rationale for what eventually became Solidarity was ‘how do we reach people in neighborhoods who are not a part our churches, who are not connected to us or [who were only connected to us] in terms of food or social service?’ Because the truth was, the minister may know them, but members of the congregation had no idea who they were feeding.”

The condition of the BUILD churches in the early 90’s, was a direct reflection of Baltimore’s decline. While the churches were still there as physical presences, they were struggling to keep their doors open and meet the demands of the impoverished residents of their neighborhoods. The BUILD churches were losing their base to death, aging and relocation. They were losing their energy, not just for BUILD, but for trying to cope with what was happening in the city. The neighborhood's mounting social problems -- the large number of people coming in for food, the high levels of drug use and violence, AIDS and homicide -- were overwhelming the churches.

As the middle classes of both races fled the city for the suburbs, they often maintained connection to their old congregations, commuting back on Sundays for services, but becoming increasingly uninvolved and disconnected from the life of the neighborhoods in which those churches were situated. As Kathleen O’Toole, BUILD Lead Organizer at that time described it “The churches were becoming older and smaller and dying. Congregants were moving away. The churches were less connected to the communities they served... There were people who came to the soup kitchen and Head Start program that the churches were serving, but were not in meaningful relationship with...the church was only viewing them as clients.”

This situation presented a number of challenges to church clergy. First, they were struggling under the burden of serving the needs of two distinct congregations under one roof: the “Sunday church” of worshipers and the “Monday through Saturday” church of the poor.

Second, they were aware of the danger of remaining dependent upon Sunday commuters who might eventually develop new relationships to churches closer to where they lived. Most of all, several ministers worried that their ministries lacked a clear mission--something they viewed as essential to the historical survival of the black church. As Graf described these discussions:
"Some pastors recognized the disconnection between the two congregations under one roof as more than just a matter of survival...this core of pastors recognized that the most important institution in the black community is the black church, not just for spiritual life but for political, economic and social life as well...If you lose the prophetic thrust and connection to the next rung of poor people...unless the church moves out and folds in people who live and work around it, the black community itself will lose strength and mission."

BUILD organizers and leaders considered many possible responses, eventually deciding to build two new organizations: the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee--an organization of low wage service workers, and Child First--an organization of parents of public school students and their children. As Graf explained, “Our conclusion was that we needed to rebuild our city and recreate our neighborhoods, and to do so we needed a whole new series of voluntary associations, mediating institutions. These new mediating institutions will eventually, we hope, also strengthen the churches themselves. But right now, it is taking the strength of the church to try to build new mediating institutions for this disconnected population.”

In October of 1992, BUILD conducted a big training event, using bible study and organizing training to challenge members and leaders to think about “Who these folks who were ‘the other’ were," as Kathleen O’Toole, BUILD Lead Organizer, put it. "We read passages from Mark’s gospel on ‘encountering the other’ and we taught leaders how to do individual meetings and got churches to take commitments of members to go out and meet the working poor.” Over the course of eight weeks, organizers, leaders and members of BUILD churches held a total of 500-600 individual meetings with the working poor in their neighborhoods and church social service programs. As they identified and recruited potential leaders, the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee began to come to life.

In a series of house meetings conducted by BUILD, one issue that kept getting raised again and again was the general lack of activities for kids, including recreation and after school programs. Graf and Lange were struck by the intensity of feeling expressed in the house meetings around these issues and came up with the idea of the Child First Authority to fund after school programs. The Authority would raise money by creating a dedicated revenue stream that would be taken out of projects that had received a lot public subsidy: “...If everybody is so concerned about kids, why is it that the recreation department is always the one that was being cut so badly, and why was it run so poorly? On one hand you had all this great concern for kids and on the other hand budgets being slashed, so we came up with this idea of an authority that would not have the capacity to tax, but would have the authority to sell bonds...When the corporate community wants something badly enough, like a stadium, the government figures out a way to ensure a separate source of money...Maryland created a stadium authority that was a public expense, but privately owned...” BUILD organized to get the City Council to create the Authority and appoint one of its top leaders to chair it. (From Graf/Lange interview, November 1996.)
The organizers also tried to identify potential members by going out to workplaces, employment agencies and other locations where the working poor might gather. Jonathan Lange asked the clergy to accompany him at odd hours of the morning and evening to the big city labor pools where they would meet hundreds of men showing up daily to find work. The BUILD pastors were impressed by the tenacity of so many of these men who had been working this way for years, unable to land steady jobs, but consistently showing up at the labor pool to seek work. That winter, Lange and another organizer spent many hours at bus stops, in front of major buildings downtown and riding the buses to the end of the line, in order to engage with custodial workers and others about what their lives were like.

Lange recounted the early months:

I started riding the #3 bus, and parking my car at the end of the route and taking the bus filled with custodians. I would try to go from seat to seat and engage with them. We wandered through the hotels talking to housekeepers cleaning up rooms, talked to state workers who worked for temporary services...Mostly, we were looking for stories and trying to understand the industries.

At this point, the organizers were just listening, not proposing solutions or trying to recruit people to particular campaigns. “To get them to talk to us, we would say something like: We are with the church and we are tired of money going to the downtown while most people weren’t getting any part of it and what did they think?” What amazed Lange and Micciotto was how eager people were to talk and how willing they were to continue the conversation later on at home. “So many people at ten o’clock at night would be approached by these two white organizers and 99% of them would not only talk to you, but virtually everybody would give you their name, phone number and address and agree that you could call and make a time to come and talk to them.”

Lange worked closely with Reverend Vernon Dobson of Union Baptist Church, whose church operated an inexpensive coffee shop/luncheonette where, for 50 cents or a dollar, people could get a meal. For a year, Lange, Micciotto and Dobson would invite workers to house meetings and parties down at the coffee shop.

As they were conducting this outreach, a big push was on in the legislature to allocate an additional $100 million dollars for expansion of the Baltimore Convention Center. To the
BUILD clergy, the service workers they were encountering bore testimony to the problem with this downtown redevelopment strategy as a cornerstone of urban economic development. Convention center expansion was the top priority for many of Baltimore's hotels; at the same time, these hotels were refusing to provide BUILD with statistics on the wages of hotel housekeepers. Many of them had been working at these hotels for years but were still being paid $5.25 an hour.

Lange recalled the growing outrage of the BUILD pastors:

Over two billion dollars had been spent in Baltimore to subsidize the development of a downtown hospitality industry. Early on, that development was endorsed by the same churches that make up BUILD. But the promise to the churches was that downtown development would provide new job opportunities for African Americans. As it turned out, those high paying jobs were filled with people from outside Baltimore and the remaining jobs were low wage dead end jobs with no benefits.

That winter, BUILD organized a one day "hotel invasion" where twelve clergy were sent out to the hotels, each assigned a certain number of floors and charged with interviewing the housekeepers, finding out how much they were earning and asking for their names and phone numbers and if someone could come and see them about becoming part of a new organization.

IAF organizers had already departed from their standard organizing play-book by deciding to build new mediating institutions of low wage workers and parents "from scratch" as opposed to relying upon the institutional base of the church. Another departure was the decision to move quickly into the action phase of the organizing. Lange said, "In our IAF sponsoring committees, we try to stay away from "issue" and "action" early on. We try to keep the tension focused on whether people want to build an organization." BUILD made the decision to move much more quickly into action because Lange, Graf, Dobson and others felt that an early victory was needed -- a victory "that we could then use as our credential in approaching skeptical workers."

From early on, the building of the new organization always had two main thrusts. The first was to organize low wage service sector workers into a union. Day to day, the outreach

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65 To "credential themselves" Lange and Miccioto often used the name of the dean of Baltimore's black pastors: Reverend Vernon Dobson of Union Baptist Church.

work was akin to the day-to-day work of union organizing, albeit totally outside of the NLRB framework. Lange and Micciotto began organizing committees of bus drivers (working for private city contractors), janitors working in downtown office buildings (including the World Trade Center), cafeteria workers, childcare workers, workfare workers and others. Working with these committees, the organizers tried to figure out how to gain employer recognition, structure a membership, collect dues and offer benefits and healthcare to members. The second thrust of the project was to re-establish a set of low-wage labor market protections through the pursuit of a public policy agenda. Here the day-to-day work was akin to the day-to-day work of community organizing. The workers Lange and Miccioto recruited were active at their workplaces: recruiting their co-workers and taking part in a series of actions on city government around a set of new public policies to improve conditions in the low wage labor market.

After months of hands-on investigation, BUILD pastors and leaders began to develop a set of ideas about what a campaign to improve jobs and wages might look like. It was cast in terms of the need to develop a new social compact between the City, the Baltimore business community and Baltimore residents. Lange developed a workshop for BUILD leaders and presented it at a series of house meetings for members of BUILD congregations. The workshop summarized patterns of work in the city and the shifts that had taken place including the privatization of public sector jobs and the decline of the manufacturing sector and shift to the service economy. During these house meetings, people would share their own experiences in the labor market and the impact the economic shifts had had on their own lives. The sessions ended with a discussion about the erosion of the old social compact—that companies would reward hard work and high productivity by including their employees in the prosperity through increased wages and benefits, and providing opportunities for upward mobility—and the need to develop a new compact especially in light of all the public subsidy Baltimore had given to private corporations. The leaders always came around to the same conclusion, Lange said: “If private enterprise is going to take public subsidy, it has a public responsibility....It can’t argue the free market rhetorically while operationally getting all this public subsidy.”

67 Interview with Lange and Graf, November 1996.
One of BUILD’s long-time leaders, Carol Reckling, worked at the epicenter of Baltimore’s redevelopment agency for a few years. When she left out of frustration, BUILD hired her to help with the new campaign. Reckling conducted research on downtown development projects and funding streams. “I knew where to look and I knew what documents would tell me what had been spent for various projects. It was a matter of piecing it together from the City’s capital budget reports and block grants and some of the Board of Estimates approvals about how much money was spent, how much was promised and the source of the funds...It was a matter of taking it project by project and coming up with the amount of public subsidy per project.”

Culling from a variety of sources, Reckling researched and pulled together a basic summary of the local, state and federal sources of downtown subsidies. Local sources included city loans in which the city borrows money for specific improvements by selling general obligation bonds; city general funds which come from city collections of property tax, “piggyback” income taxes and other taxes; revenue loans which are borrowed funds used for capital projects which generate revenue from users (like parking lots or utility systems) and thus generate income for loan repayment; the city motor vehicle fund which comes from the State motor vehicle fund which is for highway construction or transportation related projects; sale of city land; and conditional purchase agreements. State sources included waterway improvement funds -- a matching fund program from the Department of Natural Resources. At the federal level, community development block grants (CDBG’s) were available to the City from the U.S. Department of Housing and Community Development. To qualify for CDBG’s the project must meet criteria for alleviation of unemployment, poverty, slum and blight conditions.

Reckling’s research also summarized the highlights of public investment in the inner harbor. Subsidies for the downtown hospitality industry included $10 million dollars from a city UDAG loan for the Hyatt Regency; $42 million from the state for the city convention center with an additional $115 in the works for expansion of the convention. The proposed expansion included $65.1 million from the City in revenue loans, the construction of the Stouffer’s Hotel garage with City Parking bonds, as well as $920,000 in block grant monies for pavement and landscaping for the hotel. There were also $7 million dollars in loans to the Lord Baltimore

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68 In an interview Reckling recalled: “Every time black people talk, they always say ‘we need some economic development in our community.’ I didn’t want to work for the City, I never wanted a government job, but after a
Hotel and $5.9 million for the Omni Hotel. In addition to the hospitality industry, the National Aquarium and the city-owned, but privately operated Camden Yards (the new Orioles baseball stadium), were both recipients of many millions of state and city dollars.

Reckling also worked to identify the big conventions that were coming to town. She would then ask the visiting organizations to pressure the big hotels to pay better wages to their workers. In addition to holding meetings with hotel management, several convention-going organizations distributed envelopes to their members to leave for the maids who were cleaning their rooms. The envelopes said “I support your work and believe you should earn a living wage. The folks in the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee believe the same thing. Here is my tip.”

The organization showcased the corporate subsidy research when it held it’s first major public action of the social compact campaign at the Hyatt Hotel in the inner harbor. With the press in town, 2,000 BUILD members marched through downtown Baltimore that day on a “subsidy tour” stopping at each of the major developments and announcing the amount of public subsidy that had gone into each one. Several times BUILD took members, clergy and visiting dignitaries on similar bus tours of the major subsidized developments.

By May of 1994 the organization concluded that it had recruited enough workers to join Solidarity and done enough internal work with the leadership of BUILD to publicly announce its partnership with AFSCME. BUILD organizers and clergy used the occasion of Pentacost Sunday to speak about the partnership with the union. O’Toole recalls “We made the connection to the Pentacost as the time to do it because of the push of the church to ‘go out to all nations.’" Jonathan Lange remembered: “We had the action at Knox Presbyterian to send a real strong message to workers that they would be protected if they participated. [We] wanted to frame our relationship with AFSCME so that nobody else would be able to. We thought we might get a bunch of reaction from employers and we wanted to frame the issue before they did. So this was an action where BUILD and AFSCME in essence were ‘recognizing’ each other.”

Carol Reckling and the other BUILD leaders were nervous about how successful the event would be, as well as the organization’s ability to build Solidarity because it marked the first time it had attempted to build an individual membership base. “We had never done this kind of organizing before, we were used to doing it all through churches. Now we were trying to...”
reach people who were disconnected... Then the buses started rolling in. People started filling the room. We had organized a paper for all religious judicatories to sign. We got all of them, including the bishops. They were all there: the Lutherans, the Catholics, Presbyterians. Workers filled the place and Gerald MacIntee, the international president of AFSCME was there and he was preaching! All of our people started telling stories that had not been told publicly. I was doing all the media, they were all there and it was the only time I have ever seen the news media excited. The TV people were so into it that when they were about to change shifts they sent in other reporters to cover when they had to leave--they never do that."

The union and the workers were meeting in two separate places while the BUILD clergy and leaders waited in the main sanctuary next door. At one point in the meeting, workers came marching in through the double doors of the sanctuary singing ‘Sign Me Up’ and sat down in the front of the room. Lange added, “We had all of our clergy there seated separately, many in their robes. We wanted to send the message that if employers messed with workers, the pastors would go after them. Reverend Vernon Dobson closed the meeting on our basic message. He said ‘The church is going to protect these workers. I have a message for employers--people who are upset because they don’t want to pay workers more money...they don’t want workers to organize. You keep your hands off these people because they are children of God.’ I thought lightning was going to come off of his fingers. I don’t think these workers had ever been wrapped around by so much power before.”

It was also a moment that made clear what the church might gain by such an association, O’Toole said: “One reverend looked at me and said ‘this is the church that I want to pastor.’ Clergy, labor and SSC workers realized this was no longer a question of the church saving the workers...it really introduced the possibility that the relations with these workers might save the church...”

An article appearing in the *Baltimore Sun* the day of the action summarized AFSCME’s interest in the partnership: “For AFSCME, which represents more than 8,000 government employees based in Baltimore, the partnership is a foray into organizing workers, often part-time or temporary employees hired by small contractors across industry lines.” Kimberlee Keller, AFSCME area director summarized the case: “This is the new American workforce--contingent, temporary, part-time, low-wage workers doing in what many cases used to be decent jobs...This
is the most direct possible way to address poverty in the city: Let’s look at what people earn on
the job.”

The headline in the Baltimore Sun on Monday, May 23rd was “Labor leaders preach, and
preachers urge union solidarity.”

A Profile of the Membership

Who were these low-wage service-sector workers who had gathered at Knox Presbyterian
to be "wrapped around" by the power of preachers and union organizers? During the course of
my research I conducted twenty-seven interviews with Solidarity members and welfare action
team members. Here are the results.

**Solidarity members**

Virtually all members of Solidarity are African-American. About half of the members I
interviewed had been born and raised in Baltimore, another quarter had emigrated to the City
from the deep south and a good portion of others were from near-by states. The majority of
members are women. The older members (45 years or older) were more likely to once have held
full-time jobs and to remark upon how much worse job opportunities, wages and hours were in
the present than the past. Many of the older members had extensive job histories, holding each
job an average of 2-4 years, but most also had fairly lengthy breaks from employment either due
to marriage, problems due to illness or injury, drug problems or problems with their children. In
more unusual cases, workers spoke of having been at previous positions for ten or eleven years
until the factory closed down or the company went out of business, or the public sector job was
eliminated. A number of the older women I interviewed were living with their grown children
and/or their children’s children. Some were raising their grandchildren because the children’s
parents were incarcerated or addicted to drugs and unable to care for them.

Many of the older members were working part-time jobs as bus aids or janitors to
supplement their social security, veterans’ administration pensions, and Medicare or Medicaid
payments, which they said did not provide enough income to live on. Many of the bus aids and
cafeteria workers spoke of filing for unemployment insurance in the summer months. The
younger members (45 years or younger) were more likely to be working more than one job
because of the part-time hours of each job, and, in general, expressed a strong preference for full-
time employment. Education levels varied. More than half of all interviewees had graduated from high school. A majority had moved between jobs in several different sectors including manufacturing, janitorial, food service, bus aid and low end health care positions. No one talked about having had a career in anything. A minority had attended some type of post-secondary program—vocational school or community college, but few had completed them.

Almost all the members I interviewed had no health insurance. The older workers were more likely to have once held jobs that provided decent health insurance whereas many of the younger members had really never had health insurance through a job and used emergency rooms for their health care or relied on some type of free care program.

Fewer than half of the people I interviewed belonged to other organizations including churches. Those who did belong to groups, most often mentioned a church, some other small (and often black-oriented) civic organization or Alcoholics or Narcotics Anonymous. About half said they had heard of BUILD before they were approached to join Solidarity. A minority of members belonged to churches that were affiliated with BUILD. Most belonged to churches that were not BUILD members. Many who mentioned going to a particular church often said they weren’t really formal members, or didn’t go every week. Whether or not they belonged to a church or attended one regularly, most viewed Solidarity’s connection to the church as a very positive thing. They said that it made them trust the organization more because they knew it was telling the truth and trying to make things better for people.

A number of Solidarity members had once belonged to a union and almost all of them said positive things. When describing what unions provided for their members, workers spoke primarily about higher wages and better benefits. Most thought it was a good idea for Solidarity to think of itself as a union. When pressed to distinguish between their experiences of belonging to a union in the past versus being a member of Solidarity, most talked about union membership as having been a much more passive relationship. Very few seemed to have ever attended union meetings and those who had, sounded more like spectators than participants; although two or three made reference to union leaders as insiders separate from the workers, “smoking cigars” etcetera, no one characterized them as corrupt. Most said the difference between their union experience and Solidarity was that Solidarity really reached out to them, involved them, asked them questions and took the time to explain things. Several said that in comparison to unions, their experience with Solidarity felt more like a conversation.
In almost every interview, when asked about why they had joined Solidarity, members cited economic as well as social reasons. Many talked about the need to raise wages, some talked about wanting to fight for the living wage at their jobs where their bosses were resisting paying it. But usually in the same breath members talked about liking to help others, wanting more respect from their bosses and enjoying the opportunity to learn new things, take part in a group and testify at City Hall or the state capitol.

In my interviews, the members of Solidarity often mentioned the need to come together because of low pay and a desire for a better life. They expressed strong kinship with other workers in Solidarity but never in occupational terms—not a single person ever said anything like we need to come together as bus aids or as cafeteria workers or janitors. The group they understood themselves to be a part of was one of workers struggling to earn better than a poverty wage.

Race as a constitutive category was mostly a silent presence in Solidarity. Racial oppression and the lack of opportunities for African-Americans to move up were specifically mentioned in BUILD’s call for a new social compact. Staff and leaders spoke often about racism playing a role in the troubled economic history of Baltimore’s black community. But when it came to most of the actual organizing, issues were framed primarily in economic and not racial terms. More interestingly, in the interviews, not many members made explicit reference to race at all, and when asked about it, most said race wasn’t important to them and that all people were basically the same. Very few members used the term racism in their interviews. But the membership of the organization was almost entirely black, and every worksite, neighborhood and church I visited in connection to the organization were overwhelmingly black as well. Solidarity events, with the exception of some staff and invited allies, were also almost entirely black affairs.

Unlike the Workplace Project whose organizational identity was always clearly Latino and where members were constantly reminded of their status as immigrants, outsiders and Latinos, Solidarity did not call itself a black organization and members weren’t outsiders—they lived in a majority African-American city. Given my emphasis on race and ethnicity in the claims I make about community unionism, what is to be made of the absence of direct reference to race among members? Is it still possible to claim that it was an important factor in Solidarity’s appeal? Solidarity grew out of BUILD and BUILD was an IAF organization made
up of religious institutions across a range of Catholic and Protestant congregations. Although many white clergy participated, the membership base of BUILD was overwhelmingly black. If race as a constitutive category was seldom spoken of by members, perhaps it was because Solidarity was so clearly a black organization. From its inception, the organization was cradled in the bosom of the black church, prominent black ministers offered the sheltering power of the church as a protection for workers new to organizing and black Christian spirituality permeated Solidarity meetings and actions. Perhaps the best explanation for why members didn’t talk about race is that they didn’t have to. Blackness and Christian-ness were in Solidarity’s bones.

Welfare Action Team

I have chosen to make some separate observations about the members of the Welfare Action Team because 1) they were specifically contacted by organizers because of their common link as women on welfare and students at Baltimore Community College and 2) because their responses differed from those of the workers I have discussed in the preceding section.

Of the eight women I interviewed, six had grown up in poverty in inner city neighborhoods, primarily in Baltimore. The other two grew up in more stable, working class, albeit still poor, families but had been downwardly mobile during their adult lives. Many of the jobs their parents held and companies their parents worked for had long since ceased to exist. Most had been born to teenage mothers often raised by grandmothers and great grandmothers, and almost all had children at a very young age. About half mentioned that their parents or themselves had had serious drug and alcohol problems. Many had been witnesses to or victims of domestic violence in their families of origin or in their sexual relationships. Several mentioned that a family member had been murdered. Many struggled to hold steady jobs or to regularly attend school because of the demands of single motherhood, which often included caring for children with debilitating health conditions. Many of the interviewees had multiple health problems of their own.

A number of the women were not attending community college for the first time, having tried to go in the past but having been forced to drop out for one reason or another. Most had been on and off welfare at various points and had worked a wide variety of jobs from slinging fast food at Kentucky Fried Chicken and cleaning toilets at the Baltimore/Washington Airport to sewing flags, bathing suits and coats at the London Fog factory.
All of them had been through previous incarnations of workfare programs that they mostly disliked. Their main complaint was that their “training” consisted of carrying out tasks they already knew how to do like cleaning a floor or changing the sheets on a bed. They all spoke of going for an associate’s degree as their ticket to getting off welfare and landing a decent job.

Half of the women I spoke with had belonged to other organizations and taken part in other activist groups before joining the Welfare Action Team and becoming involved in Solidarity. With the other half, it was just the opposite: they had never belonged to anything before Solidarity, and said things like “I think I am registered to vote, but I’m not sure…”

Most talked about the importance of religion in their lives, and about half talked about having "been saved." In sharp contrast to the workers I discussed earlier, these women often made reference to racism. Especially when talking about the high rate of drug addiction, crime and broken families in the inner city, these women said again and again that they believed many black men had been badly damaged by racism.

Transforming the Debate in Baltimore: A New Social Compact, Re-establishing Labor Market Protections and Solidarity’s Public Policy Agenda

The more the BUILD pastors leaned about corporate subsidies and the bifurcated labor marker, the more they became convinced of the need for a campaign that would demand a new social compact. From the beginning of the campaign, the organization focused on the racial dimension of the problem. At a February 1993 meeting and press conference with 50-75 pastors, BUILD called upon the Mayor and the City Council not to vote for any subsidies unless companies agreed to three things: 1) full-time positions at living wages 2) benefits for workers 3) opportunities for training and advancement for African American service workers. Clergy at the press conference held up twenty year old press clippings of the Mayor making promises about downtown development delivering good jobs for city residents. They called upon the Mayor

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69 Placing the demand explicitly in the context of race is another departure from IAF (and for that matter, community organizing practice in general) which has generally encouraged taking on economic issues as a way to bring constituencies together.
and the Board of Estimates\textsuperscript{70} to cut off any future subsidy to developers until hotels and office buildings agreed to negotiate on the social compact.

While BUILD was unsuccessful in getting the Mayor or the city council to cut the subsidies, they did discover that the city itself was a major source of contracts. At that point, the organization began to target these city contracts, which included custodial work at schools recreation centers and sports arenas, and food services at school cafeterias. The organization decided that if it could not get the city to cut off subsidies to downtown developers, they could demand that the city mandate that municipal service contractors pay what they termed a "living wage".\textsuperscript{71}

The contracting out of municipal jobs was a natural focus for another reason. In terms of wages, benefits and opportunities for training and upward advancement, public sector jobs for the African American population of Baltimore were in many ways the equivalent of blue collar manufacturing jobs -- and privatization had decimated them.\textsuperscript{72} The reduction of public sector jobs had been taking place for more than twenty-five years. In 1971, the City of Baltimore had 38,082 total salaried and per diem positions, by 1980 this number was down to 34,835 by 1987 it was 28,786 and by 1998 it was 25,904.\textsuperscript{73} These jobs, by and large, had been contracted out to private companies which took over the administration and delivery of city services.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{70} The City of Baltimore now has three citywide elected offices: Comptroller, Council President and Mayor. The Board of Estimates must approve every contract over a few thousand dollars. It meets weekly, and is made up of the Mayor, the President of the City Council who chairs it, the Comptroller, the head of Public Works, the City Solicitor and one other mayoral appointee. Thus the Mayor has a built-in majority on the Board. The Baltimore City Council is elected by district. It has 18 members in 6 districts. There is one at-large seat and that person runs citywide to be President of the City Council. It is a strong mayoral system. The City Council can subtract from, but cannot add to the budget. It cannot independently appropriate funds independent of a recommendation from the Mayor. The City Council meets weekly as well, but the Mayor does not attend those meetings.

\textsuperscript{71} In answer to a question about where the term "living wage" came from, Lange recalled: "‘We didn’t want to use the term ‘minimum’ because we didn’t feel that people should be at a minimum wage. So we were trying to decide between a ‘family wage’ and a ‘living wage.’ When we were going around getting to know workers, one of our questions was ‘can you make a living here?’ and I have some vague recollection that ‘family wage’ sounded like Jerry Falwell. We didn’t want to say ‘what is the minimum’ people can survive on, and family wage had these connotations, so ‘living wage’ made sense. We didn’t really define what it meant for a long time...” Interview November 1996. The original living wage movement in the United States grew out of the national railroad strike of 1877, according to historian Lawrence Glickman, as quoted in Robert Pollin and Stephanie Luce, \textit{The Living Wage: Building a Fair Economy}, New York: The New Press: (1998): 27.

\textsuperscript{72} Also, regulations that barred discrimination in hiring created opportunities for upward mobility in the public sector that were much less available to Blacks in the private sector.


\textsuperscript{74} In a letter to the President and members of the City Council introducing his 1998 budget, Mayor Schmoke wrote: “As we cope with harsh fiscal realities, we will have to make tough choices about the kind of City workforce we can support. We already have reduced the size of City government from 30,000 to 25,904 employees (which of course
BUILD, knowing that AFSCME had been looking for ways to stem privatization, worked with them to develop the living wage proposal. AFSCME had been exploring several different municipal level strategies for enacting a local ordinance around raising wages or guaranteeing a certain minimal level of benefits to contract workers. Bob Linehard, the AFSCME attorney who worked closely with BUILD reflected: “We had been wrestling with how do we confront low wage competition in an environment that is hard to organize and where people are paid well below a living wage you could raise a family on in America today.”

AFSCME researchers observed that often contractors would provide a higher wage of $8 or $9 an hour, while eliminating healthcare and pension benefits. Despite the absence of benefits, the higher wage meant that they could retain a steady workforce and limit turnover. Linehard said, “A lot of the “savings” from privatization have come from erosion of the benefit plans which we have argued for local government is essentially a false economy, because ultimately those workers return to the government for their healthcare or sustenance in old age...If you are a low wage worker, you are going to go to a hospital if you are injured. So simply hiding costs of services or transferring them from one part of the budget to another is not really a savings.”

