

# *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*

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*Volume 60, Issue 2*

2007

*Article 82*

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## Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream

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the labor market institutions that emerge in the coming years.

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*Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream.* By Janice Fine. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press) and the Economic Policy Institute, 2006. 316 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4423-3, \$49.95 (cloth); ISBN 0-8014-7257-1, \$21.95 (paper).

Until recently, the immigrant-oriented “worker centers” that are the focus of this important new study were largely invisible to the public. Fine’s book provides a thoughtful and richly detailed assessment of these relatively small but highly innovative community-based organizations. As organizations devoted to assisting the millions of undocumented immigrants who do the hardest and least-rewarded jobs in the United States today, they have a triple mission: providing direct services to workers, most notably through legal action to obtain unpaid wages from unscrupulous employers; engaging in advocacy on immigrant and workplace rights in the public policy and legislative arenas; and actively mobilizing immigrants themselves in pursuit of lasting social transformation. As Fine emphasizes, worker centers also have great potential to help revitalize the beleaguered U.S. labor movement, although thus far their relationship to traditional unions has been complex and, all too often, fraught with tension.

The rapid growth of economic inequality, along with resurgent immigration, has intensified the social needs and political concerns that the worker centers seek to address. There is a modest literature documenting the daily travails and blocked aspirations of the nation’s day laborers, domestic servants, and other immigrant-dominated occupational groups at the bottom of the labor market, thanks to the efforts of urban ethnographers and other social scientists. But worker centers themselves have received limited attention from scholars—apart from Jennifer Gordon’s excellent book, *Suburban Sweatshops* (Harvard University Press, 2005). Fine’s study could hardly be more timely, appearing just months before the massive demonstrations that brought millions of working-class immigrants into the streets all across the nation in the spring of 2006.

Those huge protests, provoked by proposed

legislation that would have criminalized both undocumented immigrants and those (like the worker center staff members Fine writes about!) who offer them assistance, took many observers by surprise. But the seemingly sudden explosion of immigrant civil rights activism did not come out of nowhere. Organizing among the growing foreign-born population has been under way for decades now, and indeed the worker centers whose anatomy Fine’s book delineates are among the protagonists in this unfolding drama. Readers will be struck by how closely the geographical distribution of the recent immigrant rights marches mirrors that of the 137 worker centers that Fine mapped as of late 2005 (when her book went to press). In both cases the largest concentration is in longstanding immigrant gateway regions like California and New York, with Illinois, Texas, and Florida also well represented. But the centers are scattered across 31 states, including newer immigrant destinations like Nebraska, Minnesota, and North Carolina—areas that also showed up in the marches.

Fine’s research included the full population of worker centers, but she also provides detailed portraits of a smaller number of cases so that readers can glimpse the internal dynamics and texture of these organizations. She meticulously traces the emergence and growth of the worker center phenomenon from the late 1970s to the present, specifying the activities these organizations typically undertake and their achievements to date, analyzing their organizational characteristics, and highlighting the dilemmas they currently confront.

Fine argues that worker centers are analogous to the settlement houses, fraternal organizations, political parties, and labor unions that provided services to and advocated on behalf of immigrant workers a century ago. The infrastructure those organizations created for the earlier wave of European immigrants to the United States vanished long ago, thanks to both the decline in immigration that began in the 1920s and the subsequent advent of New Deal institutions that regulated labor markets and thus reduced the need for services to low-wage workers. But with resurgent immigration in a deregulated economy, the needs these older institutions once filled are again salient, and worker centers are helping to fill the gap—mostly with funding from progressive foundations.

The centers are by no means homogeneous; they vary along several dimensions. For one thing, they emerged from diverse types of parent organizations: Fine traces their origins in roughly equal proportions to ethnic organizations,

churches, legal/social service groups, and labor unions. And while some centers focus on particular occupational groups or industries, others are geographically based, and still others are limited to a particular ethnic group. The study, then, paints a broad panorama of workplace-oriented immigrant social movement activity. It does not include all existing immigrant civic organizations, however; for example, the dozens of hometown associations that have also proliferated in recent years are not discussed here.

One issue Fine excavates that may be of particular interest to *ILR Review* readers is the complex relationship of worker centers to the organized labor movement. In an especially insightful chapter, she highlights the “culture clash” between worker centers and unions. For example, many of the centers are committed to participatory democracy and intensive leadership development among the workers they serve, and eschew the highly centralized and bureaucratic organizational forms that are typical of many established unions. Moreover, whereas most unions aim to expand their dues-paying membership base whenever possible, worker centers typically limit “membership” to truly committed activists, are often casual about collecting dues, and instead depend on external funding. In addition, the unstable, decentralized labor markets in which immigrants served by the centers are employed (such as street-corner-based day labor and domestic work) are poorly suited to standard models of worksite-based unionism.

However, nearly a fourth of the 137 centers Fine included in the study either emerged from failed union organizing drives or were directly sponsored by labor unions at their inception. And, she reports, four out of five of these centers have at least occasional contact with unions. Some actively seek to facilitate unionization among the immigrants they serve; others are “pre-unions” that have no aspirations to engage in collective bargaining but that might pave the way to future unionization. Although Fine does not explore this in any detail, independent of the worker centers’ efforts, several unions have successfully recruited immigrant workers into their ranks, most notably the SEIU and UNITE HERE, as well as the Carpenters and Laborers. In mid-2006 (after this book appeared), moreover, both the AFL-CIO and the Laborers’ union (which was among the unions that left the AFL-CIO for the Change to Win Federation in 2005) entered into formal collaboration with a key group of worker centers, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network. So while there are formidable obstacles to worker center–union collaboration, it is not impossible.

One might quibble with some of the details of

Fine’s analysis. At times the historical parallels she draws are oversimplified, for example. And the boundaries of the universe of “worker centers” as she defines it may seem a bit arbitrary. As noted, her account sometimes exaggerates the obstacles to cooperation between worker centers and mainstream unions, while downplaying the overlap in their activities. Nevertheless, this is unquestionably a major contribution to the labor studies literature. It provides the first comprehensive portrait of a new organizational form that will likely continue to flourish and develop, and that is poised to play a key role in the 21st-century immigrant rights movement, in future debates over immigration policy, and in union revitalization efforts. It deserves a prominent place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the future of labor in the United States.

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### Economic and Social Security and Substandard Working Conditions

*The Price of Smoking.* By Frank A. Sloan, Jan Ostermann, Gabriel Picone, Christopher Conover, and Donald H. Taylor, Jr. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004. 313, x pp. ISBN 0-262-19510-0, \$40.00 (cloth).

Forty-seven dollars a pack! Would smokers pay that price for twenty cigarettes? According to the *Price of Smoking (TPS)*, that is exactly what they do. In year-2006 dollars, \$47 is the present-value of the private and social cost of every cigarette pack purchased by a 24-year-old male smoker, as calculated by Frank Sloan and his co-authors.

Estimates of the cost of smoking date at least to the 1971 publication of James L. Hedrick’s “The Economic Costs of Cigarette Smoking” (*HSMHA Health Reports*, Vol. 86, No. 2). If we convert Hedrick’s findings to year-2000 dollars, he put the costs to the smoker at \$5.35 per pack. Numerous other studies have looked at these costs with an increasingly comprehensive view, and the estimates range from \$2.96 to \$18.40 in 2000 dollars. National costs are estimated to be from 0.7% of GDP to 4.3%, with a median of 1.5%.

Using longitudinal data, and considering further real costs that were neglected in earlier