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# Context, Coalitions, and Organizing: Immigrant Labor Rights Advocacy in San Francisco and Houston

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# Context, Coalitions, and Organizing: Immigrant Labor Rights Advocacy in San Francisco and Houston

## Abstract

[Excerpt] In the pages that follow, we first situate immigrant labor rights struggles in scholarship on the “right to the city.” We then present San Francisco and Houston, focusing on their immigration histories, current demographic profiles, and contexts for advancing immigrant labor rights. We next describe the parallel types of organizations that have advocated for stronger wage and labor rights in San Francisco and Houston and the similar principles that have motivated them to advocate with local government. In discussing the wage and labor rights campaigns in each city, we draw out key differences in the policy changes that advocates have realized, the coalitions they formed to do so, and the issue frames they adopted in the process. The conclusion underscores the need for more research on how, and to what effect, advocates are mobilizing for immigrant labor rights in cities with different historical, economic, political, and demographic contexts.

## Keywords

Context, Coalitions, and Organizing: Immigrant Labor Rights Advocacy in San Francisco and Houston

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## **CONTEXT, COALITIONS, AND ORGANIZING**

### **Immigrant Labor Rights Advocacy in San Francisco and Houston**

*Els de Graauw and Shannon Gleeson*

In 2000, a broad coalition of immigrant and worker advocates secured passage of a strong living-wage ordinance in San Francisco. Over the next decade and a half, under the banner of social and economic justice for all low-wage workers, they achieved other significant reforms, including a municipal minimum wage, paid sick leave, universal health care, wage theft prevention legislation, and the creation of a local bureaucracy tasked with enforcing these policies. Throughout this period, the local business community unsuccessfully lobbied against these policies, arguing that they would poison the city's business climate. Meanwhile, immigrant and worker advocates took up a similar fight for stronger labor protections in Houston. Their ballot campaign for a living-wage ordinance failed dramatically in 1997, but they succeeded in getting the city council to enact an anti-wage theft ordinance in 2013. This relatively modest policy change created local mechanisms to enforce the federal minimum wage. Unlike in San Francisco, where labor and business interests remained opposed to each other's agendas, advocates in Houston benefited from the support of local business leaders, who have backed the ordinance in an attempt to root out unfair business competition.

The San Francisco and Houston experiences underscore that cities are increasingly important venues for organizing for the labor rights of marginalized populations, but they also show that not all cities are created equal. Labor rights advocacy is easier and more successful in some cities than in others. This is

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The authors are equal coauthors.

due to differences such as in the history and legacy of past labor rights struggles, local economic, political, and demographic dynamics, the presence and strength of advocacy organizations and other supportive institutions, and the relationships between cities and their respective regions and states. Thus, in studying the significance of cities for campaigns to expand the labor rights of marginalized populations, it is important to realize that there is no singular urban context in which such campaigns take place. Urban contexts vary, and to understand how advocates today organize at the urban level, form local coalitions, and pitch their policy reforms to local policy makers, we need to understand a city's historic trajectory and its current economic, political, and demographic situation.

This chapter contrasts recent wage and labor rights campaigns in San Francisco and Houston, focusing on how similar local advocacy organizations in both cities strategically engage with their respective city contexts to promote their policy goals. We examine advocates' motivations to push for better wage and labor rights for immigrants and other low-wage workers. We also investigate advocates' coalitional strategies, issue-framing decisions, challenges in advocating with local government officials and business leaders, and impact on the local policy-making process. San Francisco, located in a state with labor protections that exceed federal standards, has a progressive political culture, a strong labor movement, a mature and well-developed infrastructure of immigrant rights organizations, a large foreign-born Asian population, and a legacy of successful community organizing. Despite opposition from the business community, advocates successfully campaigned for comprehensive changes in local wage and labor laws. In Houston, in contrast, immigrant and worker advocates have focused instead on local enforcement mechanisms of existing protections. Located in a state that merely replicates the minimum protections provided under federal labor standards, the city is also more politically divided between Democrats and Republicans, has a weaker labor movement, a less dense and more nascent infrastructure of immigrant rights organizations, a large foreign-born Hispanic population, and a history of notable community advocacy losses. Business interests defeated the living-wage campaign in 1997, but their support helped immigrant and worker advocates to secure a municipal anti-wage theft ordinance sixteen years later.