When the union explored the possibility of mandating the provision of benefits by statute at the municipal level, they found it legally dubious because of the problem of federal preemption of local laws. The case law was interpreted as prohibiting state or local governments from requiring private sector employers to give their workers healthcare. With the benefits strategy closed to the union, AFSCME turned its attention to wages. After further legal analysis, the union concluded that it was possible for local municipalities to set minimum wages above the federal minimum without running into problems with the federal exemption of the Fair Labor Standards Act. Linehard found a 1964 legal precedent, upheld by the Maryland Court of Appeals in 1969, in which the city of Baltimore adopted a higher minimum wage for hotels and taverns. AFSCME realized that statutes like these could even

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includes the public school system employees) between 1989 and 1997...To reduce the workforce even more drastically may be self-defeating...”

75 Specifically, the Supreme Court ruled that ERISA, the federal law passed in 1974 which regulates private sector, employer-provided health and benefit plans, preempted a Washington, D.C. statute that had required private sector employers to maintain health insurance benefits at the same level for employees who became injured and were out of work on workman’s compensation. Writing for the majority, Judge Thomas argued that ERISA’s preemptive powers were sweeping and placed limits the power of local governments to require private sector employers to provide health insurance or retirement plans to their employees.
include a provision that allowed employers to get an offset if they provided benefits -- without running into the ERISA exemption problem.

Over the next year, BUILD held 3 large-scale actions targeted at the city leadership, and the Mayor in particular. In June of 1993, BUILD turned out 1100 people to Enon Baptist Church on the West Side of Baltimore, to pressure Mayor Kurt Schmoke to sign onto their demand for a new social contract including full-time jobs, payment of a living wage, as well as provision of benefits and opportunities for training and upward mobility. Workers gave testimony about the need for the new social contract. One had held a full-time job at a downtown department store for a dozen years before she was terminated and replaced with two part-time workers. Another was a full-time mental health worker officially classified as temporary, paid low wages and employed by a sub-contractor of the state of Maryland. A third had been cleaning rooms in a downtown hotel for twenty years and had never earned more than $5.50 an hour.

Schmoke didn’t say yes and he didn’t say no. He said: “I support the principles of a social contract. I believe it will be good for business. I intend to do all I can--within the limits of the law--to achieve this social contract.” BUILD viewed the meeting as the opening gambit in a longer term campaign. It was a success, BUILD thought, in so far as it had polarized the issue--downtown developers against neighborhood people--and positioned Mayor Schmoke between the two with the unspoken understanding that the mayor’s close election had depended very much upon the constituents represented in the church that evening.

On November 21, 1993, 125 members of Solidarity presented testimony to the Mayor about the need for higher wages. The following evening, BUILD held an action with 2,000 people at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in the Inner Harbor area of downtown Baltimore. Leaders called upon the Mayor and the City Council to cut off subsidies to developers until they agreed to negotiate on the terms of the social compact: payment of a living wage, increasing the numbers of minority employees in upper level management and provision of a pool of public and private money for benefits and training. The political context of the action was significant

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76 A co-worker of his spoke to the writer William Greider that evening showing him her paycheck and her food stamps as a graphic illustration of the way that state employment policy is fostering welfare dependency. Greider pointed out in a piece for the Rolling Stone “...the contradiction eventually catches up with taxpayers: What they save by reducing an agency budget eventually winds up raising the cost of welfare. The same principle applies to businesses exploiting part-time workers--they’re really pushing the costs off on the public in the form of welfare to impoverished workers.” Rolling Stone, August 19, 1993.

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because the two "targets" of the action were rivals in the mayoral election: Mayor Schmoke and City Council President Mary Pat Clarke.

Both were asked whether they would support a living wage for city contract workers and both hedged. Schmoke told the audience that he did not have the authority to raise wages on city contracts with private employers but pledged to "use the city's purchasing and investment power to achieve goals of economic justice." After the meeting, hundreds of BUILD members made their way to a number of downtown hotels, where they stood in the lobbies and decried the provision of public subsidies to employers paying low wages.

The next day, Clarke announced that she would support the living wage and introduced a bill framing the issue as the service sector equivalent of prevailing wage for city construction contracts. Several months earlier Clarke had announced her intention to run against the mayor in two years time. In deciding to support the living wage, she asked the question: "If the city can have a prevailing wage for construction workers why not for service workers?" In response, Mayor Schmoke agreed to set up a task force to explore the living wage issue with representatives of the mayor's office, the city council, BUILD, AFSCME and the SSC. This move by the mayor to set up a task force postponed Clark's bill from being brought up for a vote.

The task force placed the clergy and lay leadership of BUILD on equal footing with the new low wage leaders of Solidarity and put both groups of leaders into regular contact with AFSCME. With the task force "it became no longer necessary to sell the BUILD leadership on the idea of working with the union or standing by low wage workers, said Katherine O'Toole. "The core of the clergy leadership was always enlightened about how vulnerable low wage workers were and [thus why] the church needed to stand with them...but it took a little longer for relationships to develop on the lay leader side." The task force met weekly throughout the Spring and Summer of 1994 and bogged down in the Fall. According to Jonathan Lange "What 'unstuck' it was our show of political muscle doing voter turnout in the 1994 election."

The First Victory: Right to Organize

A turning point in the social compact effort came on June 25, 1994, when Mayor Schmoke came to a meeting of 150 Solidarity members. After hearing of workers being told by a local city contractor that they would lose their jobs if they attended the meeting, he pledged to
protect the right to organize for city service workers. The company, Johnson Controls, had a number of contracts with the city to provide maintenance, cafeteria and security workers at 12 city schools. Jonathan Lange recounted the story:

We were doing heavy organizing of school custodians at the time when Schmoke was in the middle of his privatization experiment... In the Summer of '92, Mayor Schmoke announced a partial privatization of the Baltimore public school system. He signed a contract Educational Alternatives Incorporated (EAI) that permitted them to take over management of several schools. The first thing EAI did was hire Johnson Controls to do cleaning and maintenance, and they offered the janitors at those schools the option of staying on. Through attrition the union lost a number of positions, so people either transferred out or had the right to work for EAI.

Given that Solidarity was already targeting school custodians, they went to talk to the Johnson Controls employees as well. Lange remembered: "A couple of managers overreacted and sent spies to our meetings, did captive audience speeches threatening firing--which violated the National Labor Relations Act in a major way. We knew we could take this complaint to Schmoke because we knew that the last thing he wanted in a controversial experiment like this was a big labor problem." Instead of publicly criticizing the Mayor over this issue, Solidarity invited him to Union Baptist for a meeting. "At the pre-meeting with the Mayor, some of the workers told stories from Johnson Controls and a couple of the pastors sat in," Lange recounted. "The Mayor said that he was very moved by the stories and very angry and that night he publicly announced to those custodians that he would introduce a resolution the following Wednesday at the next Board of Estimates meeting to put a stop to what Johnson Controls was doing. It might have turned out differently if it had not been Johnson Controls in the middle of the Mayor's EAI experiment, on the other hand, the Mayor was very moved by the stories and clearly angry about the situation."  

At the meeting, other Solidarity workers related similar experiences with their own employers, including Broadway Services Inc., a subsidiary of Johns Hopkins Hospital and University, which, with 800 janitors, was the largest cleaning contractor in the City. At the end of the meeting, Schmoke was asked to take a position on several issues. He agreed to back the

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77 James Bock, "BUILD accuses Schmoke of hiding behind legalities in downtown pay fight" *Baltimore Sun*: 38.
78 The AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute placed a number of interns with the campaign for the summer, who concentrated on going out and doing a series of one-on-one meetings with custodians across the City.
right to organize and to penalize any company doing business with the city that interfered with their workers’ efforts. He also agreed to sign into law by October a “prevailing wage” ordinance that would require that service workers involved in city government work be paid at a higher rate than that mandated by the federal minimum wage law, although he would not commit to a specific increase for workers on city contracts. Finally, Schmoke agreed to make unannounced visits to city contractors to investigate complaints of custodians.

Shortly after the meeting, Mayor Schmoke also hired two workers onto the city payroll who had been fired for organizing. Solidarity leader Valerie Bell was one of the workers fired: “They fired Virginia Johnson and me…and the day we went down to the Board of Estimates to speak about what happened, all the local t.v. stations covered our testimony. The mayor asked if we wanted to work, and we told him ‘yes.’ We were both given jobs with the City. Now I make enough money to be able to take care myself and go to the movies if I want to.”

Solidarity achieved its first public policy victory in the summer of 1994, when the City Board of Estimates passed a Right to Organize resolution. The resolution affirmed existing city policy but clarified how that policy applied to contractors:

...The following policy, which has always been applicable to City contracts, be formally adopted by this Board to apply to all City contractors, subcontractors and their agents and employees... 1. Contractors, subcontractors and their agents and employees may not engage in unfair labor practices as defined under The National Labor Relations Act and applicable federal regulations and state laws. 2. Contractors, subcontractors, and their agents may not threaten, harass, intimidate or in any way impede persons employed by them on their own time exercise their rights to associate, speak, organize, or petition governmental officials with their grievances.

By affirming the right of contract workers to organize, and putting a clear policy in place to deny city contracts to contractors who have labor law violations, the municipal Right to Organize resolution became the first pillar of a new labor market regulatory regime in Baltimore. This first public policy step made it possible for low wage contract workers to begin to assert some control over the terms and conditions of their work.

The legal standing of a municipal level Right to Organize law was not clear to Solidarity or to the City of Baltimore. While some legal experts argue that local labor laws would be pre-

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79 Interview with Jonathan Lange, June 8, 1998.
80 Interview with Valerie Bell, November 12, 1996.
empted by federal laws, they have never been tested. Furthermore, Baltimore’s law is not so much focused on enforcing labor laws as preventing labor law violators from receiving city contracts—a right cities do seem to possess, and certainly one they’ve exercised historically through the Davis/Bacon Act regarding prevailing wage and it’s local equivalents.

Although Solidarity organizers and leaders were not fearful of a possible legal challenge, they focus more on the cultural or environmental impact of the city going on record in support of the right to organize. “I can go to work without fearing I’ll be kicked out” one worker told the Baltimore Sun, “The mayor made me feel I have more grounds I can stand on” said a school custodian who had been told by his employer not to get involved in Solidarity.\(^{81}\)

While fear of employer retaliation has always been a major hindrance to successful unionization efforts, the confidence the Mayor's announcement gave Solidarity's rank and file was especially important given how much more sophisticated and intensive employer opposition to union drives has become. In a 1988 Gallup survey, 71% of the workers who expressed overall approval of unions agreed that “Corporations sometimes harass, intimidate or fire employees who speak out for a union.” In 1994, the Worker Representation and Participation Survey by Freeman and Rogers found that 79% of workers surveyed thought it likely that workers who seek union representation will lose their jobs.

Some researchers have argued that fear not only plays a role in defeating unionization drives once they are started, but likely also leads workers otherwise favorably disposed to unions, to look unfavorably on the idea of being part of a union effort in the first place. Cohen and Hurd argue that employers use fear in a variety of ways. They fire the leaders of organizing campaigns to make an example of them to other workers. They hold “captive audience” meetings where they try to discredit the leaders, make clear that more retaliation will be forthcoming against other workers if they support the fired workers, and they tell workers that the facility is likely to close if the union is voted in. Cohen and Hurd conclude that “aversion to conflict provides a significant explanation for the hesitancy to organize among workers who are otherwise favorably disposed towards unions.”\(^{82}\)

Statistically speaking, the firing of workers during union drives has become so commonplace that it is a predictable feature of union organizing drives. In a study conducted by

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\(^{81}\)Baltimore Sun, Section B Sunday, June 26, 1994.

\(^{82}\)Larry Cohen and Richard Hurd, "Fear Conflict and Union Organizing" paper draft, 1996.
Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University, 32% of private sector employers fire workers “who are active in helping other workers join together in unions.”\(^8^3\) This same study found that 75% of private sector employers aggressively oppose workers’ unions. While Weiler estimated that in 1980, one worker was fired for every twenty workers voting for union representation, more recent estimates indicate that close to one union supporter in eight are fired during an organizing drive.\(^8^4\)

Historically, the trend has been decidedly toward greater and greater employer interference in workers’ right to organize. In 1950, 5,619 certification elections were held and 4,472 charges were filed against employers, 3,213 of which were specifically for 8(a)(3) charges.\(^8^5\) The number of these cases found meritorious was not available, but 2,259 backpay awards were made. In 1960, 6,380 certification elections were held and 7,723 charges were filed against employers, 6,044 of which were specifically for 8(a)(3) charges. Of these, 29% were found to be meritorious and 3,110 workers received backpay awards. In 1980, 7,296 certification elections were held and 31,281 charges were filed against employers, 18,315 of which were specifically for 8(a)(3) charges. Of these, 35.7% were found meritorious and 15,642 backpay awards were made. In 1995, 3,125 certification elections were held and 26,244 charges were filed against employers, 13,298 of which were specifically for 8(a)(3) charges. Of these, 37.5% were found meritorious and 26,286 backpay awards were made.\(^8^6\)

According to a General Accounting Office survey of workers dismissed for union organizing activities, about half reported that their financial situation had worsened and a majority said that the dismissal made it more difficult for them to find a job in the community.

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\(^8^4\) According to an unpublished draft report of the AFL-CIO, "Report of Workers Dismissed During Organizing Campaigns:" "In 1995, 13,298 cases were filed under Section 8(a)(3) of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). About a quarter of unfair labor practice cases were dismissed while one-third were withdrawn before a decision or settlement is reached. Also in that year 6,603 workers were offered reinstatement. Since many workers who are illegally fired are not offered reinstatement, a more reasonable estimate of workers fired during organizing drives is 12,000 (low estimate). We also know that about 100,000 workers voted for union representation in NLRB elections in 1995. Thus about one of every eight workers supporting unions is dismissed during organizing drives.\(^8^5\) Section 8(a)(3) of the NLRA states that it is an Unfair Labor Practice for employers to dismiss workers or in any other way discriminate to discourage membership in any labor organization.

Dismissed workers spent an average of 16 weeks unemployed before they were either reinstated or found other jobs. Most state unemployment laws do not cover workers fired for engaging in union organizing efforts who have ULP charges pending.

According to Bronfenbrenner, 80% of employers hire professional consultants to fight workers' unions; 91% hold mandatory, closed door, one-on-one meetings with employees to attack workers' unions and 50% threaten to eliminate all workers' jobs if they join together in a union. Another study by Bronfenbrenner and Juravitch found that "...the intensity of the employer campaign was associated with significantly lower union win rates. Unions won only 39% of the NLRB campaigns where employers used more than five union avoidance tactics." 88

The Baltimore ordinance, affirming the right to organize for city contract workers is especially significant because contract workers work for private sector employers doing public sector work—which before the era of privatization was carried out by city workers. Bronfenbrenner and Juravitch find that "private sector employers are six times more likely than public sector employers to commit unfair labor practices such as discharges for union activities, and more than twice as likely to use other tactics such as captive-audience meetings, employer leaflets and mailings, supervisor one-on-ones, and illegal wage increases." In state and local public sector units, unions are winning 85% of certification elections.

Local government coming out on the side of workers' right to organize runs counter to the role the state has played over the past several decades. Many scholars of American labor law cite passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 as one of the critical moments when state policy became much less favorable to union organizing efforts. The law banned "most forms of secondary economic pressures by unions" or "attempts to influence one party by exerting pressure on others who deal with that party." 89 It also gave employers greatly expanded rights to speak directly to the workers about the union, over the course of NLRB election campaigns.

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89 According to Betty Justice: "A primary employer is one with which a union deals concerning the rights of its employees. A secondary employer is any other employer that a union involves in a labor dispute where there is no question or dispute concerning that employer's treatment of its own employees. Frequently, secondary employers are implicated in a dispute between a union and a primary employer because the secondary employer is associated with the primary employer... The law protects the secondary employer from pressures that would compel it to use its
According to Goldfield: "It strengthened the injunctive powers of the courts and increased the severity of the penalties that could be imposed on unions, while giving minimum punishments for violations by companies." Taft-Hartley banned wildcat strikes and made unions liable for damages. The law also barred "economic" strikers from voting in certification elections but allowed replacement workers to do so. "It banned sit-downs, slow-downs and closed shops...Most significant was the granting to employers of the right to campaign vigorously against unions."

The passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 placed further restrictions on union organizing efforts, banning the use of "hot cargo" agreements in which one employer agrees not to handle the products of another employer involved in a labor dispute. Goldfield also argues that unions continued to lose ground in the 1970's, when there was an increase in "the use of what some would consider loopholes in labor relations laws. These include...increased employer campaigning...also extreme legal maneuvering solely for the purpose of delay and a greater willingness of employers to accept the negligible penalties for large scale violations of the law."

Finally, he argues that the NLRB as an institution became more conservative over time. Solidarity believed that stabilization of the low-wage labor market was a prerequisite for organizing it. Gaining the right to organize was the first step. Winning the fight for a Living Wage was the next.

The Living Wage Victory

Although they were pleased with the right to organize victory, BUILD and Solidarity leaders did not feel that Mayor Schmoke was getting closer to supporting a living wage ordinance. That summer, they also became increasingly concerned that a very conservative republican, Mary Sauerbrey, had a real chance to be elected governor of Maryland against a liberal democrat, Parris Glendenning.

For BUILD's partner in Solidarity, AFSCME, Sauerbrey's election would have been a disaster. Glendenning had pledged to support collective bargaining for state employees, and AFSCME was poised after his election to organize tens of thousands of state workers into the power against the primary employer." Betty W. Justice, Unions, Workers and the Law (Washington D.C.: The Bureau of National Affairs, 1983):155.

union. They also believed that Sauerbrey’s election would be terrible for BUILD’s constituency. They knew that Glendenning was relying upon a big African-American voter turnout in Baltimore that was not there—we knew on the street that there was this terrible ambivalence about this election, people didn’t know him, some didn’t like him...” Mayor Schmoke, who had promised a big turnout was out of town for much of the summer and although his top operative was working on the campaign, Lange and Graf were unconvinced that Schmoke was capable of transferring his base to someone else, especially a candidate for whom there was little enthusiasm among black voters.

As the race continued to narrow, BUILD decided to help Glendenning. The organization felt that if it could deliver a large part of Baltimore County for him, he would probably win. While some organizers and leaders were certainly reluctant, they all came to the conclusion that it was in the organization’s self interest to help Glendenning. Before they put anything into motion, they asked him to appear before the top leadership of BUILD and other Maryland IAF affiliates to pledge support for their agenda. Glendenning, having made the same political calculus as Graf and Lange, was anxious to meet, and he agreed to their agenda in its entirety.

In the end, Glendenning had to agree to meet with them three times. BUILD decided to do an intensive voter education effort for the next four weeks in a large number of precincts, which included phone calling and door-knocking conducted by a core of 350 people. In keeping with their organizational philosophy—"we don’t endorse candidates, candidates endorse us"--BUILD never formally endorsed Glendenning. Instead, they publicized the candidates’ positions on various issues, which made it clear that the Governor was the better candidate on their issues. In one of the closest elections in Maryland history, Glendenning won the gubernatorial race by approximately 5,000 votes. One year later, the governor issued an executive order for state employees to achieve collective bargaining. The order required AFSCME to collect 30% of each bargaining unit’s membership on authorization cards, once they did that, they were allowed to petition for an election. They petitioned for election in five units and won all five elections. While these election victories authorized the union to bargain a contract on behalf of 27,000 workers, the workers did not automatically become members of the union -- AFSCME still had to go back and recruit them to join the union.

As the Living Wage emerged as one of the major issues in the Fall mayoral race, Schmoke began to reconsider his position. Initially cool to the idea, Schmoke had come round,
Solidarity organizers believed, in part because of their demonstration of political muscle during the Governor's race. During the mayoral contest, BUILD was able to play Schmoke and city council president Mary Pat Clarke off against each other and use the tension of the race to get the living wage ordinance passed. The ordinance, proposed by Clarke, received preliminary approval from the city council on October 24, 1994. 91 The ordinance raised the minimum wage for service and professional contractors doing business with the City by 44%, from $4.45 to $6.10 an hour and built in incremental increases over the next four years. The new wages would take effect as contracts were renewed. But after the vote of the city council in October, Schmoke threatened to veto the measure because it specified a wage rate, which he believed was the responsibility of the city Board of Estimates and had to be based upon an appraisal of the city’s finances. Schmoke raised concerns about costs to the City, arguing that contractors would pass their increased labor costs on to the City in the form of higher bids. In addition, Schmoke wanted only those contracts included that were direct city contracts for services--for example he cited the inclusion of firms with professional management contracts, and wanted to exempt professional management contract like those at the Baltimore Arena and other sports venues. 92

In December, Schmoke proposed a compromise whereby the bill would go back to the City Council and the specific amount of the wage increase would be removed while the goal of getting the wage to $7.70 over four years would be preserved. Mary Pat Clarke recalled: “The mayor did what he always does. First, he says it’s illegal. Second, he says we can’t afford it. Third, he says we will do it but not by law. ‘I will just do it. I am the mayor.’ When we said ‘we want a law,’ he said ‘well, I’ll veto it.’ When we pass the law, he signs it!” According to Clarke, the mayor’s financial staff were assigned to figure out how much it would cost the city, but came up with numbers based upon three year contracts. However, at the time, these numbers were taken to be annual fiscal impact and created a strong reaction until the error was discovered.

As the days unfolded, it became clear that the Mayor, not the business community, was the major stumbling block. "There wasn’t much opposition," Clarke recalled. "It was all from

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91 The political nature of the debate was clear throughout, as the Baltimore Sun reported “The measure, approved by the City Council October 31, was sponsored by council president Mary Pat Clarke, who has announced she will run against the Mayor next year. And the bill is backed by Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD) which includes many prominent African American ministers who have always supported Mr. Schmoke in elections.” Harold Jackson, Baltimore Sun, December 10, 1994.

92 Ibid.
the mayor... What did business care if we built in a minimum wage in our service contracts? If we put it in the bid, they would build it into their bid—so what is it to them? It is our money.”

There were service contractors who did object to the proposed law on the grounds that they could not pay the higher wage. Dorothy White, owner of Miracle Services Incorporated raised this point at the City Council hearing: “Paying more may get me better workers, but if the City is not going to pay us more, then we can’t afford it...The City doesn’t want to pay us any more money. When bids are so low, how can we raise employee pay?” But other contractors disagreed: Tom McGowan, President of Broadway Services told the Baltimore Sun that he believed that companies would “find ways to absorb the increased wages so that they can remain competitive for city contracts.”

Although BUILD eventually agreed to a version of this compromise, Kathleen O’Toole articulated the organization’s objections. She was concerned that goal oriented legislation which did not specify an initial pay increase would be ignored by city officials when they began writing new budgets. O’Toole, noting that city law already required that prevailing wages for construction workers employed by private employers on city projects be set each year, argued: “The construction workers’ prevailing wage does not become a captive of the budget process. Why should low paid African-American workers be treated any differently?”

On December 13, 1994 the City Council signed the compromise version of the living wage ordinance into law, followed by the Board of Estimates on December 14th. The law stated in part: “The ongoing goal is to achieve a rate which exceeds the poverty level as defined in the index.” It also stated that, “as a matter of policy it is a continuing goal to submit bids based on a 40 hour work week for service workers.” It required companies bidding for service contracts after July 1, 1995 to pay employees on city jobs at least $6.10 an hour and put into motion three annual increases, $6.60 by July of ‘97, $7.10 for July of ‘98 to $7.70 an hour for July of 1999. (It is important to note that the organization has had to go back and mobilize for each of these incremental increases.)

The ordinance set the contract wage at 110% of the poverty income for a family of four, assuming a forty hour work week. To ensure compliance, service contractors were required by the bill to submit payroll records to the Board of Estimates as well as to post wage schedules at job sites. The ordinance included a $50 per worker per day fine for non-payment of the wage. It
also stipulated that “on recommendation of the Wage Commission, when a service contractor has paid fines on more than 3 service contracts in a 2 year period, the Board of Estimate may prohibit a service contract vendor from participating in the bid process for up to three years.”

In the months following its passage, some “republicization” of privatized services did occur as a result of the living wage ordinance. In May of 1995, the Baltimore Afro-American reported that 63 school custodial jobs affecting 6 Baltimore schools “officially went from the private sector back to the public sector, as part of a move by the City that will likely phase out all private contractors who took over city jobs cleaning Baltimore schools some 20 years ago.” The Board of Estimates chose not to renew city contracts with Miracle Services and Aramark and instead to return the work to city employees. As a result of the change, wages for these custodians increased to $8.64 an hour, and for the first time workers were given sick leave, vacation, and healthcare benefits. They also became members of the AFSCME city workers’ local.

In conversations with foundations and other organizers after the living wage victory, Lange always said that while passage of the new law represented Solidarity’s first victory, it was made possible through the borrowed power of BUILD: “We won the living wage fight on the power of BUILD, not the fledgling worker association power, although we did include the service workers at every step. They fought their way on to the Mayor’s’ task force…they organized meetings with city council members in their districts. Yet when push came to shove, it was BUILD -- and specifically BUILD pastors -- that had to push the Mayor and the City Council President to get a bill passed and signed.”

Baltimore’s living wage campaign struck a chord among economic justice organizers across the country and touched off a national movement. In the months after Baltimore’s victory, similar efforts got underway in scores of cities and local communities across the country. By May of 2001, six and a half years later, there were forty-eight city ordinances and ten county ordinances on the books. Living wage laws had been passed in Miami, Los Angeles, San Antonio, Boston, St. Louis, Cleveland, Omaha, Hartford, Denver and scores of other cities. Campaigns were pending in close to one hundred more cities and counties.

Interestingly, most of the living wage campaigns have been lead, not by the IAF, but by another national community organizing network: ACORN the Associated Communities

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City Council Bill #716
Organized for Reform Now. For the organizers of BUILD and Solidarity, the living wage campaign was really viewed as a tactic or means to the end of organizing low wage workers and not as an end in itself. It was one of many tactics they were pursuing to try to identify low wage workers who wanted to be part of an organization. At first they were perplexed by all the attention and interest on the part of organizers in other cities, in what was for them, just a tactic. In fact, they worried that a lot of the workers they were trying to organize were not covered by the living wage ordinance. It took them a long while to realize that what they had hit upon was really much more than a tactic. Living wage became a powerful slogan and living wage campaigns became a powerful vehicle for raising core questions about economic decision-making at the local level. Most campaigns in most cities have ended up covering a modest number of workers. In the final analysis, perhaps the living wage campaigns’ most powerful contribution has been to introduce a new way of talking about low wage work into the public discourse.

Solidarity and BUILD mounted campaigns for each increase of the living wage. Lange recounted, “We had to mobilize in December of 1995 to get the step up to $6.60 by July 1996, we had to do it again in December of ’96 to get the raise to $7.10 for July of 1997 and we...succeeded in getting it raised to $7.70 for July 1998.” After July of 1998, the policy was that the wage would be tethered to 110% of what it takes to bring a family of four above the poverty line in the Baltimore standard metropolitan statistical area, assuming 2000 hours of fulltime work a year. In July of 2000 it rose to $8.03, 55% higher than the federal minimum wage of $5.15 an hour. By statute, the Living Wage was to be automatically adjusted each year. In addition, the organization began to look for ways to extend the Living Wage to a larger number of workers.

The campaign for the first step increase was the one that Solidarity leaders worried most about because of the fiscal situation of the City, but Mayor Schmoke had pledged to support the increase during his re-election campaign “So we had the tension of the election to help get commitments for the next increment of $6.60 from $6.10," said Lange. "Schmoke honored the commitment, and did it after the election.” From Lange’s perspective, fighting successfully for the first increase was the most crucial because Solidarity had to prove that it could mobilize and raise these issues every year and that the living wage campaign was not a one time thing that could be dropped by the City.
If the Right to Organize and the Living Wage were the first two foundation stones put in place to stabilize Baltimore’s low-wage work force, then gaining the right for workers to hold onto their jobs when contracts changed hands, was the third.