In the pages that follow, we first situate immigrant labor rights struggles in scholarship on the "right to the city." We then present San Francisco and Houston, focusing on their immigration histories, current demographic profiles, and contexts for advancing immigrant labor rights. We next describe the parallel types of organizations that have advocated for stronger wage and labor rights in San Francisco and Houston and the similar principles that have motivated them to advocate with local government. In discussing the wage and labor rights campaigns in each city, we draw out key differences in the policy changes that advocates have

realized, the coalitions they formed to do so, and the issue frames they adopted in the process. The conclusion underscores the need for more research on how, and to what effect, advocates are mobilizing for immigrant labor rights in cities with different historical, economic, political, and demographic contexts.

This chapter is based on five years (2005–2009) of research in San Francisco and Houston. We conducted ninety-two semi-structured interviews, thirty-five of them in San Francisco and fifty-seven in Houston, with elected and nonelected local, state, and federal government officials, consular officials, union representatives, and leaders from immigrant rights organizations, churches, and business organizations. Our evidence also draws from organizational documents, city council archives, recorded and televised hearings on the various policies we studied, and media coverage of local wage and labor rights campaigns.

## **Low-Wage Immigrant Workers and the Right to the City**

Since the 1970s, deindustrialization, labor law deregularization, and a globalizing world economy have made American cities increasingly polarized places, marked by growing economic and social inequality. These changes have coincided with the post-1965 influx of immigrants from Asia and Latin America, who have become the backbone of the low-wage service sector at the bottom of urban postindustrial and de-unionized economies. The declining density and influence of labor unions have led to a concurrent rise of new organizations focused on serving, organizing, and advocating for immigrants and other low-wage workers (Fine 2006; Valenzuela et al. 2006). With this new groundwork for social unrest, worker rights campaigns are increasingly pressuring municipal governments to make labor and employment practices more inclusive and equitable.

Critical urbanists and urban citizenship scholars have long argued that cities are important staging grounds for marginalized individuals, including those without formal citizenship or legal status, to (re)claim their sociocultural, economic, and political rights. Their research documents community organizing campaigns that have expanded the rights and benefits of immigrants and other marginalized populations in areas such as health care and public education (Rocco 1999), employment (Pincetl 1994), and voting (Coll 2011; Hayduk 2006). These studies, however, often do not address how variation in city context influences rights campaigns. Also, many fail to account for the critical role of civil society organizations in urban struggles for greater economic and political equality (Smith and McQuarrie 2012).

An array of civil society organizations have worked toward building power for low-wage workers, especially in service industries that include large numbers of immigrants, minorities, and women. Labor unions have been at the vanguard of many of these campaigns, but they have not followed a singular or unified path in support of immigrant worker rights. In 1986, for example, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) supported the employer sanctions included in the Immigration Reform and Control Act, characterizing undocumented immigrants as job competitors and threats to union power. However, the AFL-CIO officially reversed its position on immigration in 2001 when it issued a statement calling for amnesty for undocumented immigrants and repeal of the 1986 employer sanctions. It did so largely in response to local dissension from central labor councils in the San Francisco Bay Area (Dean and Reynolds 2009) and the long-standing organizing efforts of new “immigrant unions” (Grenier and Nissen 2000).

Beyond unions, other key labor advocates have included worker centers, immigrant rights organizations, religious institutions, and other types of civic groups (e.g., Fine 2006; Gleeson 2012; Luce 2004; Nissen 2004). They have joined forces with unions to organize new union members, build new forms of worker representation, and push for local legislation to promote the rights of immigrants and other low-wage workers. These diverse coalitions often seek strategic alliances with other local power brokers within and beyond government. These alliances can lead to conflict but also create unique opportunities to influence the local policy-making process.