Right of First Refusal

In the Spring of 1995 Solidarity won its next local policy victory with the passage by the Board of Estimates of a Right of First Refusal ordinance. The new ordinance gave contract workers with records of good job performance the right to stay on the job when contracts changed hands. This was another means of stabilizing the contract workforce, something that Lange felt strongly was a necessary prerequisite for organizing them, otherwise every time a contractor lost a contract, workers would lose their jobs and Solidarity would be back at the beginning in terms of organizing at the worksite. The ordinance required the Board of Estimates to include the following language in future bids:

To the extent that it is not in conflict with collective bargaining or other labor agreements, and it is not in conflict with labor law, all contractors bidding on a service contract shall develop a plan to retain existing workers who meet or exceed performance standards for employment with the City. These workers shall be given first preference to be hired into any new positions which the contractor adds to his workforce for the purposes of performing the service contract.94

In the Board of Estimate proceedings, the City Council President addressed the Mayor saying: “...we will adopt this language. We will do so because SSC has persuasively made the point that a person owns his or her work. A person who is in a school or a public building working for a contractor, who is doing a good job, deserves the right to be first in line to be hired by the next contractor, in the case that the next contractor is hiring up to fulfill the contract...” The President made another important point about the connection between the newly-minted living wage and the Right of First Refusal:

It helps to make sure that all the people who have worked for $6.10 an hour get to enjoy it, and are not subject to being hired and fired around who wins the bid.” In the aftermath of the living wage fight, Mayor Schmoke seemed to agree that the ordinance made sense, saying “I think this language that has been agreed to will be of benefit to the workers and to the City and probably to the employers also. I

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think that a lot of people [that] have concerns about it now are going to see that it is the best way to do business. 95

The next November, Solidarity continued its successful efforts to stabilize the contract work force when it worked with the Board of Estimate to adopt a policy that gave preference to retaining existing service workers “whenever a private contract for services is terminated and a decision is made to employ permanent workers to perform such services in-house.” 96

Taking on Welfare Reform: The Non-Displacement Campaign

On the strength of its victories, Solidarity was ready to expand its organizing efforts among Baltimore's working poor. But in the Spring of 1996, this ambition was stopped cold by the Federal welfare reform bill which threatened to flood the Baltimore workforce with many thousands of $1.50/hr workers.

Over the Spring and Summer of 1996, Solidarity members spent quite a bit of time in Washington D.C., the “poster children” for a successful campaign to raise the federal minimum wage. In November of 1996, buoyant Solidarity leaders held a meeting with Mayor Schmoke to discuss implementation of the second increment of the path-breaking living wage. But at the meeting, the Mayor told the group that as a result of the sweeping federal welfare reform act, (formally known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996) he would have to place 17,000 workfare workers in City jobs by October of 1997. In a meeting a few days later, the Governor’s office confirmed Mayor Schmoke’s numbers.

The new law abolished the federal entitlement of the poor to cash assistance as well as the requirement that states provide direct cash assistance to the poor. It required states to begin operating a new program of assistance to poor families funded under the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant program. The law set a lifetime time limit of five years and allowed states to set shorter time limits. It also limited food stamp assistance to three months unless the recipient is engaged in work or job training. Most significant for Solidarity was the new law’s work requirements: recipients were required to work in exchange for assistance, and states were required to steadily increase the number of welfare workers and

96 Board of Estimates proceedings, November 15, 1995.
work slots or face penalties. Individuals receiving aid for more than two months were required to find a community service job and every welfare recipient was mandated to participate in 20 hours a week of work-related activities within two years of receiving TANF assistance. The penalties for non-compliance (excluding parents with children under the age of 6) included reduction or termination of assistance.

Solidarity already believed that the new federal law was punitive, but the conversation with the mayor confirmed their suspicion that the work requirements in the law would reverse the gains low wage service workers in Baltimore had made through the organization’s efforts. Within weeks of the meeting, the impact of the law was already being felt by Solidarity. The City canceled contracts with custodial companies who were cleaning several schools and paying or about to begin paying the living wage to their workers, and replaced them with welfare recipients required to perform “work experience” for $1.50 an hour.

To comply with TANF, the State of Maryland created a welfare-to-work program that provided powerful incentives to employers to participate. The “work experience” program allowed employers to place welfare recipients in jobs in which their only compensation would be their welfare check combined with an employer-paid stipend of up to $30 a week. The “grant diversion” program allowed the state to send a recipient’s check straight to the employer who could then pay the recipient at minimum wage with the recipient’s own money. Employers were also eligible for a combined tax credit of $5700 for each welfare recipient hired.

Solidarity’s research determined that the federal law would require the state to put more than 13,000 “Family Investment Program” (the title of Maryland’s welfare program) clients into a “qualified work activity” compensated at a rate of $1.50 an hour within the first year. In Baltimore City, it was projected that 6,000 clients would lose their benefits if they were not working by October of 1998 despite calculations that the projected job growth in target industries amounted to about 66 jobs.

Solidarity was concerned that entry into the labor market of so many people would depress the wages they had fought so hard to raise. The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) estimated that the influx of low wage workers into the bottom third of the workforce would drive wages down by 56 cents an hour, or 9%. The organization also worried that the law would have

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97 For FY 1997, the law mandated states to have 25% of TANF recipients working and increased to 50% working at least 30 hours by FY 2002. For two parent families, the law mandated 75% with one parent working at least 20
the result of pitting low wage workers against each other. Lange decried “welfare reform by changing places” in which low wage workers would be replaced by lower wage workfare workers. Although federal law prohibits firing someone or laying them off just to hire a welfare recipient, vacancies could be filled by workfare workers and the work hours of current workers could be reduced and assigned instead to workfare workers.

BUILD pastors found especially disturbing the focus in the law on involving private agencies including churches, church agencies and other non-profits in administering the new TANF program. Churches were asked to provide services like receiving and distributing welfare checks for dependents of recipients who had exceeded the time limit, hiring welfare workers, and making up in private donations what was about to be lost in government funding. Lange recalled a meeting he had with Reverend Dobson, in which Dobson told him: “If we can’t take on this issue, what the hell have we been building for the past twenty years? We have to be in this fight.” The organization was the first in the nation to adopt the position that there be no church collaboration with the new law and to publicly call upon all clergy to resist the law. It called upon its members to refuse to be third party contractors or hire a person on welfare unless it was for a new job and paid a living wage.

AFSCME was just as concerned about the welfare law. Booth told Lange that in addition to fears that union members would be replaced by workfare workers, they were also worried that the administration of welfare itself was going to be privatized. At a meeting between Lange, Graf, Ed Chambers and Michael Gecan from the IAF and Booth and Gerald McEntee of AFSCME, McEntee asked “What is the IAF going to do about this, what is your plan? This is the number one issue for the union this year.” After the meeting, Lange and Gecan came up with the idea to meet with the Governor and tell him not to participate.

Lange scrutinized the welfare reform law closely and found that if there was a silver lining in the bill, it was in the wide discretion accorded to states in terms of its implementation. It was clear that there were measures that states could take to make the law more humane, but Lange worried about whether the political will would be there on the part of the Governor and the legislature to act: “I was trying to think about how we could carve out a position on this that would not immediately polarize the middle class against us because this thing is so popular.” Lange talked over possible campaigns with other organizers and leaders, gravitating toward the

hours a week by FY 1997 and 90% working at least 30 hours a week by FY 1999 and thereafter.
non-displacement issue as a logical place to begin: "It would appeal to the middle class because we had learned in the living wage fight no matter how conservative people are, people who are working very hard for low wages create a lot of sympathy among people who would otherwise not necessarily support government interference in markets. As much as we didn’t want to play into this, there is a notion of the worthy poor person. We thought we could lift up a person who was working really hard, and in some sense would have been financially better off on public assistance but had a strong work ethic but now were going to be the unintended, or maybe the intended victims, of this welfare policy." 98

Targeting Governor Glendenning. Solidarity and BUILD developed a campaign to ameliorate some of the effects of the new law on the working poor and welfare recipients. There were five demands:

- No Displacement: No person who is currently working should be displaced by a workfare worker and no current job should be turned into a workfare position.
- Living wage jobs: If companies hire current welfare recipients they should be hired into real jobs that pay the living wage and provide benefits.
- Labor rights: Workfare workers should be treated the same as any other worker and entitled to the same legal protections.
- 5,000 new living wage jobs: The state should take $90 million of its $450 million block grant and create 5,000 jobs at the living wage doing needed public work such as infrastructure improvements and working in the public schools.
- No church collaboration: No church, church agency or other non-profit corporation should agree to become a third party contractor or hire a person on welfare unless it is for a new job paying a living wage.

Knowing that it was swimming against the national tide of political support for welfare reform, the organization decided it had to dramatically polarize the debate.

On December 12, 1996, seventy members of the clergy along with low wage Solidarity workers and a group of workfare workers held an angry meeting with the Governor and several members of his Cabinet, to demand “non-compliance” with the law and to urge him to take the block grant money and use it to create living wage jobs. The Reverend Doug Miles’ opening statement set the tone: “When the Nazis came to power, people kept saying ‘this will not last.’

98 Interview with Jonathan Lange, 1/23/98
This welfare reform gets worse with each passing day...It is despicable that living wage workers are being replaced by urban sharecroppers--workfare workers who are forced to work for $1.50 an hour. We are here to say that the church community will not act as third party vendors...” Speaking next, a workfare worker told the Governor, “I am working for $1.50 an hour and can’t even cover my bills, doing the same work as a regular custodian. I do not want you to get the wrong idea. I like what I do but I want it to lead me to a job at a living wage. I do not want to replace someone or be pitted against someone.” She began to cry as she said “I would rather work than be on welfare. I’m trying to support my kids and myself...” Next a Broadway Services (a cleaning company owned by Johns Hopkins) custodian talked about his hopes of being covered under the living wage being dashed as some workers have been replaced by those earning $1.50 an hour. “I was hoping to keep my job and get up to the $6.60 an hour. Now a lot of us are on welfare ourselves, we don’t want to compete with workfare workers to keep our jobs. This... ‘trading places’ – we don’t want it.”

The Governor’s first words in response were: “I share your concerns about the attitude toward poor workers. I am angry about it. You know me, I came out of poverty. Government programs helped me and my family.” Again, and again, Governor Glendenning commiserated with the workers and agreed with the clergy’s objections, at one point even telling them that he had called Clinton and other Cabinet members to urge him not to sign the bill. After several minutes of his ticking off all the things he didn’t agree with about the federal bill and all the ways in which he had tried to lessen its impact, Reverend Vernon Dobson, the dean of Baltimore’s black pastors, rose to his feet and moved to polarize the meeting:

I don’t mean to cut you off, Governor. We know what you have done, but this is a defining moment for you and for us to stand up and say to the federal government this is not going to work and I don’t want to be a party to it...If you say this to the President, we will support you, no problem. You have to let the President know, there has been too much silence, but governors have a lot of influence.

After several more exchanges, Dobson said “Just say no, Governor. We wear a common garment of destiny, we are tied to one goal. You can’t fix this, it’s a scandal...say with us publicly that this law is a scandal.”

“Reverend, I agree,” Glendenning answered,
but it’s a federal law, I must obey...there are huge parts that are unworkable, I am opposed, but let me be honest among friends...This law is being urged not just by the U.S. Congress but also by the Maryland legislature, we all of us should have been fighting this past year when they were passing this bill...These things happen, I understand.

Doug Miles cut off the Governor: “Governor, today we have a press conference, stand with us...There is power in taking a stand and saying no, even though it is a federal law...saying you will have no part of it. We are asking you to stand with us...”

“I understand,” the Governor responded once again, “but I’m telling you it’s a federal law. I can’t say no to federal law...”

Suddenly, in the back of the room a woman’s voice carried above the crowd, silencing the Governor. Everyone turned to see who was speaking. It was a Catholic nun, dressed in a stark blue habit, standing and pointing at the Governor:

Governor Glendenning, slavery was once the law of the land. When the Jews were taken away to concentration camps, it was all completely legal. Are you saying that no one should have stood up and said no to those things because they were legal?

As the Governor searched for a response, Reverend Dobson and Reverend Miles rose to their feet, “We are terribly disappointed that you won’t stand with us Governor and we are ending this meeting.”

With that, seventy clergy stood and walked out of the meeting and straight into a press conference where they denounced the governor for his refusal to stand with them and went public with their pledge not to cooperate with welfare reform. Over the next few days, the Baltimore Sun ran the story on the front page, as did the Washington Post and the New York Times. The Post story read in part: “...the broad-based grassroots rebellion by what has traditionally been the most active bloc of churches in Maryland is the most forceful and organized stance yet taken by the religious community on the state level, specialists say.”

For the next few months, BUILD and Solidarity leaders documented and publicized the impact of welfare reform on living wage jobs in Baltimore, voted to recruit workfare workers into Solidarity’s ranks, and introduced in the Maryland state legislature a piece of legislation on non-displacement which would require corporations to create new jobs in order to be entitled to tax credits. Solidarity's research uncovered that the School Board had cancelled contracts and
replaced school cafeteria workers with workfare workers. It also found that the City’s largest hotel, the Omni Inner Harbor, already heavily subsidized by the City, was receiving state subsidies to hire welfare recipients to work as $30-a-week “housecleaners-in-training.” The stature the organization had earned as the pioneer of the living wage strategy ensured continuing national coverage of the state fight, as well as more invitations than the organization could possibly accept to speak at other welfare reform opponents’ strategy sessions across the country. Solidarity’s clear analysis of the issue and their creative ideas about strategy inspired new resistance to welfare reform among organizers in many parts of the nation who had become dispirited by the passage of the federal bill with what seemed to be overwhelming public support. The Baltimore campaign helped to renew organizers’ commitment and gave them clear ideas about what could be done.

In February, Solidarity, BUILD and AFSCME introduced House Bill 1140 in Annapolis to protect against displacement. The Governor’s staff testified against the bill. The next month, at the first action ever jointly organized by all the IAF affiliates in Maryland, 1300 members turned out for an action at Johns Hopkins University, the largest private employer in the City, to press their demands both on Governor Glendenning as well as the University President. Neither of the action’s two intended targets attended, but the meeting proceeded as planned. One by one, a group of leaders took turns articulating each of the organization’s demands and several workfare workers told their stories to the crowd. Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota, the only senator up for re-election to cast a vote against the federal bill was introduced by Paul Booth of AFSCME to a standing ovation. The action concluded with pledges by each of the four IAF organizations in the state to turn out specific numbers to an event in Annapolis the following month. Then the entire group marched to the University President’s house to deliver an

99 “...Solidarity was losing members because of it. The City was not renewing janitorial contracts at schools. They were bringing work back as public work and rather than giving it to AFSCME local #44, as they had done in the past when they republicized work, they were putting work experience people there to clean the schools...” Lange interview, January 23, 1998
100 Covering the story for the Washington Post, Jon Jeter wrote “During her 90-day probation, Thompson will wipe, dust and vacuum on eight-hour shifts, five days a week, the same as any other housekeeper. In return, she will get $410 a month in welfare benefits from the state and a $30 weekly stipend from the Omni Harbor Hotel. After probation, the hotel’s managers will decide whether to hire Thompson permanently for $6.10 an hour. But the company is not legally obligated to do that for her or any of the 13 temporary, taxpayer-subsidized housekeepers drawn from the city’s public assistance rolls” Jon Jeter, “Room for Working Poor In Welfare’s New Deal? Job Training Program Aggravates Labor Tensions at Baltimore Hotel” Washington Post, March 16, 1997.
invitation to him to join a group of leaders for a luncheon discussion at the prestigious Hopkins Club. A few days later the organizations had their first major victory when Johns Hopkins Health Systems, the state’s largest private employer pledged not to “...engage in the practice of displacing workers with trainees in...any...welfare to work program,” and agreed to consider “a meaningful increase in hourly pay rates” for low wage workers employed at contractors providing services to the company.102

In April the organizations went to Annapolis to “find” the Governor and succeeded in getting a commitment from him to meet in May. On May 3rd, Governor Glendenning finally met again with representatives of the IAF, telling them “Displacement is wrong. It’s unethical and illegal and we’re going to make sure it doesn’t happen in the State of Maryland...”103 and agreeing to “issue an executive order barring employers from hiring taxpayer subsidized welfare recipients to replace workers already on the job.”104 After some difficulties and disagreements that almost derailed an agreement, the Governor issued the executive order on June 30105 106

For Lange,

The most important thing we got was protection for seasonal workers, somebody that has to be rehired every year like a bus aid or food service worker. Prior to the executive order it would not have been considered displacement to rehire them and instead put a welfare worker in there. That was important to us because the majority of Solidarity members and thousands of others across the state would have been displaced...

School Counts

The non-displacement campaign brought Solidarity’s constituency of the working poor into relationship with welfare recipients in the state’s workfare program. It raised the

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105 The State of Maryland Executive Department, Executive Order 01.01.1997.03 “Preventing Displacement of Workers by the Family Investment Program”, June 30th, 1997.
106 Louis Uchitelle of the New York Times wrote “Two other states, Illinois and Minnesota, have adopted similar rules, but Maryland was the first to act in response to protests from low wage workers.” “Maryland Order Limits Hiring Of People in Workfare Programs” New York Times, July 1st, 1997.
consciousness of Solidarity's membership about the welfare recipients who participated in the welfare to work programs and resulted in an organizational decision to open its ranks to them. Lange said, “After that victory, part of what we decided was: if we were going to stay legitimate in this issue, we had to go organize people from the other side -- people being exploited by the new welfare law being forced into the labor market under the threat of losing benefits.”

Over the next few months, Lange and Glassman, along with Sister Loretta at Saint Veronica’s and Bill Pastreich of the AFL-CIO (and a veteran welfare rights organizer), held one-on-one's and house meetings with welfare recipients, many in public housing projects. In addition, Glassman had been building committees at several sites including the Hopkins medical campus; Coppin State College, a historically black college in west Baltimore; and Baltimore Community College. They held their first action in October, hoping to turn out 75 people. More than 150 attended.

One thing that was said over and over again was that the workfare program and its previous incarnations, while billed as “worker training”, didn’t really teach workers new skills and were really just used as a source of cheap labor by employers. At meetings, Solidarity members laughed in appreciation as workfare workers told them of being trained for jobs they already knew how to do. One person told them “I’ve been through the state’s welfare training programs. I’ve done that three times. It was a waste. They had me doing things I already knew how to do--filing, typing, answering phones and watching children.” Another worker gave dramatic testament to the ways in which corporations were exploiting the workfare program to access low cost labor: “I’ve been through the welfare to work program. They placed me at London Fog where I had worked before, but as a regular paid employee. I was given the same assignment, I worked in the exact same spot, I even had the same supervisor as before. They guaranteed me that I would be hired, but I was not.”

The new welfare law required recipients to go to work or lose their benefits. Unlike earlier welfare regulations, it did not count taking college classes as a valid work activity. The organization learned that in September of 1997, 865 welfare recipients were enrolled at Baltimore Community College, yet only a few months later that number had dwindled to 335 as students were being forced to drop out due to the work requirement. In September of 1997 the

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107 Speech by Tina Lee at a Solidarity rally, October 1997
Solidarity Welfare Action Team (SWAT) was formed and began meeting weekly on the campus of Baltimore Community College.

Attendance at SWAT meetings was quite good, students were highly motivated to participate because they did not want to be forced to end their studies. Over the course of discussions and trainings with Alisa Glassman, a new organizer at Solidarity, and Jonathan Lange, it became clear that the group had a lot of potential as a source of new leadership for Solidarity. Glassman said “Here was a large number of people all in one place...who were students and on welfare. It is also a group by natural selection—of people who have a vision and the initiative to go to school on their own and we believed -- and were correct -- that there would be a lot of leaders coming out of that group.” The all-woman group decided to launch “School Counts:” a campaign to get the governor and the legislature to enact legislation that would enable school to qualify as a work activity under the new welfare reform law. They asserted that the best work training they could get was in a college classroom and that the best route to getting off welfare was to get a college degree. In October they held an action of 175 people and were told by welfare organizers at the AFL-CIO that it was the largest action led and attended by those directly effected by welfare since the 1996 law was passed. Between October and December of 1997, the women organized and carried out dozens of actions targeted at BCC administrators and local elected officials. In December the SWAT, working with three other local colleges, turned out 200 people at a rally at BCC to unveil a plan whereby the state government could allow school to qualify as a work activity under the new law. Based upon a program already in effect in Maine, the proposal involved separating out state and federal funds that were blended together into Maryland’s welfare block grant. In a statement released the night of the rally, Solidarity explained how the new program would work: “Because it is the federal funds that carry much of the restrictions, such as the five year lifetime limit, work requirements and the disqualification of school as a work activity, the state monies alone could then be accessed to allow college students to continue receiving benefits while training for a career.”

Between December 1997 and February 1998, the SWAT team began negotiations with the Governor and the state Department of Human Resources. It kept up its organizing activities and received national press attention for its campaign. Over the course of negotiations, BUILD and Solidarity honed down their proposal to the Governor from 4 years to two, urging the state to set up a 2 year pilot program that would allow welfare recipients enrolled full-time at BCC in a
certificate or Associate of Arts Program, to have school attendance count as their work requirement. On February 10th, the Governor laid out the initial parameters of a program he would accept, stipulating that the course of study be completed in two years or less and that the individual maintain a passing grade. After a great deal of back and forth, the proposal was finalized and celebrated as a win in late Spring of 1998. The headline of the Washington Post article announcing the win put it succinctly: “It’s Official: School is Work.” School Counts became a very successful program and in June of 2000, Solidarity succeeded in getting the Maryland Department of Human Services to make it permanent—agreeing to allow Baltimore City Community College students to count their studies as work under the welfare to work rules. They also won state funding for 100 more work-study slots for welfare recipients.

A core lesson that is taught by the IAF and others in community organizing courses is what is referred to as “going from problem to issue” or making something “issueable.” The focus is on teaching people to go beyond identifying the problem—something that is wrong in a community—to turning it into an issue—identifying a possible solution to the problem and breaking the solution down to a clear set of demands posed to a specific target. In Baltimore when Solidarity first began, the problems were clear—rampant poverty, high unemployment and a surfeit of undesirable, low wage, dead end jobs. Federal welfare reform, it was widely feared, would only increase these problems. What was not at all clear was how to make the problems issueable. Solidarity’s energetic development of innovative policy proposals over the years between 1994 and 1998 were unique in the nation and provided models that were picked up by hundreds of organizations around the country. Lange and Graf had developed the issues well in those 4 years. In 1988, they were able to place them into a larger framework.

The 1998 Gubernatorial Election: Politics without Endorsements and the Joseph Plan

In the Spring of 1998, BUILD was riding high from it’s string of public policy victories on behalf of low wage workers. Fiscally, the state of Maryland was in terrific shape—it was projecting record surpluses and Governor Glendening was once again in a very tight re-election fight that would need a strong turnout from the Black community in Baltimore to put him over the top. Although they would not directly endorse a candidate in the race, BUILD intended to publicize the candidates’ positions on the issues and to mount a comprehensive voter

participation effort. BUILD viewed the gubernatorial campaign as an important opportunity not only to highlight their key issues but, given the state’s enormous surplus, also to press Glendenning to make specific commitments on a number of them. The organization committed itself to an extensive voter participation effort and set a meeting date of June 7th to unveil BUILD’s 1998 Election Agenda.

Lange and Graf worked with the leadership of BUILD and Solidarity to develop the organization’s platform, which was dubbed “The Moral Use of Surplus: Save and Invest in Place, Income and Equity.” The document that Lange and Graf wrote tried to place BUILD’s work into a unified conceptual framework: “In twenty years of work, BUILD has learned that for families to thrive in the City they need a healthy place, adequate income and the opportunity to build some equity.” [bold in original] They placed BUILD’s work on affordable housing, crime and public safety, and parks and public schools in the context of “creating a place where families can thrive.” They placed BUILD’s work on the living wage and the rest of its low wage labor market protections in the context of income: “BUILD also understands that the fastest way to destroy a family is to take away its ability to earn a Living Wage. Our Solidarity Sponsoring Committee organizing and the creation of a benefits plan, are a response to the need of families for adequate income with security and dignity on the job.” Finally, they highlighted the Nehemiah housing construction and homeownership program and the new worker-owned temporary employment agency as examples of approaches to building equity for families.

In conclusion, the document pointed out how the 1998 election differed from previous years: “The 1998 state election is not like recent elections. Those elections were about making sure tight budgets did not impact our City too severely. This election is about what a state should do in a time of surplus budgets. Our platform and election plans reflect this reality and propose that the state save and invest in PLACE, INCOME and EQUITY for families.”

Under the heading of Place, BUILD called for $35 million per year for four years for Baltimore school construction, $2.5 million per year for four years for parks and recreation capital improvements and a half a million dollars per year for BUILD’s after-school program in the public schools, Child First. The organization had been deeply effected by its work with the low wage contract and workfare workers. Many of Solidarity’s leaders were former drug addicts, alcoholics and ex-offenders whose first “leadership development” experiences had been
in Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous programs. Thus, under the rubric of place, the platform also called for increased state support for long-term drug treatment and support services.

Under the heading of Income, BUILD called for the state to enact statewide living wage legislation for state contract workers, and to create 1,000 new public jobs at the living wage for people moving from welfare to work. It called for the creation of 1,000 new job training slots tied to the placement of 1,000 former welfare recipients and under-employed workers into living wage jobs. Finally, the organization spotlighted the importance of childcare to the success of families moving from welfare to work. It called attention to the fact that Maryland was among the states that did not provide its own funding to Head Start programs, instead relying entirely on the federal government to pay for them. The organization called for $5 million dollars in state funding to serve additional children and increase support services. It also wanted $5 million for increased wages and benefits for childcare workers.

Finally, under the heading of Equity, the organization called for $15 million per year for four years, in order to double the permanent financing fund for homeownership, and $15 million to be invested in neighborhood commercial development. The organization’s most creative proposal was to create the “Joseph Fund” in which 20% of the state budget surplus would be contributed annually into a specially designated rainy day fund that would be used exclusively to fund programs that benefited the poor and homeless. Taking its name from the biblical character Joseph who foretold seven years of fat followed by seven years of lean, and advised the Pharaoh to set aside grain every year in preparation for the famine, the fund could only be accessed during periods of decline and would be triggered by 3 consecutive months of economic decline.