Coalitions of unions and community organizations have proliferated across the country, and increasingly they are targeting city and county officials to bring about policy change. From one municipality to the next, however, they vary both in terms of the constituents they represent, their organizational structure, and the resources available to them. Coalitions consequently can be conflict-ridden, but strategic alliances can also bolster advocates’ impact on the policy-making process when no one group has sufficient power or resources to act alone. Varying political contexts further shape how immigrant and worker rights coalitions operate and what they advocate for or against, including political change (e.g., local mayoral and city council elections and ballot initiatives), economic need (e.g., austerity during economic crises), or shared ideologies or identities (e.g., immigrant rights, worker rights, and women’s rights) (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010). As we will show, immigrant and worker allies in San Francisco—compared to Houston—have been able to advocate for a range of new wage and labor policies, as the city’s historical, economic, political, and demographic context has made it relatively easier for them to do their work.

Differences in historical, economic, political, and demographic contexts also shape how advocates can frame their agenda and suggested policy reforms. Key decisions include how to justify the creation of new worker protections, how to articulate key beneficiaries, and how to assess the costs and benefits of taking a particular course of action. Immigrant and worker advocates can also adopt a range of justifications, including framing the issue as a moral or religious imperative (McCartin 2009), a human rights issue (McIntyre 2008), or a matter of basic democracy (Lichtenstein 2002). As we will show, the view that new labor rights protections are a matter of social and economic justice has predominated in San Francisco, while an emphasis on fair market competition and economic necessity has resonated more in Houston.

## **Immigrant Labor in Global Cities: Comparing San Francisco and Houston**

San Francisco and Houston are two large immigrant destinations, with markedly different immigration histories and compositions of their foreign-born populations. San Francisco has a long and continuous history of immigration dating back to the nineteenth century, and in 2012, 36 percent of city residents were born abroad. The majority of immigrants hail from Asia (63 percent), followed by Latin America (20 percent) and Europe (14 percent). The city counts many noncitizens—41 percent had not acquired U.S. citizenship in 2012—and an estimated thirty thousand to forty-five thousand undocumented immigrants (Hill and Johnson 2011; Migration Policy Institute 2014). Houston experienced mass migration only after World War II, and 28 percent of Houstonians were foreign-born in 2012. The largest share of its immigrants come from Latin America (71 percent), followed by Asia (20 percent). Reflecting Houston's more recent experience with mass migration, a larger share of immigrants (71 percent) are not U.S. citizens. About 390,000 individuals in the Houston metropolitan area were estimated to be undocumented in 2004, approximately 45 percent of the foreign-born population (Fortuny, Capps, and Passel 2007). In both cities, though, immigrants have mixed educational profiles, and the majority struggle with the English language, although Houston's immigrants have somewhat more disadvantaged human capital profiles.

Both cities have classic postindustrial economies, where large numbers of immigrants from Asia and Latin America work in low-wage jobs at the bottom of the hourglass economy. Densely populated with 826,000 residents concentrated on just forty-nine square miles (U.S. Census Bureau 2012), San Francisco has workers concentrated in high-end service jobs in banking and management

and low-end service jobs in the hotel and restaurant industries. With over two million residents on a sprawling area of six hundred square miles, Houston has generated enormous wealth with an economy built on a booming medical and energy sector, as well as ever-growing construction and service industries that employ the vast majority of low-wage workers.