Eleven hundred people attended the June action. The co-chairs started the meeting from the stage of the auditorium of the Greenspring Middle School, where a wooden platform built by the students stood empty. One by one, leaders took turns presenting each plank of BUILD’s election platform. At the conclusion of each presentation, a new plank would be nailed onto the wooden platform until it was completed. At this point in the meeting, Reverend Doug Miles took over the chair to begin the process of “quota-taking”, in which each member institution in attendance held a fifteen minute caucus and came up with a quota of workers it would work to recruit from its congregation to help in the get-out-the-vote effort. Miles began this session with a call to arms: “No candidate will tell us what is important to us. No one who wants to be governor, no one who wants to be a legislator will shape our vision for us. Instead, we are
asking all those "wanna-be's" to stand with us in making our vision a reality." Miles walked to
the opposite corner of the stage where there stood a life-size model of a front stoop with stairs
leading up to a front door, complete with a door bell. "How are we going to move from platform
to victory?" he asked. "We get as much justice as we have the power to deliver... We are going
to do this through old-fashioned people power. This door and 40,000 like it are going to be
knocked on before the September primary election!" As the roll call of thirty-eight institutions
was read, a representative of each stood in turn, and announced the number of people that the
group had pledged to bring to the meeting, the number who had actually attended, and then the
number of precinct workers they were committed to recruiting for the get-out-the-vote effort. By
the end of the exercise, 663 precinct workers were pledged. The last paragraphs of the news
story that appeared in the Baltimore Sun the day after the meeting cast BUILD's electoral agenda
in exactly the terms they had hoped for:

Four Baltimore residents gave moving testimony yesterday about how earlier
coalition programs, such as homeownership and college education for welfare
recipients changed their lives. "We have won the victory," said Latonya Williams,
a straight-A student at Baltimore Community College, the first person in her
family in three generations to finish high school. "We have won the right to stay
in school and will continue to be political players," she said. Her message and
that of others was clear—BUILD has won commitments in the past that have
improved the lives of Baltimore residents. And it intends to repeat that success
this fall.109

On July 23rd the organization held its next public action which was in part a training for
precinct workers and in part an accountability session for the two gubernatorial candidates
seeking the Democratic nomination (the Republican candidates were invited but did not attend).
Once again upon the stage stood the model stoop, stairs and front door and the meeting opened
with one of the co-chairs walking up the front steps and ringing the doorbell. When a person
came to the door, the co-chair said, "Hello, I'm from BUILD and I have come to share with you
where the candidates stand on our election platform." When the person at the door asked the
question "Which of the candidates supports BUILD's agenda?" the chair turned to the audience
and said "The answer we give to that question is up to you." Both candidates endorsed the
organization's platform in principle, but Glendening also reminded the organization of how

109 James M. Coram, "Coalition adopts political platform: BUILD aims to influence fall election, attract more state
money for city" Baltimore Sun, June 8th, 1998.
closely they had worked together, telling them that during his term he had met with BUILD members fifteen times, more often than he had met with any other advocacy organization. An article in the Washington Post the next day described BUILD’s approach to electoral politics: “Although it does not formally endorse candidates, the group requires that candidates endorse its agenda.”

In mid-October, BUILD invited Glendening, by then the Democratic nominee, and Ellen Sauerbrey, the Republican nominee, to a final meeting. Sauerbrey declined to attend, but Glendening attended and “promised to direct millions in tax dollars to projects endorsed by BUILD.”

For this election, Lange and the BUILD leaders decided not to do voter registration but instead to target the “occasional voter.” In the weeks leading up to the general election, the BUILD organization did get-out-the-vote work in 60 precincts, walking precincts and phone-banking. In addition, the organization taped radio spots on hip-hop and gospel stations. BUILD’s message to voters urged them to vote on the issues and gave an accounting of each candidate’s position. According to Lange, every voter received at least one call and every door in each precinct was knocked on twice. If people were not at home a door hanger bearing BUILD’s platform and message was left on the door knob. On Election Day, the organization had a very extensive poll-checking operation. Totals were phoned in hourly and were compared with numeric targets by precinct, if turnout was below the target phonebanks into the precinct were activated and teams were dispatched in vans to knock on every door, urge people to vote and offer rides to the polls. Turnout in the 61 precincts went from 41% in 1994 to 53.6% in 1998.

As it turned out, Glendening won re-election handily, defying predictions of a much tighter margin. Less than a month after his re-election, Glendening attended a celebration of BUILD’s get-out-the-vote work and reiterated his commitment to the Joseph Fund, as well as other planks in BUILD’s platform and told the group that he intended to appoint Jonathan Lange to chair the Joseph Fund. The headline in the Baltimore Sun read “Governor supports set-aside for city’s poor: Proposal to earmark part of surplus is payback for BUILD election aid” and the

112 See Lange voter participation interview, January 2000.
first paragraph began with the sentence “Moving to repay a political debt, Gov. Parris N. Glendening said last night that he will propose in his budget that part of the state's surplus be set aside to sustain programs for the urban poor through future economic downturns.” Glendening praised the Joseph Fund, calling it “probably one of the most innovative public policy ideas to come forth in a good many years.” Calling attention to the get-out-the-vote work, the article stated “BUILD officials said last night that their efforts brought an estimated 2700 more voters to the polls in 1998 than in 1994 despite a dramatic drop in the city's population. While those votes turned out to be a small part of Glendening’s 158,000 vote victory margin, BUILD’s efforts helped energize the Democratic effort in the city, where Glendening won 81% of the ballots cast.” BUILD even managed to have its electoral activities characterized exactly the way it wanted: “BUILD could not formally endorse the governor because of its non-profit tax status, but the organization aggressively spread the word that Glendening supported its urban-oriented agenda while Sauerbrey refused its invitations to appear at its events.”113

A More Perfect Union: Experiments in worker organizing

In a 1996 progress report to AFSCME, Graf and Lange wrote,

The victory of higher wages for contract workers and the victories of job protection for contingent workers has attracted hundreds of members to the organization. Our next project is to transform SSC from a small but significant wage movement into a mediating institution with a solid base of membership and power and a continuity of membership. To do this, Solidarity must organize a broad and comprehensive benefits plan and organize employer contributions to this plan...This will not be easy. For years, employers have relied on a pool of part-time workers whose hourly cost is low primarily because the employer has had to contribute nothing toward the health and welfare of the employee. To reverse this we will have to create a plan that is portable from job to job and organize the power to compel employers to participate.

Throughout the time period that Solidarity was mounting public policy campaigns, organizers were equally engaged in worker organizing efforts. New members mostly came into the organization because they were recruited at work or on their way to work, but the life of the organization was as centered around fighting for new municipal policies as it was around worker organizing efforts in their own right.

113 Michael Dresser, “Governor Supports set-aside for city’s poor: Proposal to earmark part of surplus is payback for
Temporally speaking, the twin strategies of organizing workers and changing laws were pursued simultaneously, not sequentially. From the beginning, “doing politics” was viewed by Graf and Lange as a core strategic focus because they believed that enacting low wage labor market protections was a necessary complement to organizing large numbers of service sector workers. As Graf explained “The labor movement’s premise is we can turn politics around if we get more members, our premise is you are only going to get more members if you turn politics around.” Just as important as doing politics however, was succeeding at building a strong union with a significant and stable membership base and real labor market power. They also knew that this was AFSCME’s expectation as well. As pleased as they were with BUILD and Solidarity’s transformation of the debate about privatization and their public policy achievements, AFSCME expected tangible results in terms of union organizing and membership gains. They were willing to experiment, but they always made clear that the goal was to build a union, and that they would hold Solidarity accountable to direct numeric goals.

Graf and Lange began the organizing of Solidarity with a strong critique of the unions they had been part of and worked with. A main goal of theirs was to organize a new kind of union that could serve as one model of how to rebuild the labor movement. They had a critique of the labor movement’s approach to workers, organizing drives and building local unions, and from that critique flowed the components of the alternative model they developed.

*A Different Understanding of the Individual as a basis for a Different Kind of Union*

Graf and Lange felt that most working people viewed the labor movement as just another big institution, but not one that spoke for them or represented their interests in the larger society. To address this issue, Lange and Graf felt that labor had to be turned back into a social movement--one that organized on the basis of values as much as interests, and began from a different set of assumptions about the individual labor union member. Not only did they perceive a bifurcation in labor’s approach to its economic and political work, but more fundamentally, they perceived a split in how unions looked at the individual—isolating their work life and concerns from the rest of their interests and experiences.\(^{114}\) In Graf’s words, “There is no such thing as a 'worker' in and of itself. There is a human person. Work is

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\(^{114}\) This is an observation quite consistent with Piore’s argument that was discussed in Chapter Two.
important for self-expression but it is not the sum total of life. There is neighborhood, family, church and other institutions.” To overcome this split, the organization intended to relate to Solidarity members on a deeper plane and to talk about the organizing project in a broader context than unions often do. The IAF approach of spending a great deal of time on leadership recruitment through one-on-one conversations and on leadership development through training, actions, more one-on-one conversations and debriefing sessions was at the core of their organizing approach. Conversations between workers and organizers naturally went beyond work and wages to include: the state of the neighborhoods, affordable housing, politics and the state of the public schools.

In her book *Cold Anger* about the Texas IAF, Mary Beth Rogers wrote about the IAF’s focus on developing the individual members of the group: “The IAF organizations concentrate on the development of skill and insight that allows people to act for themselves, to transform themselves from passive participants who are content to have things done for them into actors who initiate change in their inner as well as outer lives.” Rogers believes that this approach is the reason for the IAF’s record of successes and organizational longevity. Every public event in which the organization engages—actions, rallies, meetings with officials-- is viewed as a learning opportunity. Again, Mary Beth Rogers:

> For every public event where the purpose of the organization is to get a specific result....there may be dozens of private sessions to learn, analyze, and understand what might occur and why, and what it might mean on both a personal and political level for those who participate. It is a very thoughtful process and one in which consequences of political behavior are carefully weighed in terms of broad social goals, deeply felt values and personal growth.115

Graf felt that the labor movement too often mobilized people right into action and skipped the step of doing what he and others in the IAF refer to as “relational work,” getting to know people individually and reaching an understanding about their passions as well as their interests. “We must ask people what they want from their work. My experience is that they want food, shelter, clothing, health insurance, time off—the immediate self preservation part of course—but also to be respected for their God-given creativity, to bring some of their own creativity into the workplace and expressed it with their co-workers. Even people struggling at

subsistence wages--ten minutes into a conversation want to talk about that. It is a strong self-
interest inside the individual.” On this basis, they expressed differences with Stephen Lerner,
the architect of Justice for Janitors, one of SEIU’s signature programs: “One of the strong
disagreements was his insistence that, given their low wages and the degrading way they are
treated, that the only way to organize these workers was around raw anger... We felt that this was
patronizing and exploitative, and a real misunderstanding of the human person and what people
long for...”

The process of coming together, of getting to know each other and building an
organization collectively could provide satisfactions that low wage workers might never be able
to derive from their work because the process would tap into members’ needs for self recognition
and self expression. As Graf puts it, “We think the most important aspect of the person is their
“socialness” not their “econominess” or their “politicalness...and we understand that our
politics and our economics come from our socialness.” This was especially true for workers at
the lowest rung of the service sector whose work tasks and environment were unlikely to provide
that sense of meaning.

Labor’s limited view of the desires of individual workers, Graf and Lange felt, led to
many of its leaders suffering from “a kind of bureaucratic sclerosis.” In their view, many labor
leaders lacked a movement fervor, “They weren’t the people who built the institutions, they were
the ones who had inherited them. It feels to us that these are the second and third generation
lawyers just holding onto the institutions.” Although Graf saw some of the same tendencies in
community organizing, he felt there was a much better organizing culture in the IAF, one that
encouraged BUILD and other IAF affiliates to “look at themselves and remake themselves, to
spend time training and developing people, and respecting their intellect,” and that this was much
harder to get labor unions to do.

From the outset, Solidarity did its membership recruitment through one-on-one meetings
where, in addition to particulars about their jobs and employers, workers were always asked
about other aspects of their lives—their children, their feelings about the schools their children

116 In his discussions with organizers about his broader idea of what self interest means, Graf often cited the work of
Victor Frankl, the holocaust survivor and psychiatrist who wrote in Man’s Search for Meaning about the life or
death difference that holding on to meaning meant for the men he observed in the camps.
117 Rogers’ explicates this different approach to anger. The IAF’s approach is to take “the hot impulse of their anger
and cools it down so that it can become a useful tool to improve individual lives and the quality of the common
community. For them “cold anger” reflects the hope of change.” Rogers: 10.
attended, their churches and any other important affiliations and relationships. From the perspective of the workers with whom I spoke, the most shocking moment came when they were asked about their personal stories—where they came from, what experiences had shaped them and about their hopes and dreams for the future. In answer to my question “Why did you join Solidarity?” many workers said simply, “because they asked me to.” While some of them had experiences with unions in the past, and some had attended churches, for the most part they spoke of these relationships in the passive sense. They said things like “the union was a good thing, it got me decent wages and benefits” but when asked the name of the union or key leaders in the union, or if they had ever been asked to participate in a union event, they usually said “no.” Before Solidarity, several members said, no one had ever asked them what they thought about anything or what they wanted out of life, never mind whether they wanted to join an organization.

Organizers asked specific questions and were expected to remember the specific answers—not just “how many children do you have?”, but “what are their names”, not just “are they in school”, but “which schools do they attend?” Lange and the other organizers took notes after they left these meetings so they wouldn’t forget what they had learned. If the person was embedded in networks that they thought might be fruitful places to look for more members, they noted that and followed up. They took time to think about where in the new organization the person might fit, and if they showed potential to be leaders, then what specific follow-up steps might be taken to involve them in trainings, actions and strategy sessions.

The workers they met through the one-on-one's were poorer, more isolated and substantially less educated than those in the membership base of the IAF churches. Thus, in order to foster relationships and build confidence, an even greater emphasis was placed on conducting trainings and getting workers to play an active role in public actions and strategy sessions. Solidarity's approach was reflective of the IAF’s philosophy. In the words of Michael Gecan: “When they act, as they act, people change…The powerless gather, organize, and act. Victims get their first taste of victory. At the core of the relational culture is a belief in the ability of most people to grow and develop.”

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118 Gecan: 163.
Minority Unionism

Lange felt that although many international unions were worried that organized labor was dying, their prescription for recovery, even after the victory of John Sweeney, was simply to put more resources—more money and staff into organizing more members. In his experience, Lange had found a lot of labor people too under siege and in too much of a hurry to be able to stop and rethink strategy: “The analogy I think of is when you drive into mud and you are convinced that the harder you press on the gas pedal the faster it will make your tires go, and you will get out. But you just dig the hole deeper and sink deeper into the ground.”

Lange and Graf felt that just doing what unions had always done, but doing it better, would simply not be adequate to the task. This approach wouldn’t work because it failed to take into account the sea changes that had occurred in the economy—changes which had, or would, render many existing unions and their structures obsolete. The manufacturing sector of large, vertically integrated firms, upon which the American system of industrial relations was predicated, was no longer dominant. The service sector now accounted for most jobs, with workers finding themselves “isolated in small, low-wage establishments such as check-processing operations, telephone call centers, the neighborhood Blockbuster video store, or a streamlined bank branch staffed by part-time workers.”

As cited above, the same was true in Baltimore, where service jobs now also predominated, and not just in the private sector. In the public sector, which was heavily privatized in the 1980’s and 1990’s, workers were now distributed among many small contractors.

New economic realities called for new union models and structures, but labor law—once conducive to the organization of unions—had turned against the project. After the Second World War, Congress, the federal bureaucracy and federal and state courts had abandoned the traditional “balance of power” paradigm that was enshrined in the National Labor Relations Act. Beginning in the 1950’s, employers gained new rights to fight union organizing efforts and developed new strategies, but as discussed earlier in this chapter, some of labor’s most potent weapons, such as the secondary boycott, were eliminated. Anti-union statutes and court rulings were bad enough, but there was another problem—labor law, with a few important exceptions, came to view all union organizing as synonymous with majority unionism—the model of

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organizing enshrined in the National Labor Relations Act. This Act required unions to hold and win elections, and conferred the right to exclusive representation upon those who won. But it dictated a model of unionism that was mismatched to the structure of more and more industries. As Hertzenberg, Alic and Wial argue, “Current policies...effectively deny representation to many workers who move among small firms. Framed in the 1930’s, U.S. laws were designed to encourage unionization in big factories. These laws are poorly suited to an era of small service establishments and transient employment attachments...After six decades of statutory amendments and judicial interpretations, the NLRA has become a straitjacket. It offers most workers only a single choice: they may join, by majority vote, a worker association modeled on the traditional industrial union, or else do without collective representation altogether.”

In downtown Baltimore in the early 90’s, there were no unions approaching the low wage service sector workers who worked around the redeveloped inner harbor. Thus Solidarity had no competition from other unions in its efforts to recruit workers. In reality, it was in competition with itself to figure out an approach that would succeed where essentially no other unions thought it was possible. Lange and Graf were convinced that most of these jobs were not conducive to the NLRB election process, and instead set out to develop a viable model of “minority unionism.” In Lange’s words “If there were 20 people in a building, 5 can sign up and the company has to offer payroll deduction for the five.” Referring to the dominant NLRB election model, Lange exclaimed: “majority, schmajority!”

The Solidarity organizing model was to build an initial membership by recruiting from service sector workers at downtown contractors and other employers. By spending time in different service industries, Solidarity organizers could both recruit individual members and evaluate which industries would make promising targets for concentrated organizing. The model entailed a craft union approach, where Solidarity itself would train and place workers, and then bargain on their behalf by negotiating multi-employer agreements through master contracts. They did not want to organize through the NLRB election process for another reason: the expectations of members. Solidarity did not want to be viewed as a traditional union by workers who joined because they did not want to have to fulfill the servicing function of a traditional union. They were convinced that having separate agreements at dozens of different employers

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120 Ibid: 15, 162
would mean having to spend an enormous amount of time just negotiating and keeping on top of the contracts. In their view, it was better to be able to sign individual workers up through their employers, but not via an election and a contract. Before going further into a description of what Solidarity actually did, a bit more background on minority unionism is important.

In the not so distant past, most unions functioned as “minority unions,” where workers could constitute themselves as a union and act like one without needing a majority of workers to sign on. As Rathke explains, “The most accessible way of understanding the organizational relationships embodied in minority unionism, is that these relationships involve ‘members only’ representation. Rather than involving exclusive representation (only one organization having representation rights), a ‘members only’ arrangement may involve multiple associations where power in the workplace would be determined by mass strength, aggressiveness, scale and creative work.” The organization in fact would strike or bargain with the employer based on this minority membership in hopes that the issues and interests were such that a majority of the workers would respond to the union’s call. Most members joined the organization before there was a contract with an employer, or sometime joining and getting a contract were two entirely separate processes. The incentive to join came from two sources: the desirability of the membership benefits on offer, and the necessity felt by workers to build collective power in the labor market. Power over employers came not through government certification of the union’s right to bargain, but through the exercise of labor market power. This power could take a variety of forms: compelling an employer to hire only from the union membership by signing exclusive contracts with certain employers and withholding skilled labor from others; striking; sitting down; or taking action against an employer involved in a business relationship with their target.

In a certain sense, many craft unions can be understood as minority unions—membership is not premised upon any showing of majority support at individual workplaces and NLRB elections are seldom a part of the organizing process. These type of unions exercise labor market power in two ways: first, by determining who can enter the trade—through apprenticeships, licensing and the like; and second, by providing (or refusing to provide) employers with a crew of skilled craftspersons. Some unions, including the building and construction trades, hotel and restaurant and entertainment unions, started out this way and always operated in this manner.

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121 Perhaps it is more accurately referred to using Dorothy Sue Cobble’s term “occupational unionism,” because it was an effort to apply a craft union structure to low skill jobs.
Others, like the teacher and public employee unions, who had been prohibited from collective bargaining for many years, created "associations" of members -- another form of minority unionism that was quite successful. Labor law has always been the crucial factor allowing these unions to operate in this way.

In the case of the building trades, Section 8(f) of the National Labor Relations Act (as amended in Taft-Hartley) allows construction unions to sign agreements with employers without first establishing that the union represents a majority of the employees. These pre-hire agreements were allowed in the construction industry but not for other types of unions, because lawmakers recognized the temporary nature of employment relationships in construction. However, they considered this kind of agreement to be an exception in the structure of employment, not the rule. Because of 8 (f), union organizers can bring pressure to bear through job-site actions on a particular contractor, and negotiate for union recognition without first having to demonstrate that it represents a majority of the employees. The employment structure in the entertainment industry is often one of temporary employment on a project-by-project basis, as opposed to long-term attachment to a single employer. In recording and film production, craft unions negotiate agreements with multiemployer associations. In the case of the entertainment industry as well as the construction trades, it is the union and not the firm, that is often the most fixed point in the life of the worker. Also of interest to our discussion of craft union structures is that entertainment workers often hold multiple union memberships, accessing a particular union's protections on an as-needed basis depending upon the job they are presently on.

123 Janice Fine, "Three Waves of Innovation in the IBEW” unpublished research paper. The specific language of Section 8 (f) is as follows: “It shall not be an unfair labor practice... for an employer engaged primarily in the building and construction industry to make an agreement... with a labor organization of which building and construction employees are members...because (1) the majority status of such labor organization has not been established under the provisions of Section 9 of this Act prior to the making of such an agreement.

Mike Lucas, the former Organizing Director of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers pioneered a strategy to take 8 (f) one step further to get permanent agreements by getting locals to convert 8(f) agreements, which are only in effect for the life of the particular project and do not confer bargaining rights, into 9(a) agreements which do confer bargaining rights and do not place on time limitation on bargaining rights.

The specific language of Section 9 (a) of the Act reads in part: “Representatives designated or selected for purposes of collective bargaining by a majority of the employees in a unit appropriate for such purposes, shall be the exclusive representatives of all the employees in such a unit for the purposes of collective bargaining.”

124 For more on the structure of employment relationships in the entertainment industry, see Lois S. Gray and Ronald L. Seeber, editors, Under the Stars, (Ithaca and New York City: ILR Press/Cornell,1996.)
As stated several times through the course of this thesis, the smaller size of firms and establishments in the service sector, as well as the higher rate of turnover and contingent employment in this sector, makes organizing and collective bargaining at the level of the individual firm more difficult to do, and unlikely to be effective in terms of raising wages or improving job quality. As Hertzenberg, Alic and Wiall state the case, "To protect workers and influence business strategy and work systems, unions must be able to bargain jointly with multiple employers on behalf of workers in an occupation, industry, or business network, often within a small geographical area." Labor law does not prohibit multi-employer agreements, and as we have seen, both the building trades and entertainment unions use them widely. But old assumptions about what forms a "community of interest" have led the NLRB most often to determine narrow bargaining units—generally confining them to individual firms. The law thus makes it difficult for other types of workers and unions to get in the game. A more "user-friendly" version of the law would allow workers within a specific geographic area to seek representation and collective bargaining on a multi-worksites basis without a requirement that they first organize worksite-specific units.  

The American labor movement has struggled with expanding viable models of minority unionism for the past several years and met with mixed success. Frustrated by their inability to offer something meaningful to workers who had voted for a union but not been in the majority at their employer, and encountering more and more situations in which filing for an election made no sense, many unions, including the Communication Workers of America (CWA), the SEIU and the AFL-CIO itself, experimented with minority union approaches to membership. These organizations developed what were called "associate membership" plans. These plans allowed workers to join up and receive a benefits package through the "union privilege" program. Furthermore, their ability to join would not in any way be contingent upon the union having a collective bargaining relationship with the company. These plans were never able to get off the ground in a meaningful way because just signing individual workers up without a plan for building power in a particular company or industry was not compelling enough to yield a lot of

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125 Hertzenberg, Alic and Wial discuss the difficulties: "Unions have also favored narrow units because they perceive them as easier to organize. Not even the NLRB, moreover, can require units to combine for bargaining purposes. For several bargaining units to negotiate together, all the relevant unions and employers must voluntarily agree to joint bargaining." p. 163.
new members or secure a long-term commitment to the associate membership program on the part of the international union.

While generally not pursuing a minority union strategy, a small number of international unions -- including the Hotel and Restaurant workers, SEIU and the Communication Workers -- are conducting more and more of their organizing outside of the NLRB election framework. The Hotel Workers have focused on pressuring hotels to agree to remaining neutral during organizing drives and, if presented with a majority of the workers on union authorization cards, to recognize and bargain with the new unit -- without insisting an election be held. The Justice for Janitors campaign, for which the SEIU is well known, follows an organizing strategy of reaching out to as many janitors throughout a geographic area as possible and engaging in a variety of tactics that compel owners and contractors to simultaneously recognize the union and sign on to a first contract. The home health care campaigns mounted by SEIU unions (some of which were organized by ACORN), in addition to identifying and signing up individual workers, focus on lobbying state and county governments both to provide the additional funds necessary for increased wages as well as to create the regulatory frameworks necessary to make bargaining possible.

*Inducements to Membership: Benefits Package, Bank Accounts and Health Insurance*

From the very beginning of the organizing process, Solidarity believed that achieving any sort of labor market power in the service sector, especially the private service sector, was a long-haul proposition. It was easier to organize and wield political power and win public policy change than to organize and wield economic power in private service sector labor markets. They viewed the living wage victory as a victory for a small part of their base--workers employed by City contractors—but more importantly, as a way to stabilize the workforce so that it could be organized into a union. On the other hand, the achievement of the living wage for all workers created a bit of a free rider problem: “We are in a field where workers don’t need a license or certification. It’s not the building trades. So if we do this regulatory stuff and bid up wages and don’t figure out how to provide advantages to our members only, we end up with a huge free-rider problem on our hands,” Lange said. The decision to reject going the traditional majority
union route foreclosed any early effort to build on the living wage victory by holding union elections among the affected contractors. However, the organization believed that it would be impossible to build beyond a small membership base without the ability to offer an individual incentive. They concluded that widespread membership recruitment, in the context of a non-union shop environment, would require the provision of some kind of positive selective incentive. They set out to create a benefits plan that could offer a tangible incentive to join.

Kim Keller, the AFSCME organizer working with Solidarity took charge of figuring out the benefits package. Ideally, they would have just added their own members to AFSCME’s existing health and welfare fund, but AFSCME didn’t have one. AFSCME itself did not have experience with benefit plans because, aside from a very small number in the private sector, its own members were typically public employees, as such it was not necessary to put together employee-sponsored benefits plans or multi-employer health and welfare plans. Solidarity had to start from scratch.

Keller put together a committee of Solidarity members to get a sense of what kinds of services they needed. Keller and Lange contacted vendors who worked with unions and union vendors and found that the Amalgamated Life Insurance Company offered the best plan for life insurance. Although Amalgamated was founded by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) it was interested in diversifying its base and had already begun working with other international unions. Keller also discovered a company called AVISAS which was in the business of identifying and packaging discount arrangements for membership organizations. She worked with Amalgamated and AVISAS to develop the organization’s original benefits package.

In January of 1995, SSC began to offer a benefits package. For their $10 monthly dues workers got:

- a $10,000 term life insurance policy
- Vision care/eye glasses discounts: discounts of 20-60% on services to include frames, lenses, contact lenses and eye exams.

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126 Most Justice for Janitors campaigns are contract campaigns—they begin with a local union, a contractors association and a master agreement already in place. The goal of the campaign is to significantly improve wages and benefits.

127 There was an option of a $5 a month membership that did not include benefits.
- Dental discounts including a free initial exam and x-rays and 20-60% discounts on other dental services
- Hearing services discounts: 20% off the cost of hearing aids and exams
- Prescription discounts: 25-35% off for prescription and over-the-counter drugs

However, it took two more years to figure out how to offer health benefits. Many Solidarity members did not have access to affordable health insurance through their employers. Some employers did not offer any health insurance benefits to their workers; others did offer insurance but it was not affordable because of low wages and the low level of employer contribution. Although the organization’s long term goal was to build the power to compel employers to pay into a multiple employer health and welfare fund, it decided that members and potential members needed health insurance right away. Unlike the immigrant workers in Long Island, many of whom did not qualify for state and federal programs because of their immigration status. Solidarity’s largely African-American base did qualify for all sorts of programs. Often they just didn’t know how to access them. Keller and Lange discovered that Maryland actually had a number of health insurance programs for the uninsured, but the programs were often underutilized because they were not aggressively reaching out to enroll eligible people.

In the Fall of 1997, Solidarity worked out an agreement with the Maryland Labor Health Care Advocacy Coalition (MLHAC) that began to provide access to health insurance for its uninsured members. The MLHAC was created in order to help uninsured workers gain access to comprehensive health care services at an affordable price by determining eligibility and matching up workers with appropriate health plans. MLHAC contracted with a number of health centers across the city to provide the health services. Under the plan, the participating health centers determine, on the basis of a workers’ income and assets, the amount they will have to pay for health services. Workers who have the least financial resources qualify for full medical and pharmaceutical coverage at no charge. Those with more resources might very well still qualify for other federal and state programs and would receive coverage at low cost. In cases where a member did not initially qualify for subsidy but suddenly incurred significant expenses, those...