Besides differences in their immigration histories, demographics, and local economies, San Francisco and Houston also differ with regard to labor power and state labor context. San Francisco has a strong union movement, and the greater Bay Area boasts union membership rates of 9.5 percent in the private sector and 57 percent in the public sector, compared with rates of 6.7 and 35.3 percent nationally, respectively (Hirsch and Macpherson 2012). San Francisco is located in a state that offers labor protections that surpass federal standards, and in 2000 it created its own Office of Labor Standards Enforcement to enforce all wage and labor laws adopted by local legislators and San Francisco voters. San Francisco is one of about thirty U.S. cities with legislation governing local wages, and in July 2016 the city's minimum wage was \$13, higher than the state (\$10) and federal standards (\$7.25). Labor power is notably weaker in Houston. Union membership for the Houston–Baytown–Sugar Land region is low, even compared with the national averages, with 2.6 percent for the private sector and 19.1 percent for public-sector workers. Houston has no local legislation governing wages, and Texas labor law generally only replicates federal minimum protections. Although former Republican governor Rick Perry signed into law key worker protections, the Texas Workforce Commission operates centrally out of the capital of Austin, with no state offices to enforce wage theft in Houston, the largest city in Texas.<sup>1</sup> The current governor, Greg Abbott, has further advocated for policies that would limit labor union power, and he is opposed to efforts to raise the Texas minimum wage.

These two cities also vary in their political culture and the welcome extended to immigrants. San Francisco is deep blue politically, and more than three-quarters of San Francisco voters have supported Democratic candidates for the presidency in recent elections. In recent decades, San Francisco officials have enacted various immigrant-friendly policies. The city was one of the first to declare itself a “sanctuary” for undocumented immigrants (1985), to enact language access legislation to make services more accessible to limited English proficient immigrants (2001), and to issue municipal ID cards to undocumented immigrants (2008) (de Graauw 2015, 2016). In October 2013, the city adopted the Due Process for All Ordinance barring local law enforcement officials from honoring most federal immigration hold requests issued through the Secure Communities program (McMenamin 2013). San Francisco also has two municipal agencies with specific immigrant-related mandates: the Immigrant Rights Commission, established by



ordinance in 1997, and the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs, which in 2009 consolidated a handful of city administrative positions and offices responsible for immigrant integration programs.

Houston is politically more divided than San Francisco, with the balance of power often swaying between Republicans and Democrats. During the 2012 presidential election, half the voters in Harris County (which encompasses most of Houston) supported Barack Obama for the presidency, with slightly higher percentages of Republican voters in surrounding suburbs. Houston also is more of a mixed bag with regard to immigrant rights. In 2013, Mayor Annise Parker signed an executive order to improve language access for the city's limited English proficient residents. The Houston Police Department rejected a proposal to partner with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to permit police officers to apprehend and detain undocumented immigrants, but Harris County has had a partnership agreement in place since 2009. City officials have consistently eschewed Houston's label as a "sanctuary city" and pushed aggressively to limit services and benefits to the city's immigrant residents. Houston's three day labor centers have all been defunded following charges from key conservative city councilors that they promote "illegal labor," and the city's immigrant affairs office subsequently removed from its mission statement inclusive language that appealed to city residents regardless of citizenship and legal status (Gleeson 2012).

Additionally, the San Francisco metropolitan area has twice as dense an infrastructure of civil society organizations, with twenty-five registered nonprofit organizations per ten thousand residents, compared with the Houston metropolitan area's eleven registered nonprofits per ten thousand residents (National Center for Charitable Statistics 2012). Owing in large part to its longer immigration history, San Francisco has more organizations focused specifically on immigrant rights, estimated at over two hundred (de Graauw 2016). Immigrant rights organizations in San Francisco also have more experience working together in advocacy coalitions, which over the years have included the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, the Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition, *Deporten a la Migra* (Deport INS/ICE), the San Francisco Immigrant Legal and Education Network, and the Bay Area DACA Collaborative. Immigrant rights organizations in San Francisco have a relatively longer history of organizing, with several notable wins, on issues including affordable housing, education, language access, urban growth, voting rights, and immigration. Finally, both cities have several influential business organizations. In San Francisco, these organizations have faced tough battles in advocating with the city's mostly Democratic officials, especially since the city took a firm stance against rapid and uncontrolled urban growth in the 1980s. Houston, in comparison, is considered a darling for business

because of its lack of a zoning code, its generous business incentives, low cost of living, low union density rates, and weak labor and employment protections.