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128 Lange felt the clinics had compelling reasons to be willing to absorb the costs of the program related to applying for reimbursement because they were certain to collect their fees for service from the state and federal programs and, because the clinics were mostly affiliated with hospitals, they also had an incentive to get these patients because they would then most likely control the hospital referral process.
expenses alone could trigger qualification for participation in the program. Rather than just
giving out a list of clinics to which workers without insurance could go, Solidarity took the tack
that this program was an insurance plan and worked with MLHAC to create and distribute
individual health insurance cards. By issuing cards and distributing brochures with information
about the participating centers, the program more closely approximated the feel of a normal
health plan. Enrolled workers could make appointments ahead of time and present their cards at
the time of service. There was no hospitalization benefit included, but given their low incomes,
it was assumed that their hospital costs would be covered by Medicaid.

Creating a temp agency

Among the most striking findings of Solidarity’s early research into the operation of the
low wage labor market in Baltimore was the marked increase in the use of temporary workers
and the explosive growth of temporary employment agencies. In 1993, sixty temporary agencies
were operating in the City, and the top 25 of them were growing at a rate of approximately 12%
a year. The BUILD and Solidarity leadership viewed Baltimore firms’ skyrocketing use of
temporary employees as another proof of the widespread abrogation of the social compact.
Rather than hiring a permanent workforce and assuming the risk of fluctuating demand (and in
extreme situations, of laying off workers) as they used to do, many firms had shifted to the
strategy of keeping their permanent payrolls small and hiring temporary workers on an as-needed
basis. In addition to the savings realized from not having more staff capacity than demand, firms
also saved the cost of unemployment claims, health benefits, overtime payments to core staff,
personnel recruitment and payroll maintenance.129 National statistics on temporary workers
showed them to be disproportionately African-American, poor and female. They were paid on
average only 40% of what full-time workers were paid per hour and were paid significantly less
for doing the same work as permanent workers. Despite corporate claims that workers preferred
the flexibility, surveys conducted by labor market researchers showed repeatedly that
overwhelming majorities of temporary workers preferred full-time employment.130

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129 From the feasibility study conducted for the Baltimore Workers Association Organization Project: “Feasibility of
a Baltimore-Based Worker-Owned Temporary Employment Agency” prepared by R&B Unlimited, Inc. Baltimore,
Maryland, December 30, 1993.
130 Florence Gardner and Jean McAllister “Temporary Workers: Flexible or Disposable”, Poverty and Race, vol. 4,
no. 6 November/December 1995.

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Solidarity and BUILD discussed various approaches to the problem of increased temporary employment including increased regulation of the temporary employment industry and even trying to legislate limits on corporate use of temporary workers. More than anything else though, they were intrigued by the idea of trying to set up a competing agency that would operate at a lower profit margin in order to pay living wages and provide health benefits to workers. They were also interested in structuring the temporary agency as a worker-owned cooperative. As Lange explained “We liked the idea of saying ‘Your use of temps is obscene, you ought to be hiring full-time workers, but if you won’t, use us because our temporary workers will be paid a living wage and benefits.’” 131 Lange liked the idea of developing a “supply-side” strategy for Solidarity’s organizing around work and wages. The straightforward nature of the project also appealed to him: “If we can place 65 workers a week, we will crack into the top twenty temporary agencies in the City.” The ministers and other leaders of BUILD really liked the idea of being able to directly provide job training and placement to the low wage workers they were meeting in their soup kitchens and food pantries.

Even before they began working with AFSCME, Graf and Lange pitched the BUILD leadership on at least exploring the possibility of setting up a worker-owned temporary employment agency. By providing better wages, health benefits, consistent employment and an ownership stake, Solidarity thought it could inspire greater loyalty and commitment on the part of its temporary workers, which in turn would result in better job performance than their competitors could provide. In the Spring of 1993, they hired the local African-American consulting firm of Avis and Les Ransom to conduct a feasibility study. The findings of their study reinforced Solidarity’s hunches about a potential market niche for a better-paying temp agency. The vast majority of temporary workers interviewed said they would prefer permanent positions but as long as they were working temp they would prefer to work for an agency they trusted and that paid them at a higher rate. In their telephone survey of five local users of temporary agencies, they found that service, quality and price were the top considerations in selecting a temporary agency and that chief among the disadvantages of using temps was the low level of loyalty, job performance and punctuality. They estimated average wages of low-skill temps to be at or near the minimum wage of $4.65 an hour. 132 One highly successful agency

131 Lange interview, 2/14/96.
132 Temp. agency feasibility study pp. 9-10.
interviewed for the study identified three factors as key to their continued growth: a well defined market niche, expert direct sales staff, close management of temps, and product differentiation based on customer needs and expectations.

Avis Ransom, one of the two co-authors of the study ended up becoming so excited about the temp agency that she agreed to come on full-time to start it. Working with the leaders of BUILD and Solidarity, Ransom determined that the “target temporary services market niche” was in the low-skill, low-wage end of the market. During the first year she concentrated on learning the ropes, recruiting clients with whom BUILD and Solidarity already had relationships, and most of all on building a dedicated core of worker-owners. In her early discussions and marketing pitches, Ransom found that some firms understood right away the value of having workers with a stake in the business. Trained and supervised closely by Lange and Graf, Ransom worked to integrate the organizing culture of the IAF into her work with the temporary workers she recruited.

By the end of the first year, the temp agency was placing only about 2 or 3 workers a day at about two or three client companies but Ransom had identified some excellent talent to help in the training and recruitment of workers. A number of her best staff recruiters and temp workers came out of the ranks of the ex-offender and ex-addict populations. Many were actively involved in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous programs and resonated to the idea of a worker cooperative. In 1999, Ransom and Lange made a visit to the highly successful Culinary Workers local of the HERE in Las Vegas to gain insight into how their hiring hall operated so successfully in training and placing workers at the City’s casinos at an excellent rate of pay and benefits. The local was nationally renowned for its ability to keep housekeeping and other blue-collar occupations as full-time jobs at middle class wages, while these jobs had degraded to low-paying, part-time work in so many other places in the country.

By June of 2000, the temporary agency was placing between 70-90 workers a day and billing over a million dollars a year. The agency had become the main supplier of labor for the convention center. In building the cooperative, the agency creatively applied some of the lessons from the Culinary Union, beginning with the Las Vegas local’s use of hiring lists. The agency’s biggest niche was in food service, where Lange claimed it was actually setting the wage: “If you are supplementing your income by being a banquet person, you are better off to join us because...
we are paying two dollars more an hour. We charge more. How can we do this? Because they are incredibly reliable. Avis says they are the most reliable group of temps in the City and that is why we can charge more. They are clean, well-mannered, well-trained, they have a strong sense of ownership, show up on time, pray before work...They are model employees. We have no trouble placing them.”

Solidarity and BUILD were incredibly proud of the growth of the temporary agency. They were pleasantly surprised at the level of integration of temp workers into the broader political activities of both groups. Less than three years after its founding, there were temp workers in the leadership of Solidarity. Temp workers led a campaign to close down pay-day lending establishments, and temp workers were sitting on the BUILD strategy team.

*Dues Deduction and Benefits Administration*

The living wage victory achieved a concrete monetary benefit for an estimated 4,000 city contract workers. While Solidarity had organized a strong activist base among some of these workers, it had not succeeded in using the organizing around the living wage to create a strong dues-paying membership base at most contract employers covered by the wage. According to Lange “Our strategy of mobilizing workers and signing them up while organizing for the living wage had problems. The bill was an abstraction. We were able to build a core of workers in support, but the blitzes we did at this time did not yield a stable membership base. We had the dilemma that at $4.25 an hour, turnover in these workplaces was enormous. Our lists of workers were stale in a matter of weeks, sometimes days. We needed to raise the wages in order to stabilize the workforce in order to have a group to organize.”

While enactment of the Living Wage law posed something of a “free rider” problem in the sense that all contract workers, regardless of their membership in Solidarity would be receiving it, Solidarity saw two opportunities for using the implementation of the law as a means to build its membership base. First, the organization knew that a number of contractors would not implement the living wage without a fight. Mounting that fight gave Solidarity an opportunity to go in and organize and recruit members. The living wage increases were set to go into effect when contracts expired, so they planned to compile a list of specific contract

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133 Ransom interview 1997.

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expiration dates, reach out to workers at each site and provide support to them in demanding the living wage in exchange for joining Solidarity.

Second, although the living wage law scheduled wage increases every six months to a year, these increases did not go into effect automatically. The organization knew that to ensure each wage increase, campaigns would need to be mounted and that this would provide predictable opportunities to go out and organize. The organization planned to grow its membership base by systematically reaching out to workers employed at city contractors who were now receiving or eligible to receive the living wage. Given the broad sweep of public services that had been privatized, and the decentralized nature of city contracting, the organization had its work cut out for it. On top of these challenges there was yet one more: once it did make contact with workers and convince them to join, Solidarity faced the vexing problem of systematizing dues collection.

In the beginning, Solidarity collected dues by hand. However, Lange and others soon became convinced that in order to build a large and consistent membership base, they would need to achieve some form of dues deduction from member’s paychecks. Later, even with the “members only” benefits package to offer, there was still a significant inconsistency of membership. People would join and pay dues for a few months, but the organization struggled to get around to all the worksites every month to collect the month’s dues. They were able to set up a sort of shop steward system, but only at a small percentage of the organized worksites. Add to this the high turnover in many of the contract jobs, and Solidarity faced a real problem. They expressed as much to AFSCME in October of 1996. Lange and Graf sent a progress report to AFSCME in which they stated: “To grow beyond 200-250 members and to institutionalize the workers organization, dues and benefit check-off is essential. We put together a benefits package and were able to convince two employers related to BUILD (School Sisters of Notre Dame and Gladney Transportation) to voluntarily withhold dues. However to institutionalize a membership base for SSC, we can not rely on the good will of employers…”

Given the inhospitable nature of federal labor law and the general hostility of employers toward unions, Solidarity’s goal of getting City contractors to agree to deduct dues from workers’ paychecks without first insisting on an election as proof of majority representation was extremely ambitious. Even in situations where an individual contractor agreed to it, as was the case with Red Coats—the contractor at the state-owned World Trade Center, the company’s
attorneys couldn’t figure out how to do it legally. Lange asked the AFSCME legal department to research the issue. AFSCME’s lawyers as well as Red Coat’s concluded that it was a violation of the Labor Management Relations Act as well as Department of Labor rules for money to be directly conveyed to a union without a collective bargaining agreement. Their recommendation was to come up with an essentially meaningless collective bargaining agreement that workers would pre-ratify and then show to Red Coats, but Solidarity wanted a tool that could be used more widely.

With the help of AFSCME, Lange researched the legal options for creating a voluntary employees’ beneficiary organization, or IRS 501©(9), and developed a strategy to use it as the vehicle for the dues check-off for “worker sponsored benefits.” In this way, the contractor would not be conveying the money directly to a union, but to an account controlled directly by the worker, and that worker’s decision subsequently to contribute the money to the union was a totally separate act. AFSCME’s legal department helped work out the particulars, and building on its support from Mayor Schmoke and several powerful members of the council, SSC mounted a campaign on the Board of Estimates. On September 1, 1996, the Board passed a resolution approving a system of mandatory payroll deduction (mandatory for the employer to do it, but voluntary for the individual worker to sign up for it). Locating the dues deduction policy firmly in the context of the living wage and social compact ideas, the preamble began: “Whereas, it is in the interest of all citizens of Baltimore City that working men and women have health and welfare benefits and insurance coverage and...many part-time employees of city contractors do not enjoy employer-sponsored benefits due to part-time status and lack of benefit plans...”

SSC negotiated with Ideal Bank, a black-owned bank in Baltimore to be the intermediary institution. The procedure put in place had the worker sign an authorization form and submit it to their employer, which granted permission to withhold funds from their weekly paycheck. An account was then created for the worker at Ideal. Once a month the bank would carry out a cost-free transfer from those accounts into accounts that were controlled by Solidarity—one of which was designated to go for dues and the other for benefits. The different providers would be paid out of these funds. Ideal made special efforts to accommodate Solidarity. According to Lange “We had to find a bank that would be willing to change their rules and allow low wage workers to open accounts at far below the usual opening balance required, typically $150.” In exchange for the Bank’s cooperation, Lange worked to see that some of the financial resources of
Solidarity, BUILD and some of its member churches were moved over to Ideal Bank. Also, as it turned out, a number of the Solidarity members who joined in this manner checked off more than the monthly liability for dues and benefits—using it as an opportunity to open a savings account—for many the first one of their lives.

Even with this creative solution to the problem of dues deduction in a minority union model, there were still major negatives to overcome. The resolution required city contractors to give the option of check-off to employees for worker sponsored benefits but it did not require the employer to tell employees about it. In other words, if the worker presented the employer with the completed worker sponsored benefit form, the employer was required to cooperate and facilitate the paycheck deduction, but it did not mean that the employer had to proactively inform the employee about the option—that was up to Solidarity. To deal with this problem, some service unions, like the powerful culinary workers in Las Vegas, have won a system of “reverse referral” in their contracts. This system requires employers to tell those seeking employment at their casinos about the union and to send them over to the hiring hall to sign up and also to receive training. Lange visited Las Vegas and very much liked what he saw, but he knew that the culinary union was able to win reverse referral language in its contracts because of the power it had built in the labor market. He knew that it would be a long while before Solidarity wielded that kind of power.

Hotels

From 1993 through 2000, as it experimented with its benefits package and dues deduction, Solidarity mounted a number of organizing efforts in several segments of the low wage labor force including hotel housekeepers, downtown janitors, school bus drivers, food service workers and childcare workers.

In the Fall of 1993 and Winter of 1994, in tandem with their pursuit of the living wage, organizers spent several months reaching out to hotel and building service workers. Organizers were hoping to recruit an initial base of workers for the downtown workers association that would then become the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee. In February, they pulled together initial meetings of downtown workers from each of these industries where those in attendance voted to take the next step of organizing small meetings among their fellow workers. Over the next six months, organizers and leaders built active committees of workers in the downtown.
hotel, building service (janitorial) and contract cleaning industries. The Organizing Institute of
the AFL-CIO sent ten interns to help conduct 750 house meetings with the goal of turning out
125 workers to a public meeting in June which they succeeded in doing. By October of 1994,
they hoped to reach the goal of recruiting one hundred and fifty workers to be the founding
members of Solidarity. That fall, with a benefits package put in place and an agreement from
AFSCME to charter Solidarity as an independent local union, the organization kicked off its
membership drive.

Very early on, Solidarity targeted the housekeeping workforces of the “big eight” hotels
within walking distance of the inner harbor. The hotels were evocative of the problems
surrounding the redevelopment of the Inner Harbor. They had been heavily subsidized with
public money and they paid very low wages to their housekeepers. Howard Jackson, a
Solidarity organizer hired through the partnership with AFSCME began making contact with
workers. When the hotel management began to recognize him and refuse him entry, Jackson
organized groups of BUILD pastors and leaders to do the outreach, meeting in hotel lobbies in
mid to late morning when housekeepers would be cleaning. The groups would fan out to cover
each floor, having conversations with as many workers as they could and collecting names and
phone numbers so that appointments could be made for a one-on-one meeting. “But we never
had any success with the hotels,” Lange remembered, “the rate of pay was a little bit higher than
custodial services and they had some benefits and hotel management were much more willing to
threaten workers in ways we couldn’t catch them doing.”

Stadium Maintenance Workers

One of the most visible symbols of public subsidy of private enterprise in Baltimore in
the early 1990’s was the newly redeveloped baseball stadium at Camden Yards, home of the
Baltimore Orioles. While a skeleton maintenance crew of about a dozen full-time workers was
employed year-round there, during the baseball season the number of maintenance workers
swelled to several hundred, primarily part-time workers who were employed by the main
contractor at Camden Yards, the Aramark Corporation. During the season of 1994, encouraged

134 Solidarity also discovered and made an issue of the fact that the Sheraton Hotel, rather than hiring regular
workers, was using Project Independence workers (Maryland’s workfare program) to clean rooms for very low
wages subsidized by the state government.
by AFSCME, Solidarity organizers signed up the vast majority of these workers on a petition in support of union representation. Shortly after a meeting between BUILD leaders and the Stadium Authority to press for recognition of the union, Solidarity staff were informed by AFSCME that the Hotel and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) intended to file a formal complaint against AFSCME with the AFL-CIO for raiding. HERE claimed that the previous winter it had signed up a majority of the permanent employees in support of forming an HERE bargaining unit, and had already been in the process of negotiating with Aramark before Solidarity undertook its organizing efforts. Solidarity organizers found the revelation that an organizing campaign had been in progress shocking, because not a single worker among the hundreds they talked to had ever mentioned HERE or that another drive was under way. Although never able to prove it, they suspected that Aramark had contacted HERE after Solidarity’s effort was well underway, in the hope of choosing what the company would have perceived as a less militant union to work with. Nevertheless, after some negotiations at the AFL-CIO between the two international unions, Solidarity was instructed by AFSCME to abandon its efforts, and organizers watched in frustration as HERE negotiated a union contract at minimum wage for the part-time workers at Camden Yards.

Janitors

Solidarity’s other early strategy was to organize a union among janitors in downtown office buildings and work toward a master agreement along the same lines as the Service Employees’ Justice for Janitors (J for J) campaign. But the organization’s strategic approach differed from J for J. Lange posed the difference this way, “When you are organizing people who are virtually powerless, the question becomes: with what power do you ask people to take the first step—power they can muster themselves or like-minded power from allied institutions?” The organization’s strategy differed from the J for J approach in that it hoped to win by leveraging the power of BUILD’s network of black churches, political connections and foundation allies, rather than by, in Lange’s words “unfairly asking minimum wage workers to go into a dubious battle of disruption.” Just as it had worked with foundation allies in town for national conventions to bring pressure to bear on hotels and leave notes for the housekeepers, it worked with them in similar ways to help with the building service organizing. The organization’s initial modus operandi was to rent a bus, bring the foundation directors
downtown, along with 50 or 60 workers, and hold meetings with every tenant in an office building. During one such action, Solidarity organizers met Greg Pinkard, the largest owner of downtown commercial office space, who was also the head of the local chapter of the Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA).

Initially, Pinkard offered to try to broker a deal between Solidarity and BOMA. If Solidarity would drop the living wage campaign, BOMA would agree to a collective bargaining relationship, albeit at a significantly lower hourly rate than that being proposed through the living wage campaign. Graf and Lange decided that they could not agree to that because the living wage would benefit a greater number of workers. Over a series of meetings, Pinkard offered to participate in a pilot project whereby the living wage would be extended to three buildings. Between these three buildings and the World Trade Center, the organization hoped to have the beginnings of a base downtown from which to organize toward a master agreement.

The organization was able to create a very strong organizing committee at the World Trade Center, which was operated by the state Port Authority. Solidarity organizers met with the janitors weekly at a downtown McDonald's and worked with them to mount a campaign to be covered under the living wage law. By February of 1996, a majority of custodians were signed up on Solidarity “recognition” cards and BUILD and Solidarity began to press Rentokil, the cleaning contractor at the World Trade Center, the Port Authority and the governor to recognize the union and extend the living wage to the workers there. Over the course of these negotiations, Solidarity discovered that Rentokil, which was refusing to pay the living wage, was charging 40% more than the local industry average for similar property. The organization made the case to the governor that Rentokil’s fees were so inflated that he could build living wage into the next bid and it would still not cost the state any more money. The governor agreed to require the living wage, and when the contract was put out for bid, Rentokil lost out to Red Coats. Red Coats, by honoring the Right of First Refusal ordinance, retained the existing workforce, whose pay increased from $4.40 to $6.60 in a single stroke. It paid the living wage, and agreed to offer payroll deduction for Solidarity benefits and dues to World Trade Center workers. In July of 1996, Solidarity organized a major celebration at the World Trade Center where Governor Glendening was invited to personally hand out the first paychecks at the new living wage rate.

An interesting side note was that WTC workers at the weekly meetings began to express worry about losing their jobs. According to Lange, “Every day people lined up to get jobs because of the publicity around the wage increase.
During the living wage campaign, BUILD and Solidarity became aware of just how centrally Johns Hopkins University figured in the economic life of the City. Between Johns Hopkins Health Systems and the University itself, it was not only the City’s single largest employer. In addition, through its for-profit arm, Broadway Services Inc. (BSI), Hopkins was the largest cleaning contractor in Baltimore. Although not covered under the living wage ordinance, BSI held several city contracts for cleaning schools and operating municipal parking structures. Solidarity felt that BSI was a good target because of its connection to Hopkins, where there was a strong living wage support organization among faculty and students and because BSI was perceived “as a minimum wage employer that offers no benefits, [and was thus] vulnerable to public scrutiny.” Also, BSI had fired two workers for their union organizing activities and Solidarity had filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on their behalves. Lange felt that BSI stood to lose its city contracts if the unfair labor practices were upheld and Mayor Schmoke was pressured to honor his commitment to cancel the contracts of labor law violators. The strategy was to offer to settle the case against BSI in exchange for neutrality and card-check recognition among the 250 BSI school custodians and 50 more who worked in a downtown office building. This strategy was not successful but Solidarity continued to organize BSI workers and to push Hopkins to pay the living wage.

Although the World Trade Center efforts did succeed, the other forays into building service organizing did not. Pinkard reneged on his commitment; the BOMA pilot project never came to pass; and Solidarity eventually shifted its strategy on BSI, abandoning real organizing among workers there and instead trying to win living wage for BSI workers through a campaign to get the City to expand the living wage ordinance. In the end, Solidarity did not pursue an organizing drive of downtown janitors. The sixty workers of the World Trade Center continued to pay dues to Solidarity right up until the time the organization negotiated with the SEIU to turn the workers over to form one of the nucleuses of the Justice for Janitors effort that began in Baltimore in the spring of 2000. “Because of jurisdictional stuff, AFSCME was not interested in messing with SEIU or the hotel workers,” Lange told me. “We are going to end up giving up our

For the first time, workers are in the position of really wanting to keep their jobs, so we are doing training on what they can and can’t do” He laughed when he told me that “We have spent the last month meeting with them at McDonalds explaining what it is to have a job you want to keep and how to hold onto it...fulfilling this regular union function.”
local at the World Trade Center to SEIU, and the SEIU building services local has joined BUILD."

Despite earlier tensions between Solidarity and SEIU, the organization came out strongly in support of the organizing drive. At the time, Lange told me “Last week I introduced the head of the Justice for Janitors organizing campaign as our newest member of BUILD. I said SEIU is coming here to complete a mission of ours to organize the downtown janitors which we have wanted to do for a long time and have had trouble doing, and we are going to support their efforts.” In their work with members and with the press, Solidarity portrayed the effort as the unfinished business of the living wage effort in Baltimore.

Bus Companies

Another blue-collar occupation that had been entirely contracted out by the City was school bus driving. These workers were covered under the living wage ordinance and had been another early focus of Solidarity’s recruitment efforts. Employed by four or five local contractors, the bus drivers reported for work each day at bus yards where organizers had easy access to them and could work to recruit them to join Solidarity. After winning the dues check-off language from the City, Solidarity organizers redoubled their efforts to recruit the school bus drivers. In the earliest days of Solidarity’s organizing, it developed a particularly warm relationship with the owner of Gladney Transportation, who testified in support of the living wage and voluntarily implemented dues deduction for Solidarity’s benefits package prior to the passage of the payroll deduction ordinance. Lange recalled “We didn’t have to run a bunch of ugly actions, he thought it was the right thing to do, and he did it.” For Lange, one downside was the top-down nature of the organizing: instead of organizing them directly, it was Gladney who brought Jonathan and the other organizers into contact with the workers and helped facilitate the check-off.

Ninety-five percent of Gladney’s bus drivers enrolled in Solidarity and many turned out to organizational events and actions. Gladney, a member of Knox Presbyterian, one of the BUILD churches, was lifted up by the organization as an exemplary employer and received the organization’s first living wage award. Pointing to Gladney as an example, Solidarity was able to get commitments from the other bus companies to offer dues deduction. Recruitment of bus
drivers figured prominently in the recruitment goals that the organization set for the Fall of 1995 and the Winter and Spring of 1996, targeting five contractors for a total of 150 new members.

In a February 1996 progress report to AFSCME, Lange spotlighted Gladney Transportation: the number of workers opting for dues deduction had swelled to more than 80 workers as the company had grown and taken over additional transportation routes, and the new hires had joined Solidarity. “We are encouraging Gladney to expand his operations” Lange reported, “and he is willing to bid on some cleaning contracts which would help us get recognition and dues deduction for some additional members.” The relationship soured however, when Gladney refused to implement the second step of the living wage, claiming that he had been under the impression that the City was going to reimburse him for the pay increase from $6.10 to $6.60. After paying the increase for two weeks, he took it back when he realized that he was not going to be reimbursed. Other bus contractors, following Gladney’s lead, also refused to implement the wage.

In a contentious meeting, the bus drivers demanded to know which side Solidarity was on and demanded that it work with them to press Gladney to implement the raise. In a rally at Gladney's bus yard, the drivers and organizers walked over to the office and confronted Gladney and were told that he would not implement it without more money from the City. Over the next few months, the organizers worked with Gladney workers to mount a series of actions; in the process becoming a much stronger local unit of Solidarity. In a meeting with the Mayor and the Purchasing Department, the workers reviewed the terms of the contract and were reassured that Gladney was expected to implement the wage. As it turned out, the pay increase was built into the contract and it clearly stipulated that the wage be paid. Solidarity won the fight with Gladney and the other bus contractors, and forced them to provide back pay to the all the bus drivers. “We didn’t exploit it well enough at the other small contractors to use it build membership,” Lange recalled. “...If we had more organizers we would have been able to organize small actions and train and develop a whole bunch of leaders...” After this fight, Solidarity moved on to other industries and none of the other bus companies were signed up for dues deduction.

Food Service Workers

Food services in the public high schools was another industry that had been contracted out, first to the Marriott Corporation and then to the Aramark Corporation, as mentioned in the...
previous example of the maintenance workers at Camden Yards, one of the largest national service contractors. Solidarity knew a little bit about Aramark around the country and knew that unlike Marriott, which had always been ideologically opposed to unions, Aramark did have union contracts in some parts of the country. The company was already paying the living wage in its school contracts for bus aids and cafeteria workers. In late 1997, knowing that Aramark’s contract would be up in the Spring of 1998, Solidarity targeted these workers for organizing and began the process of reaching out site by site and signing them up on authorization cards. The organization had by now negotiated with the City to require the benefit check-off and the organizing was proceeding well. Then in 1997, the school system, which had been under the jurisdiction of the City of Baltimore and administered by the Board of Estimate, was taken over by the State of Maryland. “Critical for us is the benefit check-off.” Said Lange in January of 1998. “We had the City ready to do it and implement it, and then the employer changed and now they don’t want to do it.” The state education department claimed that it was not required to pay the living wage and several School Board members opposed the benefits check-off, as well as the Right of First Refusal. “We told the School Board, you are trying to help these kids—one great way to help is to take their parents from $5.00 an hour to $7.10” Lange recalled. Picking up on the theme of strengthening the schools by supporting low-income families, one school board member asked Lange “If we get it, can we get the cafeteria workers to become part of the PTAs?”

In February of 1998 Solidarity won a major victory when the Baltimore School Board voted to resume paying the living wage to the cafeteria workers and bus aids, as well as to offer workers the opportunity to check-off for benefits from Solidarity. The organization felt it was poised to bring in 500-600 members through the benefits check-off. An article in the Baltimore Sun on February 24th read “But equally important to workers is a provision which will give the school contract workers the option to have money deducted from their paychecks for health insurance.” In another blow to Solidarity’s minority union strategy, a few months after the vote of the School Board, the state department of education refused to allow the benefits check-off. As a result, Solidarity had to shift it’s strategy. The organization continued to sign up workers through the Spring of that year, but once it had a majority signed up for dues deduction, it began directly targeting Aramark in a straight union organizing and NLRB election campaign.
In the end, however, Solidarity decided not to pursue the organizing drive at Aramark. In a conversation about the decision not to go forward, Lange explained “We could see the whole thing bogging us down and getting us stuck. We are still holding on to the idea of minority unionism. But once you make that decision to go for the more traditional collective bargaining route, you have to forgo the opportunity to play out the idea of payroll deduction. You give up on the idea of creating voluntary association/minority unionism labor market control through political might.” Graf expressed a similar sentiment “If we go that route, this is the end of experimentation... We may become a bigger, better, smarter, more community-based traditional union, but nothing different will come about.” Both felt that, at AFSCME’s current level of financial commitment—3 staff positions ($180,000 per year) and a $65,000 annual consulting fee to the IAF, Solidarity could not take on an election campaign, saying “If AFSCME agrees to it, they will have to bulk us up.” Critiquing the lack of progress in terms of membership organizing, Lange said “Other than having a larger membership, we have done pretty well on other parts of this. People are making $7.70 an hour and we are making an impact on larger stuff.”

In early 1998, hoping to take advantage of the payroll deduction victory to move the benefits plan toward financial self-sufficiency, the organization received funding from the Abel Foundation to hire a benefits administrator. They set ambitious goals. “By the end of the funding period, which would be in 2,000” the grant read, “we should be able to support the infrastructure of the benefits plan from the dues of the organization. At 2,000 members of the plan, paying $15 per month we would net $240,000 a year and this would allow us to increase the benefits...”

In June of 1998, Solidarity made another proposal to AFSCME about how they would meet their numeric targets for membership and the international ended up agreeing with their decision not to go for an election. Solidarity went back to pushing Aramark to accept dues deduction. Lange was encouraged by the fact that Kerry Miccioto was negotiating to bring in the entire fifty-person membership of a small Pentacostal Church on dues deduction. “This is the kind of church that generally won’t join BUILD but they want benefits and the pastor thinks everyone ought to get politically involved as individuals, just not as a church.” Lange was excited saying “If we knock off big chunks like that we won’t have trouble making our quotas
with Paul Booth. This is one reason we are less worried about numbers and more worried about industrial strength inside industries…”

SES Workers: “Permanent” Temporary City Workers

Over the course of Solidarity’s work with the cafeteria workers and bus drivers, the organization became aware of an enormous potential organizing opportunity—a group of close to a thousand employees who worked for the school system as “SES” workers in what amounted to an in-house city government temporary agency. SES workers were not covered under the City’s collective bargaining agreement. The vast majority was provided no benefits at all although a small number of full-time SES workers were offered a minimal benefit plan.

According to Lange, the ranks of SES members had swelled because, “When we won the living wage and started bidding up the wages of the contracted-out workers, one response of the Baltimore school system was to bring that work back in house. The way it was brought back in house though, was not to create full-time permanent positions, but to dramatically increase the number of SES workers the City employed.” People who had previously worked for private contractors were instead hired directly by the City, but as temporary employees. To avoid having to transition them to full-time status as city employees covered under the collective bargaining agreement after 90 days, these workers would be hired for 89 days, laid off for one day and then rehired. Solidarity felt that this practice of establishing a two-tier system of wages, benefits and representation could not have taken place without the local union’s tacit consent and this feeling reinforced the organization’s mistrust of the local’s leadership. “From our perspective,” Lange said, “District Council 67 had to have allowed that part of the workforce to grow exponentially…either by agreeing to it or just ignoring it…and it did grow to hundreds and hundreds of workers—one estimate was well over a thousand SES employees.” In 1999 and 2000, Solidarity had tremendous success signing up the majority of these workers to become members, and then sought the assistance of the international union in negotiating with the municipal workers local 67 to discuss what to do. Rather than allowing Solidarity to affiliate the SES workers, a move that would have significantly increased the organization’s union membership base, AFSCME instead decided that Solidarity had to turn the workers over to the local. With help from Solidarity, the union’s attorneys filed a grievance against the City that eventually went to arbitration and was decided in its favor. As a result, all the SES employees
became members of District Council 67. Solidarity was tremendously disappointed to lose the opportunity to build its membership base, but it also understood the international union’s rationale. Lange summed up the organization’s ambivalent feelings: “...The best option would have been for us to build an organization, which was of course what we wanted to do. It would have been to say officially these workers work for the City, but this is an in-house temp agency so it falls under Solidarity’s charter from AFSCME. But the actual best thing for the workers was for them to become city employees and gain city benefits and get into the bargaining unit.”

**Solidarity shifts its stance on collective bargaining: the Head Start campaign**

In the late Spring of 1998, after their failure to organize the hotels and janitors and after it began looking less likely that they would succeed in organizing Aramark food service workers, Solidarity decided that childcare was the next logical industry to organize and began organizing Head Start workers.

Organizers had a variety of reasons for targeting Head Start. First, childcare was a large and rapidly growing sector of the low wage workforce, especially given welfare reform’s work requirements on parents of young children and the fact that so many mothers with childcare experience were entering the workforce. Organizers believed that Head Start could yield about 600-700 members for Solidarity. Second, childcare workers were tremendously underpaid, untouched by the living wage law, no other union was trying to organize them and they were a discrete occupational group.

Third, although Head Start was the best employer in terms of wages, health insurance and other benefits, their health care plan was expensive and of low quality. Solidarity hoped that this problem would provide an incentive for the agencies to come together with the union. Head Start was required by law to provide health insurance, but its agencies were struggling to raise wages and pay for a health insurance plan that was more than token for many of its lowest paid workers. Solidarity leaders and organizers were intrigued by the idea of trying to create a multi-employer fund for health benefits. “Healthcare is a big selling point for employers.” Lange explained, "Small employers are mandated by Head Start to purchase healthcare but given a budget that is inadequate to buy anything very good. Some are subsidizing it out of other funds, but many of them are losing teachers because of bad health insurance and no pensions, so it is a selling point.”
Fourth, at the time, the Baltimore Head Start program was solely funded through the federal government. The state made no contribution to the program. BUILD and Solidarity knew that in order to raise wages and provide better health insurance, more money would have to be found. They felt confident in their power to organize for a state budget allocation to Head Start. They believed that their political power to do this would make them attractive partners to the Head Start directors.

Fifth, many of the Head Starts were hosted inside of churches that were members of BUILD and the contradiction of living wage advocates paying low wages created an opening. Lange said “The low wages that are paid to the service workers in Head Start are a contradiction to our insistence that the Baltimore corporate community pay a living wage.” When confronted with the problem, the director of Head Start for the City pleaded poverty, saying that she would have to make deep cuts in other parts of the program if they were forced to pay the living wage: “We agreed that if we could find state funding they would earmark the funds to raise the level of benefits of the lowest paid workers.”

It was during the Head Start campaign that Solidarity finally ended its prohibition on collective bargaining campaigns. Lange told me “I am convinced we cannot institutionalize this without collective bargaining and that we can do it without turning ourselves into a grievance machine. But we will still try to do pattern bargaining of master contracts.” When asked what convinced him, Lange replied,

“Three thousand people who joined that we never see. The membership benefits we offered, the political empowerment we were doing, worked for a small part of the membership and we can’t sustain it. The number of people who actually joined and paid dues at some point is 3,000 but the active dues-paying base today is about 500. The irony is that the SEIU organizer told us they consider themselves members of Solidarity, even if they have not paid dues for two or three years.

Lange and Graf also knew that AFSCME’s patience with Solidarity’s minority union approach was fading in the light of their inability to make dues check-off work to consolidate a union membership of any size. The larger labor movement was also assessing their efforts as a failure. Lange said “Our winning will demonstrate the power of community-based organizing to the unions. They will not accept as a victory what we have done so far if it is not tied to
collective bargaining because they only have one measure of success—the number of people covered under a collective bargaining agreement.”

AFSCME granted Solidarity permission to mount a collective bargaining campaign of Head Start workers. The organization decided on a strategy of signing up a majority of workers on union authorization cards and then asking the director of the agency for voluntary recognition of the union. Taking this approach, they signed up three Head Start agencies, each with about 40 workers. Solidarity also organized Head Start directors and workers across the City to participate in a legislative campaign to win a grant to the program from the state as well as to create a childcare multi-employer fund. The idea was to create a Taft-Hartley multi-employer health and welfare fund in which each employer would make a contribution to the fund as mandated by their collective bargaining agreement which would specify that a certain percentage of the total payroll go into the fund. It would be administered by a joint committee of Solidarity and the employers association who would set the rate of contribution and purchase benefits on behalf of all the members. Lange wrote the charter for the fund in such a way that it could include other childcare employers, not just Head Start: “They don’t have to be Head Starts, they just have to have a collective bargaining agreement with our union in order to join.”

After the 1998 election in which BUILD played such a central role in getting out the vote for Glendening’s re-election, the Governor fulfilled his promise to include five million dollars in funding for Head Start in his budget proposal. But in the legislature this proposal met with some opposition from the for-profit wing of the industry. Lange recalled, “It was in Annapolis that we began to understand how strong the low wage child care lobby is. The childcare advocates are not monolithic in their politics. The for-profit part of the industry was very interested in BUILD not raising the wages or benefits of low wage Head Start workers. They were very clear that they were operating in the same labor market...they felt that any increase in wages would put upward pressure on them to raise wages as well.” In the end, in 1999 the legislature earmarked two and a half million dollars for Head Start—the first state funds ever contributed in the history of the program. The organization claimed a partial victory and planned to go back during the next legislative session for funding to endow a multi-employer health benefit fund for Head Start workers.

During the 2000 session BUILD and Solidarity succeeded in getting the governor to allocate $500,000 to set up the first multi-employer health care plan for childcare workers in the
country. The next year the groups were able to win a supplemental budget allocation of 3 million dollars to put the benefits plan into place, but in the end Solidarity was never able to make it happen. Local Head Start affiliates opposed using the money for this purpose. They wanted to use it instead for expanding their programs, so that when the state RFP came out, it was impossible for Solidarity to apply for the money to set up the multi-employer fund. The extra 3 million did free up other money that could then be used to raise wages at the bottom of the salary scale up to the living wage. “This was our attempt to do something innovative but the existing structure got in the way,” Lange felt.

In assessing their failure to set up the multi-employer fund, he believed that the organization had made two mistakes. The first one was in not working the bureaucracy to understand and support their proposal. The Governor understood what they were trying to do and put the funding in place, but the state childcare bureaucracy and the Head Start directors never totally understood the idea. Second, from the beginning, Solidarity had presented the proposal as a substitute for raising wages, saying in essence: since we can’t raise wages, let’s improve benefits. When the opportunity came along to apply more money directly to raises, that is what the Head Start agencies preferred to do.

While Solidarity was glad for the wage increases and received a lot of the credit from the workers for having gone to bat for them, the leadership strongly regretted their inability to create the multi-employer fund. “The fund would have built the organization -- wages won’t. We would have controlled the health and welfare fund. We would have used it to help organize other sets of low wage workers.”

AFSCME dealt the other fatal blow to the Head Start organizing campaign when it pulled out of the partnership with BUILD and withdrew its funding and support for the collective bargaining campaign. The final disagreement came over two issues. The first had to do with the campaign itself: while Solidarity had succeeded in winning voluntary recognition from three Head Starts, it was, in the words of Lange “obvious we weren’t going to get Catholic Charities without a big fight, and we couldn’t have a big fight because of BUILD’s relationship with the Cardinal.” Catholic Charities represented about 50% of the Head Starts in the City of Baltimore and they were strongly opposed to unionization, even going so far as to hire a union-busting firm to advise them on how to resist the drive. “Our relationship with the Cardinal was very important. He could tell the churches they can’t belong to BUILD. Saint Veronica’s is BUILD’s
single largest unit, they would not have supported our going after Catholic Charities.”

Solidarity’s strategy was to organize around Catholic Charities, signing collective bargaining agreements with the other Head Starts and then wearing down the Catholic Charities Head Starts over time. AFSCME decided it did not want to invest resources into this kind of long-term campaign. It was not interested in having only the three Head Start units whose workers would be an appendage to another local, isolated from a larger bloc of childcare workers, and expensive for the union to service.

The second reason that AFSCME decided to sever the relationship was Solidarity’s continued insistence on remaining independent of the local public employees union. In the wake of AFSCME’s withdrawal, Solidarity felt it was left with two choices. The first choice was to affiliate with another union or start an independent union and do formal recognition agreements of their members with that union. The second choice and the one the organization opted for, was to transform the Head Start campaign from a union organizing drive to an organizational affiliation drive where the Head Starts themselves would join BUILD as organizational units.

“This is a poor substitute,” Lange said “but with the current level of staffing and funding and AFSCME’s unwillingness to take it all the way, it was the only thing we could do.”

**Solidarity Today**

As noted above, Solidarity eventually ceded its World Trade Center members to the SEIU Justice for Janitors campaign, instead deciding to pursue a strategy of working with the SEIU and HERE locals -- which were all beginning to organize in Baltimore again -- and getting them to affiliate with BUILD. By 2002, Solidarity was focusing most of its efforts on the temporary agency. “Solidarity,” Lange said,

has metamorphosed into an organization with a couple of hundred members who pay dues to get the benefits. Aside from that, our most active members are now around the temp agency. We were trying to be do organizing in 30 or 40 workplaces, with handfuls of workers here and handfuls of workers there, and hold it together with a lot of staff and constant mobilization...but we couldn’t do it. So what we have now is a team made up of some of the workers. The worker-owners of the agency are by far our most active members. Their board is where the heart and soul of Solidarity is now.
In the hope of strengthening membership recruitment and especially retention, the organization has done two things. First, it recently upgraded its benefits package and is marketing it to living wage workers. Second, although it was a part of the organization’s goals from the very beginning, Solidarity has begun actively pursuing a plan to buy a building and open a worker center at the intersection of two major bus lines.

Solidarity’s vision of a worker center draws its inspiration from three sources: the settlement house of the Catholic Worker movement, the union hiring hall and contemporary worker centers such as those run by the culinary workers local in Las Vegas and the Workplace Project in Long Island.

A recent proposal to the Tides Foundation elucidated the motivation behind moving forward with the worker center. It reviews the accomplishments and failures of Solidarity in its eight years of organizing:

Our organizing has yielded many victories. BUILD’s Living Wage campaign ignited a national movement and coined a recognizable phrase in most households around the country. We led major policy campaigns... We built a positive and mutually supportive culture among our top leaders. In a time of growing privatization, we republicized several hundred city jobs. We built a cooperative temp agency that not only pays a living wage but also a dividend to its worker owners. We re-engaged many low-wage workers in political thinking. These leaders have acted at the highest levels of city, state and occasionally federal levels. We joined with a large collective of diverse leaders in BUILD to complete historic voter registration and turnout in state and local elections... Over 3,000 people have paid dues at one time or another. What we have not done is build an institution capable of sustaining this fight for justice. The SSC worker center is the next chapter we are ready to write and sustain the fight.

Lange, Graf and the other Solidarity and BUILD leaders cite low wages and a high level of mobility as the two factors that most contributed to making the constituency of Solidarity so difficult to organize and keep organized. “In Solidarity, we have tried to follow people through various workplaces and neighborhoods with some success. We have also tried to steal enough of peoples’ limited time to build relationships and move them into action with some success. One objective of the new worker center is to develop a critical mass of basic services and programs so that people will move through the center regularly and frequently to take care of basic needs. Instead of SSC leaders and organizers having to follow people, we will have a place where people can gather for a variety of reasons...”
Another recent internal paper summarized two important lessons that have informed Solidarity’s accelerated efforts to open a worker center. The first is that “all people are already organized in one way or another—which may or may not lead to justice.” The second is that one of the best ways to organize “people power” is to work through those already existing institutions that "share common democratic values.” The paper poses the question—“which institutions have organized poor and working class citizens,” and answers it: “Churches, unions, Narcotics Anonymous, prisons, temporary agencies, the child care industry, check-cashing agencies/predatory lenders, and emergency rooms.” It goes on to say, “churches…and unions...are organizations that have shown an interest in formally affiliating with our worker center. NA is a network that cannot engage in political activity or affiliate with any other group, but may want to use a center to hold meetings. Prisons are institutions that fail to give people opportunities for rehabilitation and upward mobility but are full of people who are seeking such things. Temporary jobs and the need for child care, health care, loans and other financial services are examples of programs and services that people need and that can be provided in a much more fair and just way if organized as cooperatives."

The center would provide a physical space for Solidarity to bring workers together for political education and organizing training. It would house the temporary agency, the worker-sponsored benefits plan, a recreation center and a café or coffee shop. But it would also provide a wide variety of hands-on services to low wage workers including: a child care cooperative, a financial education and on-line banking center, a communications center where members could have voice mail, mail boxes and e-mail accounts, homeownership, credit and legal counseling, job training programs and a place for AA and NA groups to meet.

In my final interview with Jonathan Lange in the summer of 2002 he summarized the last eight years of experimentation with low-wage worker organizing in Baltimore, and said,

We always wanted to build our own organization -- a union, but an independent one that would not be part of the AF of L, or that would be part of it later, but would be coming from a place of power. Lacking the ability to have a labor intensive staff, we were more than willing to get into relationship with AFSCME and organize a union not through collective bargaining, but through political activity and build a workers organization that crossed all sorts of jurisdictional lines. But then a year and a half ago, I became convinced that the only way to institutionalize the organization was to become a local and do collective
bargaining. That is why we decided to do Head Start. Then as soon as we started, I was reminded once more of the limitations of working that way.

Lange described the years of building Solidarity as, first, a process of knowing what they wanted to do in terms of organizing a union of the working poor; then, identifying what would need to be done in order to do it; and finally doing the next best thing, instead. He said,

the campaign has always proceeded via the question 'what is the next best thing we can do now...?' The living wage was the next best fall-back at the time to raising the wages of all private and public low wage service sector workers, which was the next best fall-back to organizing a union. The dues-deduction for SSC worker-sponsored benefits was the next best thing to union dues, and the temp agency was 'oh God, we would really like to unionize temp workers, we don't know how to do that, so let's do this instead.' Now the worker center is that too. It is us acknowledging you can either have a huge staff and try to do a land war, where you occupy every place in town or you can have some sort of place which becomes a magnet for the group you want to organize...

Conclusion

Solidarity is a very accomplished nine-year old. Over the course of its existence, it has had many groundbreaking victories. First, it established a dynamic organization of very low-wage workers in Baltimore where none had previously existed. It recruited a membership base of people who had next to no civic affiliations and little experience with public life, developed a good number of them into effective leaders and led them into direct and passionate civic engagement. Thousands of voters were registered and turned out to the polls because of BUILD and Solidarity's voter participation work. The development of Solidarity also significantly expanded the economic make-up of the membership of BUILD—adding constituencies of poor and working class African-Americans to what had been a predominantly middle-class and lower middle class organization.

Second, it succeeded not only in establishing the organization as the major voice of low wage African-American workers in Baltimore, but also in using that voice to powerfully alter the terms of debate about the right to organize, and about poverty, jobs, the minimum wage, economic development, and welfare policy in the City (see chart below). By making the connection between economic arrangements and democratic prospects in its social compact campaign -- and the national living wage movement it spawned -- Solidarity resurrected a fundamental debate about the role and purpose of the market economy in American life.
Third, its campaigns won concrete improvements in the lives of certain segments of the poor and working poor. The living wage campaign directly increased the wages of approximately 3,000-4,000 low wage service sector workers, from the minimum wage of $4.25 to $6.10 an hour, and arguably had a positive impact on a much broader number of workers' hourly wages – all this, without increasing unemployment significantly\(^\text{136}\) and without much additional cost to the City of Baltimore.\(^\text{137}\) The Right of First Refusal and Right to Organize municipal ordinances and the Non-Displacement executive order at the state level (coupled with the living wage ordinance) all contributed to re-establishing a set of labor market protections in a segment of the low wage labor market. The School Counts program has helped more than a thousand welfare recipients stay in community college and count their schooling as work experience.

Fourth, Solidarity’s work had an impact far beyond the Baltimore City limits. Their living wage victory catalyzed a national grassroots social movement with living wage as its battle cry. Fifth, in addition to the new ideas it fostered in the public policy arena, Solidarity also pioneered several new ideas relating to union organizing and dues collection in low wage settings. If those ideas have yet to bear fruit, low wage workers are still better off for the fact that these ideas were tried and can be tried again. Sixth, the organization established a successful worker-owned temporary employment agency.

In spite of all of these achievements, however, the organization’s reach -- at least in terms of union organizing -- has exceeded its grasp. Like the Workplace Project, it has enjoyed far greater success in the political arena than in the economic arena. Despite the success of the living wage campaign and the temp agency in improving the economic fortunes of some low wage workers, most attempts to directly intervene in the labor market through economic organizing have not succeeded. Solidarity has largely failed in its efforts to organize a local union of more than a few hundred members. It has largely failed in its efforts to organize a


\(^{137}\) The cost increases were less than the rate of inflation, Niedt, Ruiters, Wise and Schoenberger: 3-6.
membership through “minority union” strategies, and it has also largely failed in its efforts to do more traditional NLRB election campaigns.

Unlike the Workplace Project, Solidarity had a well-developed analysis of the low wage labor market. It prided itself on understanding power and how to leverage BUILD’s power to win things for the working poor until it could build its own power. Strategic capacity was present in abundance. So what explains the failure to achieve direct labor market intervention?

In the ten-day organizing training that communicates the universal principles that guide the IAF’s organizing approach, there is a lot of emphasis on building the broad-based organization as the over-riding priority of the organization. They are quite judgmental of organizations that engage in “issue-organizing,” in which organizations make winning on particular issues their primary goal. Instead of understanding their purpose as building the organization, these groups bounce from issue to issue and don’t attend to building and developing a membership base, ultimately degenerating into advocacy organizations that speak on behalf of others and have limited power to win. But while Solidarity did focus on individual membership recruitment and leadership development, it mostly did this in the context of issue campaigns. While Lange and Graf made a decision to depart from the usual practice of organization-building because they felt an early win was crucial to building the confidence of the members, they ended up continuing on the track of issue organizing even after the first win. In fact, during much of its life, Solidarity went from one issue campaign to the next. These campaigns were tremendously creative and effective and, in addition to the specific victories that were won, they provided great leadership development opportunities for new leaders and also won the organization excellent recognition in the media and foundation worlds. But all that issue work took its toll. Perhaps without the constant demands that accompany the energetic pursuit of an issue campaign, the organization might have been able to apply itself more completely to the base-building work of membership recruitment. Such base-building is generally the key to succeeding as a union. Solidarity’s attempt to do issue work and union organizing simultaneously may have resulted in a trade-off that hampered the organization-building agenda, even if the organization never fully grasped that it was making that choice.

Why was Solidarity so focused on winning on the issue agenda? From my conversations with Solidarity organizers, several reasons emerged. First, given the dire straits and general powerless of the working poor in Baltimore, Graf and Lange felt it was important to “put some
early numbers up on the scoreboard” in order to demonstrate to potential members that winning was possible. They also felt they needed to demonstrate the viability of the project to AFSCME, the BUILD membership and the funding community. This was much easier to do through issue organizing than union organizing. Given the fact that BUILD already had political power in the City, the shortest route to victory was to combine that power with innovative ideas and smart strategies to pass public policies.

While it is clear that there was a set of built-in advantages for Solidarity to pursue public policy, it is equally true that there was a set of built-in disadvantages for Solidarity to pursue union organizing. First of all, they could anticipate strong employer opposition. As outlined earlier in the chapter, most employers put up a serious fight when faced with a union drive. Avoiding that opposition is what led to the second difficulty: embracing alternative minority union strategies. These were either too difficult to pull off or sustain for a long enough period of time, or they were untested and quite likely to run up against unsympathetic labor law. Both of these obstacles kept the organization from fully investing in minority union strategies and carrying them out all the way. Third, at the low end of the service sector where Solidarity was organizing, profit margins are thinner, employers are smaller, more precarious and less able to raise wages or improve benefits on their own. For services involving public money, this reality often leads unions to pursue one or more of the following four options: 1) to never start a drive among these workers or to abandon it fairly early in the process, 2) to go to the state to get the money that employers will need in order to raise wages, 3) to try to win the support of employers or at least a pledge of neutrality in exchange for political cooperation to win more money from the state for the service and 4) to work to deny contracts to employers who resist union drives. These strategies can be successful but are often difficult to win without a significant investment of resources – which Solidarity never had.

As difficult as the above scenario is for union organizing, it is even more difficult to organize private sector employers who are not receiving public subsidy. There are the same problems of high turnover, strong employer resistance and unsympathetic labor law. These problems are coupled with the same difficulty posed by the structure of the secondary labor market—indirect relationships between owners and employers of record—only this time it is without the leverage provided by public subsidy. Because organizing under these circumstances is so much more difficult, it is essential to have an effective strategy and the resources to be able
to apply pressure across a critical mass of employers in a sector. Solidarity attempted this organizing strategy with hotels and downtown office buildings, but gave up almost before it ever began.

Another aspect of the IAF’s organizational culture may have contributed to Solidarity’s struggles with organizing a union—it’s institutional, as opposed to individual membership base. The IAF’s model for building organization is through affiliating “units” like churches and other religious institutions, and in more recent years, schools and unions. These units are carefully recruited to join and pay dues and a tremendous amount of attention is paid to leadership development among the participating members of that church, school or union, but it is the unit that joins and not the individual. The IAF clearly knows how to do this type of membership recruitment. But to build an individual-member based institution like a union requires enormous focus on recruitment, day in and day out. While IAF organizations stress the importance of one-on-one meetings and insist that their organizers do a sizeable number of them each week, what constitutes "a sizeable number" for a community organization versus a union, is dramatically different.

Unions and community organizations have different institutional imperatives. In order to win an election, a union needs to get a majority of workers at the workplace to join. In order to win on an issue, a community organization just needs to mobilize a dedicated minority. For a union to alter the labor market dynamics of a particular sector of the low wage service economy, a significant number of individual workers and workplaces have to be organized. For a community organization that is pursuing a strategy of passing public policy to alter labor market dynamics -- at least in many cases -- far fewer recruits are necessary. If there is a trade-off to be made between quantity and quality, in a union organizing drive the choice is likely to be quantity, while in the IAF it is likely to be quality.

For all of their efforts to perfect a benefits package, provide health insurance and achieve a system of dues deduction, there seemed to be more excitement in coming up with the ideas then investment in making them work over the long haul. There was a quality of impatience or at least inconsistency to Solidarity’s union organizing work. It was almost as though they were looking for the “quick fix” that would yield a lot of members all at once and were too willing to pull organizers off of one drive and put them on another if the new one promised a faster pay-off. If this had ultimately resulted in large-scale success, than this would have been the correct
judgment to make, but in the absence of an obvious choice, slogging away across employers may have been the best way to proceed.

It is tempting to blame Solidarity’s failure to recruit and retain a large membership base on a lack of selective incentives. Perhaps the benefits package and the health plan simply weren’t compelling enough to attract a large base of workers. But I am not certain that the available evidence warrants such a conclusion. At those particular worksites where Solidarity won the dues check-off and implemented it, a large number of workers signed up. The problem was that unlike in a union shop, where once under contract, the onus is on the employer to honor the collective bargaining agreement and deduct dues, the dues deduction system that Solidarity won from the City only required employers to allow individual members to sign up at their own initiative. But, given the high turnover rate, Solidarity didn’t have the level of staff or focus to constantly recruit new members or stay on top of each member as he or she moved between employers.

For much of its history, Solidarity didn’t pursue the path of organizing for collective bargaining agreements because it was philosophically opposed to doing so and thought it could organize a union without resorting to majority unionism. But what explains the failure after it reconsidered that stance? One answer is resources. Serious union organizing drives among unorganized constituencies in difficult-to-organize sectors require large staffs. Solidarity never had more than four organizers. The Head Start campaign failed for several additional reasons. First, when faced with the Hobson’s Choice of aggressively targeting the Catholic Head Starts and winning the union drive but losing the Catholic Church’s support for BUILD, Solidarity chose to forgo the Catholic Head Starts even though they accounted for more than 50% of the total workforce. AFSCME disagreed with this decision and soured on supporting the collective bargaining drive among childcare workers. Second, when faced with an ultimatum from the international union, of either affiliating with the local district council or losing the international’s financial support, Solidarity refused to affiliate, and AFSCME made good on its ultimatum. This suggests once again that, when faced with a choice between building a union or building a community organization, Solidarity and BUILD opted for the community organization.