## **The Organizational Landscape of Immigrant Worker Advocacy**

The organizational landscape of immigrant worker advocacy in San Francisco and Houston has been similar, including a diverse group of labor unions, worker centers, immigrant advocacy organizations, and faith-based institutions. While motivated by similar goals to expand and strengthen the labor rights of immigrants and other low-wage workers, these organizations have pursued different policy objectives in the two cities, strategically adapting to the characteristics of the specific urban context in which they operate.

In both cities, labor unions have advocated for immigrant worker rights, but to different degrees. Reflecting their long history of labor organizing, San Francisco unions in recent years have allied with boycott campaigns to organize local hotel workers, and the city's strong public employee unions have staged regular strikes during stalled contract negotiations. The San Francisco AFL-CIO has also pursued campaigns of national import for immigrant workers, including litigation that challenged both the Social Security Administration's No-Match Letter program and the rollout of the federal Secure Communities program. In Houston, the Harris County AFL-CIO and its member unions operate with significantly fewer resources and in a more hostile political context, making it much more difficult for them to bring about comprehensive policy changes. However, several union victories in Houston have been monumental for the labor movement. These include winning a contract for the Houston Hilton Americas, the state's second unionized hotel, and the success of the Justice for Janitors campaign.

Unions, however, rarely have acted alone in local wage justice campaigns. With union membership dwindling across the country, worker centers have emerged as important new institutions for organizing, serving, and advocating on behalf of immigrants and other low-wage workers (Fine 2006). In San Francisco, worker centers such as People Organized to Win Employment Rights, Young Workers United, La Raza Centro Legal (the People's Legal Center), and the Workers Organizing Center of the Chinese Progressive Association have played key roles in advancing several new wage and labor policies in recent years. There are fewer worker centers in Houston, but the Fé y Justicia (Faith and Justice) Worker Center and, more recently, the Restaurant Opportunities Center have played central roles in the campaign to end wage theft. In fact, these groups have been at the helm of labor rights advocacy benefiting low-wage immigrant workers beyond the union context.

In both cities, various immigrant rights organizations have worked with unions and worker centers to advocate for stronger wage and labor protections. These organizations have grown more numerous and diverse in recent decades and provide a variety of services to needy immigrants, including immigration and naturalization services. They also frequently advocate for the unique interests of immigrants, including language access and immigration reform, as well as housing, health care, and labor rights. In San Francisco, a traditional immigrant gateway city with a dense and well-developed infrastructure of immigrant rights organizations, those active with immigrant labor rights advocacy have included the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights, the Chinese Progressive Association, Mission Agenda, and the Mission Anti-Displacement Coalition. Houston has fewer immigrant rights organizations, which have focused largely on Mexican and Central American immigrants and, to a lesser extent, the Vietnamese and Chinese communities. Key immigrant rights organizations include the Centro de Recursos Centroamericanos (Central American Resource Center), the newer Alianza Mexicana (Mexican Alliance), and the more education-focused Familias Inmigrantes y Estudiantes en la Lucha (Immigrant Families and Students in the Struggle).

Immigrant labor rights advocacy campaigns in San Francisco and Houston have also drawn support from faith leaders across different traditions. Capitalizing on their moral capital, priests, rabbis, ministers, and imams have participated in actions to demand fair restitution from employers and to testify before governing bodies on the importance of protecting worker rights. In San Francisco, over seventy-five interfaith leaders came together in a large committee called Clergy for a Just Living Wage. With support from the Catholic archbishop and an Episcopal bishop, this committee advocated in support for living wages for immigrants and other low-wage workers. The Down with Wage Theft campaign in Houston has similarly drawn support from the Catholic Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston and the Houston Dominican Sisters. These faith leaders, along with the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, have been key supporters of the Justice and Equality in the Workplace Project, a pioneering effort to safeguard the labor rights of immigrant workers through the coordinated efforts of federal labor enforcement agencies and foreign consulates (Karson 2004). The Fé y Justicia Worker Center also has strong faith roots: it initially was sponsored by the Houston Mennonite Church and currently has its office at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