On a final note about this preference for the community side of community unionism, my interview notes over the years reflect a continuing ambivalence on the part of Solidarity organizers about even being a union. At certain points the objection centered around the
negative associations the ministers and others had with traditional unions: "...there is
tremendous resentment inside the black church at the labor movement. This can’t be sold as a
traditional union approach because of the 50 years of pent-up anger at the American labor
movement that nobody recognizes -- and it is huge...Our not being a union has been a huge
advantage inside the BUILD organization." Or: "What would the new union look like if we
didn’t have to call it a union because the word gets in the way because people only think of it as
having a role in the workplace." As the organizers struggled more and more with building the
membership base of Solidarity, they had a tendency to flip-flop the terms they used to
characterize the whole project, sometimes continuing to speak the language of controlling labor
markets and building a union, and at other times describing it less as a separate organization and
more as a new dimension of BUILD. In later interviews over the last few years, statements were
made that directly contradicted many earlier declarations. Recently Lange said to me: "We are
not creating three separate organizations -- Solidarity, Child First and BUILD. We are creating
an organization that we hope is a larger mediating institution that is more diverse economically,
if not racially." This may have been what they did in fact end up doing, but it was certainly not
what they set out to do.

Although the Head Start campaign was explicitly undertaken to win collective bargaining
agreements in order to finally consolidate a real union local with a solid membership base, when
the campaign ran into difficulty, the organization dropped the union organizing campaign and
instead tried to get some of the Head Starts to join BUILD. Traditional union drives are usually
all or nothing propositions. In the wake of losing an election, the union just pulls up stakes and
leaves town, leaving those who supported the drive high and dry and bereft of any continuing
organization. On the one hand, at least Solidarity had a fall-back for continuing to relate to the
Head Start programs after it became clear that the union drive was not going forward. On the
other hand, Solidarity sometimes used its relationship to BUILD as an out, falling back on the
language of mediating institutions when the union organizing ran into trouble, reiterating its
ambivalence toward unions in a way that cushioned the blow of failure.

In the final analysis, I believe that what was decisive was that whenever Solidarity came
to a point where it needed to choose between political and economic organizing, Solidarity chose
politics. Given the low-ranking position in the labor market of its low wage members -- they
were unskilled and for the most part, easily replaced -- this was arguably the right choice. As we
will discuss more thoroughly in the next chapter, in politics all votes count equally, in economics, all jobs -- and all workers -- do not.

Over time, Solidarity tended to favor political over economic strategies because its efforts to organize a union were repeatedly frustrated. The coming-apart of the early partnership with SEIU and subsequent relationship with AFSCME is the major reason why the organization pursued a strategy of increasingly targeting the formerly public, contracted-out workforce and in focusing its efforts on public policy change. Whereas AFSCME’s focus is on public sector workers and hence the problem of privatization, SEIU organizes much more widely in the private sector. AFSCME was not only less able to offer advice in terms of organizing private sector workers it was not interested in Solidarity’s private sector organizing agenda. Booth made it clear, for example, that AFSCME was not inclined to put significant resources into organizing janitors. In addition, AFSCME did not want to get into jurisdictional battles with other international unions. Hence, it instructed Solidarity to drop the Camden Yards campaign in deference to the Hotel Workers local. As Lange said, “The AFSCME charter that they gave us for our little local basically outlines what we were allowed to organize and it was privatized public sector workers. We did the others [private sector workers] because we wanted to do them. It wasn’t in the charter but we wanted to do it because that was where the anger was inside of our churches. The original issue around subsidy wasn’t around the privatization of custodians in the schools, the original anger was about the 2 billion dollars in subsidies that went into the downtown and the lousy jobs that came out. We couldn’t ignore that. It was more visible and symbolic than the bus drivers and cafeteria workers in the schools who had been contracted out.”

Had the SEIU relationship endured, Solidarity not only would have been free to organize among private sector workers, but it may also have gained the level of resources necessary to do so and been able to avail itself of the strategic resources of the international union with the most experience in organizing low wage service sector workers. In an interview with Stephen Lerner of SEIU about his observations of Solidarity’s work over the first three years, he said:

We didn’t feel they knew how to do the power analysis of how you fight private sector employers as opposed to public sector and regulatory battles...Over time it has always seemed to me that they have been focused on stopping further contracting out and pushing work back ‘in-house.’ That strategy is relevant for a small number of workers but doesn’t move anybody in the private sector. So it is more adjunct to a public sector and defensive strategy as opposed to an offensive
strategy which says ‘let’s increase the total number of workers under contract and raise standards for all workers.’

Lerner felt that Solidarity lacked an understanding of what it takes to, as he put it “get collective bargaining out of these people and what it takes to organize the workers.” Graf and Lange felt that they knew how to organize the workers but were hamstrung in doing so because their union partner was AFSCME, which was only interested in public sector workers and not SEIU, which was targeting private sector workers. In terms of organizing the contracted-out formerly public sector workers, in the end, the organization was really caught in a “Catch-22.” As Lange explained, “If we bid wages up enough, the jobs would get ‘re-publicized’ and so those jobs would then fall under the jurisdiction of the city workers’ local union. If we tried to organize among the workers who had been contracted out, as we did in the case of the SES workers, once we built up a head of steam, the international told us to give the workers over to the local city workers’ union. So once again we couldn’t build up our own membership ranks. And if we organized private sector service workers we were both violating our charter from AFSCME and getting the international into jurisdictional problems with other unions.” Finally, whether or not BUILD was able to partner with SEIU, bitterness over the breakdown of negotiations combined with their critique of the weakness of leadership development in the SEIU model and of some of the Justice for Janitors’ campaign tactics may well have blinded them to the larger strategic lessons of SEIU’s organizing approach.

Even in the context of organizing around a specific employer, the organization chose policy change over consolidating a union. In his early negotiations with Lange and Graf, Greg Pinkard, the building owner and president of the building owner and manager’s association, offered a deal: if they would waive or relax the living wage requirement, he would sign a collective bargaining agreement that would give them a base of workers under agreement from which to build Solidarity. They opted not to accept his offer and instead pursued the living wage campaign because they felt it benefited a larger portion of Solidarity’s base and that agreeing to a lower wage in exchange for collective bargaining would undercut the living wage campaign. They also felt that they simply did not have the resources to pursue an aggressive organizing campaign of private sector janitors or to service workers once they were organized. “We also felt,” said Arnie Lange “that we wanted to keep trying our experiment in terms of developing alternative union structures. If we went to a traditional model, we would have to service the
units. In addition to the fact that we felt we didn’t have the resources to service these units, we felt if we took it on, the experimental focus of the campaign would be at an end.” Other organizations, especially those affiliated with labor unions have made very different choices. The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, a labor-community coalition in that city which has organized very successfully around the living wage, has always opted for union-building strategies building in strong incentives for employers to accede to unions.

Another limiting factor in terms of being able to organize a union of low wage workers of any scale in Baltimore, was the total lack of a union partner or partners to work with on the ground. Solidarity's relationship with AFSCME was always with the international union, and not the city workers' local. From the outset of the project, Lange and Graf ruled out a working partnership with the local union due to the corruption of its leadership, (and the local leadership also made clear it had no interest in collaborating.) Over the course of their organizing work with the SES contracted-out workers, this view was only reinforced, as Solidarity became convinced that a deal had been struck between the local president and the mayor to exclude large numbers of workers from the wages and protections of the union contract. Thus Solidarity was never able to partner with the local AFSCME affiliate and leverage its power at the local level. Nor were they able to tap into the power of any other local unions because during most of the time they were actively trying to build Solidarity as a local union, none of the “usual suspects”
like SEIU, HERE or CWA (the Communication Workers of America) were organizing in Baltimore. In terms of organizing low wage workers or mounting public policy fights relating to low wage work, they were really out there on their own. In addition, the larger labor movement including the area central labor body was not playing an active, public role in terms of supporting organizing or on broader economic justice issues. In answer to the question of why they didn’t develop partnerships with other local unions or work more with the local labor movement, Graf recalled: “There simply was no one to go to. The AFSCME local was corrupt, there was no SEIU to speak of, the HERE was corrupt and eventually taken over by the international, there was nothing being done in the low wage sector. Nobody was asking the question, ‘why aren’t these workers being organized?’” Imperfect though they knew their partnership with AFSCME to be, Lange and Graf were eager to at least try their hand at the experiment. “Perhaps we should have realized, given the local labor situation, SEIU pulling out, and the nature of the AFSCME local that the project could not work,” Graf reflected “but we really wanted to try to organize low wage workers in new ways, so we decided to just try to make it work.” Lange also recalled, “We went out and aggressively looked for private sector union partners. After the SEIU relationship fell apart, we went out and met with the CWA, the UAW and others but they were not interested in doing a campaign. I guess what I was thinking was if we could maintain some sort of workers’ association-like membership not just of the privatized public sector workers but general service sector workers, then at a future date we would have some options to negotiate with other unions who wanted to do collective bargaining. We always had that as an option and talked about that openly. But what we knew we couldn’t get into in the initial organizing was servicing lots of tiny little bargaining units. That would have bogged us down…” For all of these reasons, Solidarity over time, whether completely consciously or not, favored political over economic action.

Solidarity did not succeed at organizing a union. On the other hand, it did win concrete improvements in the lives of the janitors, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and childcare providers it worked with and it generated a host of creative ideas that may yet come to fruition. Whether other unions will have more success at consolidating an organization among these workers still remains to be seen, although as mentioned above, the SEIU Justice for Janitors’ campaign has come to Baltimore and has so far succeeded in its organizing. In terms of the janitors’ success, SEIU’s Lerner acknowledges that the union has Solidarity in part to thank for the sympathetic...
treatment the campaign received from the media, local government and the general public; for the talented leaders they inherited from Solidarity’s janitorial organizing, and for the public policies that have helped to stabilize and protect the low wage workforce.
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION: SOME NOTES ON COMMUNITY UNIONS AND POWER

This chapter will summarize the key findings of my dissertation, elaborate on some of its central themes and conclude with a few considerations for future research. The ideas behind this thesis took shape during the mid 1990's when I noticed that more and more community organizations were concerning themselves with issues having to do with work and wages. At the same time, it seemed that certain innovators within the labor movement were embracing “whole-labor market” or community-wide organizing strategies. Despite these scattered union efforts, it was impossible not to see that the labor movement as a whole was in very serious decline and unable to provide representation to the vast majority of low wage workers in the United States. I wanted to get a deeper understanding of the new community-based labor market institutions that were growing into the void left by the decline of unions and trying to fulfill the dual role of raising wage standards and projecting political voice among low wage workers.

In addition to developing some basic knowledge about thirty or forty of these groups that I called community unions, I selected two of them for case studies: the Workplace Project in Long Island, New York and Solidarity, in Baltimore, Maryland and followed them closely over a period of several years. From my initial observations, I identified a set of key features shared by community unions and singled out three of them as the most important: their local labor market or “place-based” focus; the centrality of identity as opposed to craft or industry to bringing workers together; and their “mini social movement” character.

A Summary of the Key Findings

The Workplace Project, the only organization of its kind in Long Island, established a vibrant community organization of Latino immigrant workers that became a well-respected voice in the media and local politics on immigration and work-related issues. The organization’s articulation of the issues resulted in much more sympathetic coverage of the issues faced by
immigrant workers. It graduated more than 500 workers from its worker rights and organizing course and forced scores of employers to pay back hundreds of thousands of dollars to settle the unpaid wage suits it brought against them. The organization even won a statewide bill in the notoriously impenetrable New York State legislature. On the other hand, its direct labor market interventions yielded only modest results.

Solidarity, a joint venture of the IAF and AFSCME, like the Workplace Project established itself as the voice of low wage, African-American workers in Baltimore—championing their issues and changing the terms of the debate about economic redevelopment. The organization developed and won one innovative public policy after another including the nation’s first municipal living wage law and the first statewide executive order banning the replacement of regular workers with welfare recipients required to work in the new workfare programs. Solidarity created a benefits package and pioneered some intriguing “minority union” strategies, but its ambition to organize a union of low wage workers was much less successful than its public policy campaigns.

Despite significant differences in origin, the Workplace Project and Solidarity ended up with a strikingly similar set of strengths and weaknesses. They created dynamic organizations for constituencies who had no place else to turn to pursue work-related issues, but their numbers remain small by union standards and they have not been able to regularize membership through systematic collection of dues. Both organizations have had a very concrete impact on the way the media reports and the larger public perceives low wage workers and their issues. They have drafted, campaigned for and won important and imaginative new public policies. But neither organization has succeeded so far at large scale economic intervention or worker organizing. At present, they seem to be best at bringing community organizing strategies to bear on labor market issues through politics and worst at doing so through economic strategies. The reason for this disparity of achievement will be explored in much greater depth below.

Early in the research, I developed a four-fold typology of community unions that was based upon organizational structure. The first category was community unions based solely in community organizations. The second was community unions based solely at labor unions. The third and fourth were community unions that were partnerships between community organizations and unions but where either the union or the community organization was the dominant partner. Later in my research, after having the opportunity to observe my two case
studies as well as a number of other organizations over a period of several years, I was able to turn the descriptive typology into a predictive one. Based upon the location of the community union in the typology, I predicted a set of outcomes regarding membership building, leadership development, climate change, public policy change and direct labor market intervention. Community unions based in or dominated by community organizations were likely to demonstrate greater strength at bringing class and identity to bear in politics than at the workplace. They were also likely to demonstrate greater strength at leadership development, as well as altering the terms of the debate about society’s approach to low wage work. On the other hand, community unions based in or dominated by labor organizations were likely to demonstrate greater strength at bringing class and identity to bear at the workplace than through politics. They also demonstrated greater strength at building and maintaining a sizeable membership base than the community-dominated organizations. They were not likely to perform as well in terms of leadership development or altering the terms of the debate.

In pursuing the dissertation, I sought some understanding about the relative importance of organizational structure to the construction of economic and political power. The evidence from my case studies as well as the broader universe of cases with which I was familiar led to the predictions I reviewed in the preceding paragraphs. But they also led me to the next puzzle: why were community-based community unions so much more successful at changing public policy than direct labor market intervention? My answer, which will be elaborated upon more below, is that it is easier for these groups to wield political power than economic power. But while I found that labor-dominated community unions do have an easier time building economic power, there is no denying that they also are struggling to do so. The truth is, labor unions today have also lost their ability in most places to significantly impact private sector labor markets. They are having more success than community organizations at establishing unions and organizing a membership base, but these are still tiny islands amidst a mighty sea of non-union establishments. This leads to my final question: If all community organizations and all labor unions are largely failing at direct, large-scale labor market intervention, might the explanation lie not in differences of individual organizational structure, but in a strategic repertoire that, given low wage labor market structures, cannot succeed?

My exploration of contemporary community unions was also motivated by a strong interest in one of the main theoretical tenets of historical institutionalism in American political
science--the so-called "work/home divide." This thesis argued that class functioned as a constitutive category for workplace struggle but that when it came to politics was trumped by other categories. But community unions, in which class and ethnicity, class and race, and class and gender marched hand-in-hand, both at the workplace and in politics, seemed to defy the work/home divide thesis. I will discuss in greater detail below the revisions my work led me to propose in the work/home divide theory. My investigation into contemporary community unions piqued my curiosity about earlier labor history. This project began with the intention of revising the work/home divide thesis on the basis of contemporary cases that seemed anomalous to it. But as I started down that path, I also identified historical examples that seemed to confound the pattern as well. The case of the waitresses, farmworkers, sanitation and hospital workers pointed to the existence of a third form of unionism in American labor history that theoreticians of industrial relations seemed to have overlooked--one in which forms of identity such as race, ethnicity and gender stood in for craft or industry.

City Trenches to City Tunnels

The work/home divide and more particularly Katzenelson's treatment of it, provided scholars and organizers with a powerful and enduring conceptual framework for understanding the history of the American working class. It provided the foundational ideas for this thesis. My arguments, labor histories and case studies resulted in a double transformation\(^1\) of the original theory.

The City Trenches argument is that the American working class evolved separate realms, or trenches, of economic and political life. Workers engaged in militant struggles with employers at the workplace and there joined unions and developed a strong class identity; while at home the potential for a militant working class politics was trumped by party politics organized along ethnic and territorial lines. In essence, class militance in the workplace did not bridge to a class-based politic. But while this was the dominant story, I found a subordinate one among women and people of color. For these workers and their unions, in place of city trenches, I found city tunnels. For waitresses, Chicano farmworkers, immigrant industrial workers and black sanitation and hospital workers, class militance at the workplace did manage to cross the

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\(^1\) In a recent conversation, Ira Katzenelson helped me to better describe and refine my findings with regard to the original theory of the work/home divide.
bridge into a class-based politic by uniting with racial, ethnic and gender identities. This was the first of the two inversions my work made to the original theory.

In my study of contemporary community unions in Long Island and Baltimore, like the historical examples, I also found groups of workers who crossed over between work and home—but in the opposite direction. The Workplace Project and Solidarity were able to bring class to bear in concert with race and ethnicity to powerful effect in politics (through direct pressure on elected officials, not through party activism) but were much less able to cross over into bringing class to bear in the workplace. This was the second inversion of the original theory.

The world of City Trenches took as “givens” strong unions and class militance at the workplace. However, as organized labor has declined, most workplaces are non-union and demonstrate little in the way of organization around wages or conditions of work. As a result, we can no longer take unions or workplace militance for granted. For today’s community-dominated community unions at least, it is easier to bring the category of social class to bear in fighting for changes in labor market policies through politics, than through workplace-based economic organization.

In the historic examples as well as in contemporary community-dominated community unions, race and ethnic identity are able to fuse with class to stand in for occupation and industry. In the examples from the past, they stood in well enough to provide the foundation for successful union organizing. In the contemporary examples of community-dominated community unions, they stand in well enough to provide the foundation for successful political organizing, but not workplace organizing. It is to a speculative explanation of these phenomena that I now turn.

**Political Power versus Economic Power**

In politics, despite the distortions of personal wealth, special interest money and skewed structures of representation, when it comes to the weighing of actual votes, each one is counted equally. Organizations that demonstrate that they have the ability to influence or mobilize a large number of votes for or against elected officials, whether those voters are rich or poor, black or white, have political power. While Solidarity was a small organization, its close connection to BUILD, Baltimore’s most powerful community organization which had a strong connection to black churches totaling hundreds of thousands of members, gave it real political power.
Solidarity’s strong ability to portray its members’ wage and work-related struggles in a sympathetic light also enhanced its political power, by, to borrow a phrase from Schattschneider, “expanding the scope of conflict”\(^2\). One can assume that, given the enormous and largely positive media attention Solidarity received, a larger number of voters, well beyond the membership of BUILD churches, were aware of the living wage campaign and agreed with its basic premise, and that elected officials believed this to be true.

On the surface, the Workplace Project’s political influence is more difficult to account for and almost certainly weaker, but it turns out to have had more in common with Solidarity than was suggested at first blush. While its majority non-citizen base had no direct political power, it had organizational allies on Long Island who did.\(^3\) In terms of the Unpaid Wages campaign, it won powerful Long Island and statewide interest groups to its side and both Newsday, Long Island’s newspaper of record, and the New York Times provided strong editorial support. Like Solidarity, it is a plausible assumption that The Workplace Project was able to translate its high visibility and strong moral standing into voter sympathy beyond the membership bases of its closest organizational allies and elected leaders knew it.

While an argument can be made that at least once a voter makes it to the voting booth, all individuals count equally, as workers in the labor market this is not true. For the most part, the members of the Workplace Project and Solidarity had little power in the labor market because they were unskilled and available in abundant supply. Skilled workers wield much more power over employers than unskilled workers, for several reasons. Through unions, trade associations, apprenticeship programs and the role they are able to play in licensing and regulation, they are more capable of controlling entry into the occupation and their incomes and market power enable them to make significant contributions toward self-organization. In skilled occupations, there is more likely to be a restricted supply of workers. With their skills in greater demand these workers have more ability to pressure employers and a more realistic exit option because they know there is demand for their skills. Their level of skill or education means that firms rely upon them heavily and do not view them as easily replaced. For these reasons, firms are willing to pay higher wages and invest more in training.

While labor markets vary by industry and occupation, firms that are competing in low-end, low skill, service sector industries often have little incentive to minimize turnover. In fact, sometimes they are incented to do the reverse—to employ people for shorter periods, keeping base wages and benefits low. Because small firms are dealing with tighter profit margins they may be less capable of raising wages or improving job quality on their own anyway. These firms face greater barriers to organization. It is harder for them to form networks, trade associations and the like. In turn, their employees face much higher barriers to organization. They can’t close off entry into the labor market. They have less money to put into self-organization. They face immigration and language barriers that make them fearful of collective action, and because they are poor and have fewer resources to fall back on, the stakes are higher in terms of the consequences of job loss. In this type of situation, the workers most in need of self-organization are least likely to achieve it. Unable to control the supply of labor into the industry, they have to organize large numbers of workers to take collective economic action. Low wage workers at larger firms and corporate giants like Walmart face many of the same obstacles to organization as mentioned above, but on top of these, they confront employers with huge resources with which to oppose union drives.

As discussed in the chapter on Solidarity, labor law shaped on old assumptions does not facilitate organizing in the new economy. Thus, despite affinities of class, race and ethnicity across workplaces, turning them into a union or any kind of effective labor market strategy is enormously difficult. This is why there is so little union organizing or any other collective action taking place among low wage service sector workers.

Given that they have such limited economic power and the barriers to building it are so high, it makes sense that low wage worker organizations turn to politics. Given the generally low level of participation in politics in America, as evidenced by low voter turnout and low levels of active political engagement, well-organized minorities are often capable of mounting successful campaigns in the public policy arena. How often do we hear from a legislator that receiving twenty or fifty letters on an issue is unusual, and several hundred an even greater rarity? There is an often unspoken multiplier effect at work when legislators are contacted by constituents: when a legislator receives fifty phone calls, the assumption is they are

\[3\] In a paper she wrote for the Carnegie Foundation, Jennifer Gordon writes that one explanation for why the republican senators and representatives on Long Island supported the Unpaid Wages Act was because they wanted...
representative of a much larger number. As an organizer who has always focused on trying to build organizations that have significant membership bases, I have always disliked the oft-quoted Margaret Mead axiom "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it's the only thing that ever has," but it turns out that when it comes to low wage labor market politics, as opposed to economics, Mead was probably right.

The Workplace Project and BUILD had enough political power to win some important public policy changes. Or did they? Of course one argument for why they passed is that the living wage laws or the unpaid wages act weren't very far-reaching and that if the stakes had been higher—if the laws had covered more workers or cost companies more money—they would not have passed. It is certainly the case that tougher laws would have incited greater resistance, but it is still true that when it comes to public policy versus union organizing campaigns, the bar is lower in terms of what it takes to win. At the very least, the coin of the realm (votes), and the quantity (of them) necessary for a victory, is more within reach.

**Labor unions and low wage worker organizing**

If all of this is true now, why was it not equally true for the low wage workers in my historical examples? Why were they able to unionize and build economic power and why is it so much harder today?

In most cases, the occupations involved in those drives have become even more devalued. The hospitality industry in general, and the vast majority of restaurants in particular, are non-union today, and HERE, the international union that once housed the waitresses locals, has largely given up trying to organize restaurants. The sanitation workers of Memphis, as weak as their position was in 1968, were employed by the City of Memphis, which could be pressured into meeting their demands—contracting out had yet to revolutionize the public sector. Although the UFW won their fight with the table grape growers in 1970, they have struggled since to hold on to their contracts and have never been able to organize a very large percentage of agricultural laborers into the union. What success these unions did enjoy was in no small measure due to their ability to project the sanitation workers' struggle as part of the civil rights movement, and the farmworkers' struggle as a social movement.

to court members of the Latino community who could vote.
It is probably not an exaggeration to say that 1199 New York is the most successful health care local in the country today and one of the few in the nation that has most of the hospitals in its jurisdiction under union contract. As it was never possible to control the supply of very low skill/low wage workers into the industry, from the beginning, 1199 has pursued a strategy of working to organize all hospital workers in New York City. The considerable economic and political power it built up over time enabled it to stay on top of the changes in the health care industry and to continue organizing new hospitals and groups of workers into the union. From my observations of various SEIU health care local unions, I would also say that these are low wage workers who, in contrast to many of their peers in the service sector, have a strong sectoral identification—as health care workers. (The same can be said of nursing home and childcare workers.) In addition, public policy plays an enormous role in the organization of the health care industry and both SEIU and 1199 at the level of state government across the country, have been able to have a major impact.

But on the other hand, 1199, like AFSCME and the UFW, also located its organizing efforts in the context of the civil rights movement and was greatly aided by that association. It is more difficult for unions today to tap into the moral legitimacy that the farmworkers, sanitation workers and 1199ers used to further their cause. These groups organized during times of broader social ferment. Individual organizing efforts are given big boosts when social movements are underway. In the absence of a broader movement, it is much harder for unions to portray their individual campaigns as social justice struggles. A lot of them simply don’t know how and a lot of them don’t behave like social justice organizations. They operate as special interest groups—fighting for the narrow agenda of a particular group of workers—and they seem uninterested in functioning any other way. Lacking the ability or inclination to place their union drives and issues into a larger social context, it is harder for them to cross over from the workplace to be effective at the kind of “climate change” and political activity that the Workplace Project and Solidarity have done so effectively. And the truth is that climate change and public policy change may well be the most critical prerequisite to rebuilding the labor movement. But I will return to this point in a moment.

In light of all that I have had to say about the difficulty of organizing in the contemporary low wage industries, the second part of my claim that community unions based in labor unions or dominated by them are more likely to be able to bring class to bear effectively at the workplace,
bears closer scrutiny. Is it really true? I think the answer is yes, but for such a small percentage of workers that one is forced to conclude that no approach really seems to be working all that well.  

Although not in as much depth, I have examined several union-based community union efforts: Justice for Janitors which I have mentioned several times in this dissertation, the Stamford Organizing Project, an AFL-CIO multi-union organizing drive, HERE’s work in New Haven and Las Vegas, and several home health, nursing home and childcare union organizing drives. The first thing to note is just how exceptional these drives are. The AFL-CIO organizes an average of 400,000 new workers a year. But there are approximately 27.5 million poverty wage workers in the United States. Thus only 1.5% of these workers will acquire union representation. That means that to organize the 27.5 million would take more than a hundred years, and the service sector is growing every day. But even this assumes that all 400,000 workers organized hail from the poverty wage sector. If we assume a more realistic but still optimistic number, that 200,000 of the 400,000 hail from the poverty wage sector, then only about three-quarters of one percent will acquire union representation. As was once said about marriage and women over forty, most low wage workers are more likely to be struck by lightening then to ever win union representation. This is also why community-based community unions must be understood on their own terms and not just as the next best alternative to unionization—because most workers will never get to make that choice.

The second point is that these union drives are launched from pre-existing union bases. When existing international unions try to organize new groups of workers they have resources to fall back on and local unions already in place in the jurisdictions they target. Still they struggle to succeed. There are far fewer situations in the past twenty years where a union went into a place where it did not already have a beach-head, and succeeded at organizing a large number of new members. Justice for Janitors seldom starts from scratch. It builds upon its base of union janitors and contracts it already has to mount the big campaigns. The massive home health care campaign in California that SEIU won a few years back, was close to twenty years in the making and took an enormous investment of financial resources into organizing and politics. The drives that have been mounted by the ACORN unions now affiliated with SEIU, like home health care

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4 This is a point that Richard Locke raised again and again at my second colloquium.
in Chicago and local 100 in New Orleans, did start from scratch, have had much more modest resources to work with and have achieved impressive but modest results. The fact that home health care unions have organized six or eight thousand workers who are almost impossible to find and toil in workplaces of one, must be viewed as quite an achievement. But given what they are up against, are the current strategies and financial resources enough to succeed?

The recent Justice for Janitors campaign in Boston was very instructive. The local union projected the fight as a social justice struggle very well: it had the look and feel of a mini-social movement. It was able to alter the terms of debate about part-time work and health benefits. It had significant support from the community and sympathetic treatment from the media. The campaign was not an organizing drive per se, but a contract campaign to increase wages, benefits and hours for area janitors. Even with all of its strengths, the strike turned out to be excruciatingly difficult to win and was one of the longest in the history of the national Justice for Janitors campaign. The union simply lacked the economic power to either compel the cleaning contractors to settle or to force the building owners to get involved directly and force a settlement. The economic activity of the workers themselves—going on strike and refusing to clean the buildings, was not nearly enough to force the contractors to settle and neither was the economic pressure the international union brought to bear. A lot of union members crossed picket lines and went to work and cleaning contractors were easily able to hire replacement workers to clean the buildings. SEIU tried to exert pressure on some of the owners, like Equity, by threatening job actions at some of their major properties in other cities. But the union’s efforts to get some owners to drop their contracts with the main cleaning company that was opposing its demands was largely unsuccessful. Even an international union like SEIU with a building services local that already had ten thousand members, failed to win based upon economic pressure alone and almost didn’t win even with a lot of union, community and political support. This was not at all a surprise to the national leadership of the Justice for Janitors campaign. Given the weakness of immigrant janitors in the labor market, SEIU knew it couldn’t win on economic power alone and engaged in a wide variety of strategies calculated to turn up the heat. But most union drives are not nearly as creative.

So, is it still correct to claim that unions are better positioned to bring class to bear in the workplace and to institutionalize a significant membership base? Yes, because they begin with more members, they have more financial and strategic resources and more of an orientation toward the day in and day out recruitment of members on a large scale. But it is important to bear in mind that all organizations—unions and community organizations—are struggling to organize workers in the United States today. Of the 19 million workers in the retail sector of the economy, only 5.2% belong to unions. Of the 15 million in the service sector, union density is 3%. Of the 10 million in the healthcare sector, little more than 9% are union members.

Public Policy First

With all of the obstacles to economic organization, community unions are making a supremely rational decision to focus on public policy change. It may be impossible to rebuild the American labor movement until the rules are changed. There is a very strong argument to be made that in the United States today, given current labor market structures and the silence of the state regarding them, micro-economic approaches just won’t work. Broader public policies that require firms to create full-time jobs that pay living wages, provide health insurance and honor the right to organize, are what are needed. In the past, most labor market interventions on behalf of the poorest workers in America have come via public policy. Today community unions are organizing to put into place a new generation of public policies. The victories that have been achieved at the local level on the living wage ought to embolden reformers to think about other policy measures.

In every nation, a set of values about social welfare, corporate responsibility and structures of work, wages, benefits, business practices and collective bargaining underlie public laws. When it comes to governing the market and the structure and behavior of individual firms, the United States, for reasons of history and culture, has hewed to a hands-off approach that has been difficult to challenge successfully. As Michael Sandel has written, American political parties have ceased to offer contrasting points of view about the role and function of the economy in a democratic society. But the recent corporate governance and accounting scandals,

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6 "In contemporary American politics, most of our economic arguments revolve around two considerations: prosperity and fairness. Whatever tax policies or budget proposals or regulatory schemes people may favor, they usually defend them on the grounds that they will contribute to economic growth or improve the distribution of income; they claim that their policy will increase the size of the economic pie, or distribute the pieces of the pie..."
bottoming out of the high technology sector, extreme growth of very low wage jobs, rising number of Americans without health insurance and the lasting recession create an opening for a new conversation about the social contract. Given the Republican party’s current control over the presidency and both houses of congress, the conversation will not be opened from above, by the national parties, but from below, through grassroots campaigns at the local and state levels. Community unions, in their special ability to launch mini-social movements over work and wage issues may be able to overcome obstacles that unions have been unable to breach.

If it is true that it is now easier to pass public policy than to succeed at direct labor market intervention, perhaps the labor movement should follow the lead of the community unions into politics. In addition to having more resources than community unions to do economic organizing, unions also have much greater resources to do politics. Fifteen million workers may be a drop in the bucket in terms of labor market density, but it is a whole lot of voters. As Hattam’s work has taught us, the AFL and Workingmen’s Assemblies’ initial focus was on mobilizing its members to win public policy change. It gave up on the public policy strategy only after it became clear that the labor movement could not protect its political victories from hostile courts. At that time, switching over to economic strategies made sense. The labor movement through exercising its economic power was able to achieve goals that had been won through politics but overturned in the courts.7 Today, there is a strong argument to be made to organized labor that, in a time when it has so little economic power, switching back to political strategies is the most rational course of action.8 Doubtless, the new public policies will once again face legal challenges, but how the courts will rule we cannot know. Given today’s unprecedented and rapidly increasing level of income inequality, the growth of jobs that pay only poverty-level wages, the powerlessness of workers relative to firms, and the mismatch

more fairly, or both... But our debates about economic policy have not always focused solely on the size and distribution of the national product. Throughout much of American history they have also addressed a different question, namely, what economic arrangements are most hospitable to self-government? Along with prosperity and fairness, the civic consequences of economic history have often loomed large in American political discourse.” Michael J. Sandel, Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, Harvard University Press, 1996) p.124.

8 In a recent article, Peter Olney advances a similar argument in favor of the AFL-CIO mounting a more aggressive campaign for labor law reform: “The election of George W. Bush notwithstanding, the political ledger is considerably more positive than the organizing one. The Sweeney leadership has continually emphasized that ultimately political power rests on density and the size of the labor movement, yet despite the declining density
between labor law and the new economy, courts may be more favorably disposed to public policies that counteract these trends than ever before.

But for unions to succeed at public policy change at the level that is needed, they must be perceived as speaking on behalf of the whole. What this fight needs is the moral legitimacy that the community unions have demonstrated they have, in their successful battles for living wage and unpaid wages. It also seems clear from labor history that mounting the fight and helping to build a broader movement for social change whether or not it succeeds in the short term in winning new laws, has historically been a good thing for union organizing. As Freeman, Farber and Western have documented, the American labor movement has always grown in spurts as opposed to “slow and steady additions to membership over long periods of time.” 9 The labor movement grew the most in the 1930’s, the period of greatest social unrest and activism about economic issues.

**Future Research**

In the predictive typology that I set out in Chapter One, careful readers may have noted that there was no category for an equal partnership between labor union and community organization--the lobster always has a dominant claw. Although beyond the scope of the case studies presented in the dissertation, I definitely saw this in the labor dominated community unions I spent time with. When I visited the impressive South Bay Labor Council in San Jose, I was struck by how unequal the relationship between the central labor council and its community partners truly was. I had the same feeling during my stay at the Stamford Organizing Project. The AFL-CIO was speaking out and organizing on behalf of community issues, especially affordable housing, and it was working with a group of black ministers, but there was a huge disparity of resources and power. In my interviews with these ministers and other community allies, they recognized the power differential and accepted that their roles for this reason would be those of junior partners. Both labor organizations in Stamford and South Bay were allied with much smaller and weaker organizations on the community side. In San Jose, a faith-based community organization akin to the IAF did exist, but the relationship between the two was not

numbers AFL-CIO political clout has been on the rise...” Peter Olney “The Arithmetic of Decline and Some Proposals for Renewal” *New Labor Forum* (Spring/Summer 2002): 10-11.

close. In Stamford, no such organization existed on the community side and the AFL-CIO leadership seemed to prefer it that way. They had a free field in which to build something in Stamford without the added complication of having to negotiate with a community organization of commensurate size or ambition with its own agenda.

Although I have tried to make a strong case in this conclusion for a focus on politics, I am not suggesting that the labor movement cease its organizing or that community unions cease their efforts to organize low wage workers directly. How do community unions improve their performance in direct intervention in low wage labor markets? The first principle of rebuilding the labor movement through worker organizing must be to focus not just on organizing more workers but on increasing membership density in each of the major sectors of the economy. Without dramatic increases in density, unions will not have the power they need to win major improvements in wages and job quality.

In a recent paper, Stephen Lerner argued that “labor markets are the places where unions have the best ability to affect density. In a concentrated defined labor market there is greater opportunity for unions to utilize their existing membership base, and the strength of the labor movement in the community and politics to support an organizing campaign.” Community unions bring some important resources to the struggle to rebuild union density. They are place-based which is a good start for building density geographically. They excel at altering the terms of the debate and creating the mini-social movement atmosphere in which union organizing is most likely to thrive. In terms of kicking off union drives, these groups are sometimes in deeper relationship with targeted workers from specific ethnic groups than the unions are. On the other hand, as I have documented, they are not sectorally strategic. While they bring together organizations of low wage workers around common bonds of class and race or ethnicity, their industry-specific campaigns have not been effective thus far. The immigrant worker centers in particular, seem to employ one of three strategies. They attempt to create free-standing projects like the day laborer and domestic projects at the Workplace Project, which achieve limited results. They turn over “hot shops” to unions and get angry when the union loses the campaign or decides against trying, or, they try to organize “independent unions” not affiliated with any existing union which almost always lose their elections.

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To play a role in effective, sector-specific union organizing, community unions not only need to learn the tools of analysis and strategy that good union organizers know. They need to be connected to a larger institution that has membership and resources and can protect and support them when they are battling with employers. The best scenario would be for them to be in ongoing relationship with union partners. It is important to see whether any such partnerships have resulted in significant sectorally-specific organizing and to make sure the lessons from these projects are shared widely. A future research question is whether or not equal partnerships do exist and whether they are able to achieve more sweeping labor market and public policy outcomes as a consequence. There are several organizations around the country that merit closer examination: the alliance between the food and commercial workers and the IAF affiliate in Nebraska; the strong partnership between HERE and a group of powerful black churches in New Haven; and the joint childcare organizing effort underway in Philadelphia between 1199 and the Childspace cooperative. If these efforts and others like them do turn out to be more equal partnerships and to demonstrate more favorable outcomes, labor unions who are struggling to expand union representation among low wage workers in areas where community-dominated community unions already exist, or where they could, may have more of an incentive to invest in them.

Those who would stand in judgement of community unions must acknowledge that they have had considerable success in altering the terms of debate, bringing the voices of low wage workers into politics, developing leaders and changing public policy. They have done this even in the face of scarce resources and almost no regional or national infrastructure. And they don’t seem to be going away. If the organizations that fall under the rubric of community union are to take the next step in posing their strategies and structures as a third way of organizing workers, or even as a crucial component to joint organizing efforts with unions, they must develop closer links to each other and devote some thought to what it would take to strengthen their work as a whole. Of course they would first need to view themselves as a category of something—I do, some public charities and private foundations do, but most practitioners in my experience, often view their work as unique and remain fairly ignorant of what other organizations like them are doing. Immigrant worker centers are the exception. They do seem to view themselves as a group of similar organizations and appear to be increasingly in touch and learning from one another’s work.
They do gather together upon occasion to share strategies, but largely at the behest of foundations. There is no umbrella organization to which they belong that is speaking on their behalf to the larger polity or charting out a course for strengthening the organizations or growing their numbers.

In light of the many obstacles to organization, that the Workplace Project and Solidarity have survived close to ten years must be understood as a staggering achievement. Just because they have yet to succeed at broader labor market intervention does not mean that they never will. In fact, it may turn out that the swiftest path to reorganizing the private sector runs right through public policy. If it does, community unions may lead the way.
APPENDIX A. ADDENDUM TO CHAPTER 1: HISTORY OF COMMUNITY UNIONISM

I could not write this thesis without first acknowledging the existence of the most important and most direct predecessor of the examples of contemporary community unionism I detail here. Four years into my research, I discovered that, in the 1960’s, there had been an effort, by the Industrial Union Department and one of its member unions--the UAW--to organize what they explicitly called “community unions”. Enamored of the collective bargaining model, and also at the time, deeply involved in the Johnson administration’s War on Poverty, these unionists, frustrated with labor’s lack of attention to organizing the poor, struck upon the idea that a union organizing model could be directly applied to low income communities, not only to organize worksites but neighborhoods as well. For example, tenants would organize a dues-paying membership base, engage in collective action on landlords and compel negotiations which would result in signed contracts with specific commitments to improve buildings.

I explored these organizing efforts through interviews with Pablo Eisenberg, the long-time Executive Director of the national Center for Community Change, and Paul Schrade, a long-time west coast leader of the UAW, who supplied me with the transcript of a talk, given at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in 1967, by community unionism’s main architect, Jack T. Conway, originally of the UAW, but who by that time served as the executive assistant to the president of the Industrial Union Department.

Conway’s words were quite stirring, because they contained many of the same arguments I make in Chapter 1 and those to follow. He begins:

During the mid-thirties, there was so much unemployment and the institutional pattern that existed in the country at that time seemed to be out of focus as far as the problems that existed at the time, and the creation of new institutional structures obviously was needed, and I joined in with a great deal of fervor in the movement of the industrial unions. There were, at the time, approximately three and half million people organized in the AFL and there were 15 million
unemployed people. Probably these figures are reversed now as a result of substantial growth and institutionalization of the American labor movement to the point where we probably have now some 15 million people in the organized labor movement and perhaps three and a half million unemployed people—fully unemployed—in the country. ...The thing that strikes me today is that this three and a half million unemployed are concentrated in such a fashion among minority groups and young people that the same conditions, updated to today’s scene, prevail. That you have unemployment rates in the central cities among Negroes, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans and young people, without regard to their race or their skin color, ranging anywhere from 25-50% and the degradation, the insecurity, all of the factors that prevail in the lives of these people match in intensity, the conditions that prevailed for a much larger population during the depths of the Great Depression. In the last two or three years since I have returned to the labor movement, I have been quite concerned about the fact that the structure of the labor movement is not designed to reach this section of the population—whether they exist in poverty in the central cities, or whether they exist in poverty in the rural areas of this country and are engaged in migratory farm labor. There has been developing specific situations which I think merit great attention on the part of the labor movement and on the part of the intellectual leadership of this country generally. We, for want of a better word, have chosen to call it the community union. [footnote]

The first example of a community union Conway offers is the early organizing that Cesar Chavez was doing in the central valley of California among farmworkers, about which he said:

Cesar Chavez came to the conclusion a number of years ago that the traditional labor union form may not be appropriate to organize farmworkers effectively, and he set about at that time creating what would be called a service organization. There is merging now as a result of the activities of the farmworkers, I think, a new institutional pattern which can affect a substantial number of union activities in the future. The concept here is that the problems that face farmworkers and their families go far beyond the workplace and work relationship, and for an organization to be effective, in dealing with these problems it has to do deal with the totality of the situation. It has to deal with the problems—the relationships—of the worker and his family, to the community that he lives in when he stays put, to the communities that he goes through as he moves about from one farm location to another. It has to do with the relationship of the children to the schools, of his family to the health facilities, his family and himself to the police of whatever the community happens to be, and so on. And the farmworker’s union is emerging around the general concept that there are two heads to this thing that have to be tackled at the same time. There has to be a union entity which is somewhat traditional in character which will address itself to the relationships between the individual and the employer. Whatever the grower is, wherever the grower is located, and this institution will develop side by side to a service sector which would be designed to bring other services which are not
related to the employer-employee relationship to the individual and to the family, and this is in the way of remedial education, of skill training, of counseling, of legal services, of a variety of things, and the chances of success now organizing the hundreds of thousands of rural migrant farmworkers is greatly enhanced as the result of this, what I consider to be a radical change, in structural approach.

Conway's next example of burgeoning community unionism was the organization of the Watts Labor Community Action Council in 1964, just prior to the horrible riot in the Watts community of Los Angeles and its subsequent organizing work there. The organization was formed by a collection of unions including the UAW, the Longshoremen, the Steelworkers and the Teamsters, concerned about conditions in the Watts ghetto. The strategy was to identify union members from all the different unions that lived in Watts and bring them into contact with each other to form the nucleus of the organization. Conway described what happened next:

This was the beginning of a community organization with a labor base. Some 300-350 such people were identified over a period of months and this became the neighborhood organization, a community organization, which has begun to sponsor a whole series of activities at the community level and the theory here, and it's actually been put into practice...the theory is that you look at the community—the neighborhood—as if it were the workplace, the factory, and you adapt all of the techniques which have been developed over the years to problem-solving and program-developing and political action, and you name it, to the community as if it were an organization functioning at the factory level, which means you carry out education, you carry out grievance-solving, you look to the problems of citizens who, in this instance, start out being union members but are not necessarily confined to union membership. They could be unemployed people, partially employed people, and their problems become the problems of the community union, or the community organization, and the relationships of these individuals to the police, to the schools, to the health institutions, the public housing authority, become the problems that the community organization would help the individuals to solve...

Conway's talk is rife with the ideas I explored so many years later in the Baltimore and Long Island organizations and that I had unknowingly also christened "community unions". He talks about the idea of different trajectories of union organization and of the need to expand the concept of the union:

I think there is an expansion of the concept of union here. And just as the industrial union thing was an expansion of the early concept of unions preceding the thirties. But there is really nothing new about this. This is the thing that
strikes me because the whole history of the labor movement has been built around concepts of this kind. Sam Gompers, when he started out with the cigar makers union, had a problem of an immigrant workforce and he used the concept of reading and educating and assisting in the development of the use of the English language as an organizing tool...

Along similar lines of argument, he pointed to the need to break out of the legal constraints of union organizing under the National Labor Relations Act.

Discovering Conway’s transcript was like discovering community unionism’s manifesto. But then after interviewing Schrade and Eisenberg about the Watts Labor Community Action Council in California, I discovered a profound disconnect between the theory of community unionism as expressed by Conway, and the reality of what these community unions actually came to be. Conway’s theoretical reach had exceeded his practical grasp. He had developed the theory of community unionism. In the United Farm Workers he had identified some of it’s key elements. But as it turned out, when it came to actually doing it, the community unions diverged quite dramatically from the theory. When I eventually discovered an extremely useful description of the IUD’s Watts, Newark and Chicago community union efforts in Labor and the American Community by Derek C. Bok and John T. Dunlop¹, it reinforced my initial conclusions.

A short time after the Watts Labor Community Action Council’s initial campaign to win construction of what eventually became the Martin Luther King Jr. County General Hospital in the community, it began to receive significant funds² from the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). OEO monies made all sorts of projects possible from a summer camp for two thousand children, job training and placement programs to a sizeable tract of land for vegetable farming and a check-cashing service.

Regardless of the ideas that were floated prior to its original organization, in practice, the Watts Labor Community Action Council became an enormous community development corporation, albeit one with a strong investment on the part of a group of unions and a large number of union members on its board. But it never organized other members of the Watts neighborhood into unions or tenant organizations to exercise power against bosses or landlords.

¹ Bok and Dunlop provide short histories of the community unions which were organized in Chicago, Newark and Watts.
² Bok and Dunlop found that by the summer of 1967, a total of $1,175,000 in federal money had been promised for projects the following year.
Bok and Dunlop recounted the final turn of events which led the organization permanently away from real organizing: “As time went on, it became clear that the committee was moving further and further away from its original conception as a militant citizen’s organization to bargain with the “power structure.” No organizing drive had been conducted. No broad-based membership had been assembled. No dues were being collected. Far from bargaining abrasively with city officials, the committee was working more and more closely with them…”

When the other unions began to drop off in their financial commitment to the WCLAC, the UAW picked up the slack and then pulled together meetings to discuss getting back to organizing a real membership base. But the other unions objected. They feared first off, that such an organization would become an appendage of the UAW, but most importantly they feared that community union members would identify as UAW members even when they accepted jobs in non-union plants. Again, Bok and Dunlop:

Eventually therefore, the organization could easily emerge as the traditional bete noire of the American labor movement, a rival union. Apart from this danger, there was the obvious threat that a full-grown community organization would begin to put pressure on the established unions to relax seniority provisions in their agreements and provide preferential employment to Negro and Mexican-American workers. In addition, political struggles with the city could result in embarrassing relations between the sponsoring unions and local officials...

Pablo Eisenberg described another important factor in terms of how WCLAC evolved—the initial leadership of the organization stayed on for many years, cast the organization very much in his personal image and had become comfortably invested in the WCLAC as a community development corporation: “Watts was interesting because it had this union Godfather, Ted Watkins, who shaped it as a family affair, didn’t believe in democracy. Hoffa could have been one of his role models. He was an extraordinary guy in a lot of ways and he did a lot of good things for Watts…It never really had a board, it was really his daughter and a couple of family members who made the decisions. They set up a bus service, had an enormous housing program that was really terrific, bought land and built houses which people could buy and pay off very reasonably, he ran the food stamp program...And whenever he needed people to march down to City Hall he could get them to do it and make an impact on city programs. But he never cooperated with other organizations or coalitions...like the mafia boss with the Brooklyn turf, he was going to control and run Watts, he definitely stifled other organizations...
from growing, including youth organizations, cause he had his own youth organization. So while lots of good happened, it prevented a lot of good from happening. He was ‘da boss.’"

Today, 37 years after its formation, the WCLAC is a thriving community development corporation that has trained and supported thousands of young people, and created several hundred jobs and housing units. It went the way of a CDC in part, Paul Schrade explained, because “the opportunity for building an organization like this was based upon the fact that we were getting a lot of money from government, foundations and unions that was going to dry up at some point. A permanent structure had to be developed with the money that was coming in, so the non-profit development side of the organization made it possible for the institution to continue after the War on Poverty was over and unions and foundations became disinterested.”

Schrade told me that after the first few years, the UAW continued to hope to see the WCLAC become involved in organizing, but they never got the opportunity: “Aerojet was already organized by the Machinists and most private employers fled that area, so the main source of jobs became social services with the city and the county moving into that area, so it was mostly government employees. The biggest private employer in Watts is the WCLAC with about 500 people on the staff, who are not unionized.” Despite the fact that it did not become directly involved in union organizing, the WCLAC was of use to the UAW’s organizing work: “Of course it did have some value with people in shops with multi-ethnic memberships who saw us as a very progressive organization because of our work there...So they felt the UAW was doing good work this way, and therefore they supported the union when it was organizing in their shop...” In terms of politics, Schrade said, “In some ways the WCLAC can’t get involved in politics because of its tax status and that has always been a problem. But the organization does get involved in pressuring city and county government to do a better job with welfare and that is why a lot of social services are now in Watts...”

In 1965 in Chicago, an effort was made to organize a community union in the Woodlawn neighborhood, that would “provide representation for local residents on a broad series of community issues...to be built along traditional union lines with a regular dues-paying membership.” Staff was to be contributed equally by local civil rights groups and the Industrial Union Department and Martin Luther King Jr. was directly involved in the organization’s early stages. It’s first project to organize hospital workers on the West Side, ended in failure and prefigured the failure of the entire project.
Bok and Dunlop argue that the project broke down because of major differences between the civil rights groups and the union over the purpose and priorities of the community union. In the midst of the gathering storm of a social movement, the civil rights groups were reluctant to “engage in the slow, frustrating task of building a permanent grass-roots membership. These groups were never enthusiastic about the drive and could not match the organizing know-how of the I.U.D. staff.” In addition, during a close electoral race, the IUD tried to divert the staff to a voter registration effort for the re-election campaign of Senator Paul Douglas, and the civil rights groups objected. Likewise, union leaders, fearful of a backlash by their members, resisted Dr. King’s efforts to involve the organization in a fair housing campaign. Bok and Dunlop conclude that the effort failed because “the IUD organizers were outsiders to the local community, without a feel for its people and their problems, and the representatives of civil rights groups who were selected to assist in organizing proved increasingly undependable.” The final nail in the coffin was the arrival of the Teamsters of Building Services Employees (the precursor of the SEIU) claiming jurisdiction over the hospital employees.

After the hospital organizing campaign fell apart, the community union tried its hand at tenant organizing: “The community union then turned to helping in the organization of tenant unions, which had sprung up in Chicago. In several apartment buildings, tenants had been organized to picket and withhold rent in order to obtain agreements from their landlords guaranteeing repairs, stable rents and even grievance procedures. The I.U.D. actively sought to enter into these activities by lending organizers, training building stewards and helping to staff negotiating committees...” Once again there was a clash of cultures between the civil rights groups and the Industrial Union Department, but there were other reasons that the drive fell apart.

After collecting more than 500 membership cards from the tenants of buildings operated by the Schavin Corporation, the union organizers demanded that the company negotiate. When it refused, the union found it was unable to mobilize the “members” to take action. Bok and Dunlop speculate this was because, once again, the union didn’t have the relationships that local ministers and civil rights activists did, with residents and that would be necessary in order to organize them effectively. There were other problems—the buildings had high turnover, also poor landlords often lacked the money to improve the buildings and would need government assistance in order to do so. Bok and Dunlop conclude:
In the face of these problems, the community union steadily declined. While continuing to offer assistance to tenant organizations, it had failed to achieve real leadership or success in the tenant movement. Its campaigns in other areas had proved abortive, its alliances with civil rights groups had broken down and it had no support from local unions in the area. By the summer of 1968, the organization had dwindled to a single representative and a secretary.

Bok and Dunlop argue that community unions failed to achieve their initial mission because of the focus on residence as opposed to workplace which exposed it to threats from cutthroat competition of jealous, turf-conscious community organizations, and conflicts with established unions organized along traditional occupational lines. In general, they believe that community unions “require a sensitivity to local issues and a special organizing skill that the average union does not possess in abundance.” Faced with these significant obstacles, it is no wonder that the community unions gave up on the initial conception of a militant dues-paying, power-building organization and became, in their words “another community agency for administering government money to alleviate the heavy burden of ghetto problems.”

Interestingly, Bok and Dunlop select some of the same historical examples that I have, but to argue a different point. They point to 1199 and the United Farm Workers to argue that despite the failure of community unions, it is possible to organize the poor as long as it is does along occupational lines. As I have stated above, I believe that these unions succeeded because they were organized along lines of identity. Occupation was much less instrumental to their success.

Nevertheless, it would be thirty years before the practice of community unionism—independently conceived by other activists in other times—would approach the perceptiveness and sophistication of Conway’s theory.
In equipping volunteers, student interns and lawyers to interact with employers, Gordon prepared a 2 page handout entitled The Games They Play: Things employers say when they don’t want to pay their workers... and what you can say in return.

Here are some excerpts:

**He has no proof he ever worked for me. --or- I don’t have any idea who he is.**
Well, he certainly knows who you are. He has told me all about... (list appropriate details: schedule, names, rates paid, work done, where employer lives, etc.) You might be interested to know that, incases like these where employers deny knowing their own employees, judges and government agencies will look at other kinds of proof that the employees bring, including witnesses, the employees’ own records, the employee’s testimony about the schedule at the workplace, etcetera. Often these investigations turn up other evidence of wrongdoing, which the agencies can then report to the relevant government authorities. We have found that most employers who start out believing that they can get away with pretending they never knew their immigrant workers, change their minds and settle pretty quickly.

**That’s crazy! He never worked that many hours.**
If you would like to fax (or send) me proof that you have of Mr. Workers’ hours, I would be happy to sit down with it and to compare it to the records that Mr. Worker kept himself...

**I won’t pay until I get her Social Security number.**
Actually, you have to pay whether you get her Social Security number or not. By admitting to me just now that you do not have her Social Security number, you have admitted that you knowingly hired her without fulfilling the requirements of the law. If anyone is punished or fined for that, it will be you. New York and federal law are very clear on this point: once an employee has done any work, she must be paid for it, no matter what documentation she has.

**I’m going to call INS.**
If you call the INS I would be very surprised if you didn’t regret it very quickly. If you call them, the next call they receive will be one from me, reporting you.
think about it: you will be calling to report the fact that you knew about an undocumented immigrant. They would have to find money to find him, money to catch him, money to detain him. They will have to pay lawyers fees when he defends himself against deportation. And in the end, if he loses, they will have to pay his plane ticket home. On the other hand, I will be letting them know about easy money. You have an address where you are easy to locate. You have already made a statement to me indicating that you knowingly hired someone without papers. When the INS comes, they can do an inspection and then fine you for violations of the immigration law that they find—that’s money in their pocket. Whose call do you think they are going to follow up on? Not only does it make financial sense for them to go after the employer, it is in line with their stated policy.
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