These immigrant and worker advocates have increasingly mounted campaigns to both enact new wage and labor protections and implement existing ones at the local level. In San Francisco, advocates pursued a more comprehensive agenda aimed at restructuring the city's low-wage labor market. They

successfully campaigned for living-wage, minimum-wage, universal health care, paid sick leave, and anti-wage theft legislation. Here, advocates worked with the San Francisco Office of Labor Standards Enforcement to expand the office's enforcement powers and outreach efforts. In Houston, in the long shadow of a failed living-wage campaign a decade prior, and in a city with no local worker protections or an agency to enforce them and weaker union power, advocates had to pursue a more modest agenda focused on preventing theft of the federally mandated minimum wage. They pushed the police department to fulfill its mandate to pursue "theft of services" claims and ultimately for the creation of a city administrator who could bar offending employers with outstanding claims from operating in the city.

## **Different Urban Contexts, Different Paths to Immigrant Worker Justice**

While motivated by the similar principle of promoting immigrant worker justice, campaigns in San Francisco and Houston promoted different policy goals, struck different alliances, and developed different narratives to support their causes. San Francisco has a longer history of successful community organizing, strong labor unions with significant political clout, and progressive politicians who have enacted other policies benefiting disadvantaged immigrants. It is also located in a state with labor protections that exceed federal standards. Consequently, advocates in San Francisco have been able to pursue ambitious and comprehensive local policy changes under the banner of social and economic justice for all without support from the business community. In Houston, in contrast, community advocacy does not have a long a history or record of success, labor unions are weak, and local politicians include a number of Republicans critical of immigrants and especially the large number of undocumented Hispanics in the region. Houston also is situated in a state that offers less generous wage and labor protections. As a result, advocates there could pursue only modest policy change under the banner of rooting out unfair business competition, and they had to rely on critical support from the business community.

### **Different Policy Agendas**

Since the late 1990s, organizations in San Francisco have advocated for several ordinances that expand the labor rights of immigrants and other low-wage workers. In 2000, amid concerns over rising living costs that affected immigrants and low-wage workers most visibly, they pushed the Board of Supervisors (i.e., local

legislators) to adopt the Minimum Compensation Ordinance (popularly known as the living-wage ordinance). Initially, there was no majority support for the ordinance among board members, and Mayor Willie Brown was under pressure from his allies in the business community to oppose it. Advocates, however, threatened to put the issue on the November ballot, which forced local legislators and the mayor to adopt a compromise ordinance. Advocates' original proposal called for a living wage of \$14.50 at a time when the federal minimum wage was \$5.15 and the California minimum wage was \$5.75. The Board of Supervisors ultimately enacted a \$9 hourly wage, which has benefited an estimated twenty-two thousand low-wage workers employed in businesses with city service contracts (Reynolds 2004).<sup>2</sup>

In 2003, buoyed by their living-wage victory, advocates went a step further and put the Minimum Wage Ordinance on the ballot, which was approved by 60 percent of San Francisco voters. The ballot strategy allowed advocates to shape the content of the ordinance at a time when the San Francisco economy was in a downturn and the business community opposed another wage hike as an additional burden on their businesses. This ordinance created an indexed citywide minimum wage—initially \$8.50, \$13 in July 2016—that far exceeds California (\$10) and federal (\$7.25) standards. At the time of enactment, it was estimated that the ordinance would result in direct and indirect pay raises for more than fifty-four thousand workers (12 percent of San Francisco's private and non-profit sector labor force), particularly benefiting many immigrants, native-born minorities, and workers under the age of twenty-five (Reich and Laitinen 2003).

San Francisco advocates also focused on implementation and enforcement of the Minimum Wage Ordinance. They pushed for an administrative enforcement mechanism through the city's Office of Labor Standards Enforcement (OLSE), as well as a private right of action that allows unions and community organizations to file wage claims on behalf of aggrieved workers. They won a requirement for every workplace to post official bulletins announcing the current San Francisco minimum wage in English, Spanish, Chinese, and any additional language spoken by more than 5 percent of the workforce. Finally, they achieved strong anti-retaliation language that prohibits employers from discriminating against workers (including undocumented workers) who exercise their rights under the ordinance. Each of these provisions aimed particularly at protecting the rights of vulnerable immigrant workers, who are frequently targeted for abuse and—owing to unfamiliarity with government agencies, undocumented status, or limited English proficiency—are less likely to contest labor law violations and speak up against unscrupulous employers (Gleeson 2012).

Immigrant and worker advocates have achieved subsequent local labor rights victories, including the enactment of universal health care, paid sick leave, and

wage theft prevention policies. A small group of worker centers and immigrant rights organizations have also gone on to collaborate with OLSE to hold non-compliant employers accountable through targeted monitoring of the Minimum Wage and Health Care Accountability Ordinances. These organizations have reached out to immigrant workers, documented instances of wage violations, and then encouraged aggrieved workers to turn to OLSE for help. With input from these organizations, OLSE helped immigrants and other low-wage workers to recover \$6.5 million in back wages between 2004 and 2013 (OLSE 2013).

In Houston, the goals of immigrant and worker advocates have been more modest. Here, advocates operate strategically, with full knowledge of a previous failed campaign. In 1997, there was an aggressive living-wage initiative on the ballot to raise Houston's minimum wage to \$6.50 at a time when the federal minimum wage was \$4.75. The Harris County AFL-CIO spent \$20,000 on the ballot campaign but faced steep opposition from business leaders, who spent \$1.3 million to stop the initiative (Dyer 1996; Luce 2004). Defeated by 77 percent of the vote, the initiative lost citywide but won in low-wage neighborhoods (Levi, Olson, and Steinman 2002; Reynolds 2002).

Following this massive defeat, advocates shifted their attention to the growing problem of wage theft and particularly the abuse experienced by many immigrant day laborers. During the 2000s, advocates convened a Day Labor Taskforce to advise the city council. The task force successfully pushed for the creation of three day labor centers, which were supported by federal Community Development Block Grants. Each, however, was ultimately defunded amid accusations that the centers served as magnets for illegal workers. The task force next focused on pressuring the Houston Police Department to carry out an existing mandate to enforce "theft of services" claims. Police officers, however, resented taking on additional duties that detracted from their efforts to fight violent crime, and they had little cooperation from the district attorney. Other publicly funded entities that had served as resources for aggrieved day laborers, including the Harris County Dispute Resolution Center and the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, also withdrew their support for immigrant labor rights initiatives amid public criticism (Gleeson 2012).

Advocates renewed their efforts to seek local support for immigrant worker rights in 2006 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, when thousands of day laborers left for New Orleans to help with reconstruction efforts under precarious wage and safety conditions. The newly created Houston Interfaith Worker Justice Center (HIWJC) helped shepherd workers through the process of pursuing a workplace violation claim and advocated for policies to safeguard the rights of low-wage workers. Prior to HIWJC, which in 2012 incorporated as an independent nonprofit worker center and was renamed the *Fé y Justicia* Worker Center,

there were few to no resources for workers seeking assistance with workplace violations. Houston's only major legal aid center, Lone Star Legal Aid, did not offer services for labor and employment issues, and it was unable to serve undocumented clients owing to federal funding restrictions. Ultimately, the police department appointed a community liaison officer, who has worked closely with the Fé y Justicia Worker Center to address community concerns.

In 2011, HIWJC went a step further with the creation of the Down with Wage Theft campaign. Citing an estimated cost of \$753 million per year for wage theft, the campaign pushed for a city ordinance that would suspend and possibly revoke business permits from offending employers who refused to pay up (HIWJC 2012). Specifically, the Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance provides workers with a formal complaint process. Businesses convicted of wage theft will be listed in a publicly accessible city database and become ineligible for city (sub)contracts. Those criminally convicted will be barred from receiving any business permits and licenses in Houston for five years. Complaints related to city contracts are handled by the city's Office of Inspector General, with others referred directly to the Texas Workforce Commission for processing. In all cases, claimants can still pursue their case in court (Perez-Boston 2013a).

## Different Alliances

These varying policy agendas have led advocates in San Francisco and Houston to pursue different alliances with other local power brokers within and beyond government. In San Francisco, the coalitions backing the living-wage and minimum-wage campaigns have been large and diverse and have involved several progressive members of the Board of Supervisors. They included labor unions, and most importantly the San Francisco Labor Council (which operates as the countywide federation of local unions within the AFL-CIO), SEIU Locals 250 and 790, and HERE Local 2. Because these unions have large memberships, significant financial resources, and enjoy significant political clout, they had sway with the Board of Supervisors as well as Mayors Willie Brown and Gavin Newsom, whose electoral fates depended on union support.

The coalitions also included community organizations representing Asian and Latino immigrants, most notably the Chinese Progressive Association and La Raza Centro Legal. These and other immigrant rights groups injected the campaigns with high levels of grassroots energy, expertise from prior advocacy campaigns, and community legitimacy that unions often lacked. The coalitions also included a large cadre of interfaith leaders, whose moral and religious capital helped to smooth over tensions that at times built up within coalitions. Finally, the coalitions included community organizations representing poor and black

San Franciscans, including the Coalition for Ethical Welfare Reform, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), and People Organized to Win Employment Rights. These latter organizations underscored that the negative effects of low-wage work affected a broad cross-section of city residents.

A broad Living Wage Coalition of more than twenty labor organizations, twenty-eight religious leaders, forty-five community organizations, and ten immigrant rights organizations advocated for the Minimum Compensation Ordinance. They faced steep opposition from the business community—and especially the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce and the Golden Gate Restaurant Association—which opposed the initial \$14.50 wage proposal and argued that wage increases would result in cuts in low-wage jobs and create a hostile business climate in the city. Businesses expended great resources in lobbying the Board of Supervisors and Mayor Brown to stall action on pending living-wage legislation. To underscore the economic cost of wage increases for restaurant owners in particular, the executive director of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association repeatedly testified against wage increases at public hearings in City Hall by waving an empty piggy bank in the air.

The success of the San Francisco Living Wage Coalition ultimately did not depend on the support of business leaders, but advocates did have to act strategically to neutralize the power of the business community over especially Brown and his supporters on the Board of Supervisors. Brown, a moderate Democrat by San Francisco standards, drew his political support from both labor unions and the business community. However, he did not want to support a living-wage ordinance as long as unions were tied to Tom Ammiano, his progressive rival on the Board of Supervisors who was the lead sponsor of living-wage legislation and who ran against him for mayor in 2000 (Epstein 2000). Upon learning that there was no majority support on the board for Ammiano's \$11 wage proposal, the Living Wage Coalition moved to qualify the proposal for the November 2000 ballot via a signature campaign paid for largely by unions (Lelchuk 2000). This ballot threat forced Brown and the business community back to the negotiating table. The final negotiations between Ammiano and the Living Wage Coalition, versus Brown and the business community, eventually produced the \$9 compromise legislation enacted as the Minimum Compensation Ordinance.

The advocates who led the charge for a living-wage ordinance regrouped as the Minimum Wage Coalition in 2002 to advocate for a citywide pay raise for all low-wage workers in San Francisco. This time, however, they decided to put the issue on the ballot and not work through the Board of Supervisors. This tactic deprived the business community of the opportunity to influence the deliberations between the mayor and the Board of Supervisors. With a ballot campaign



calling for an \$8.50 minimum wage, immigrant and worker advocates put the issue directly before the voters, who could vote themselves a raise at a time when the local economy was in a downturn and the business community opposed another wage increase. The Minimum Wage Coalition developed an empowering electoral strategy targeting lower-turnout neighborhoods of working-class people, immigrants, and people of color who would benefit most from the ordinance, including Chinatown, the Mission, and Bayview. In the November 2003 election, 60 percent of San Francisco voters approved Proposition L, the Minimum Wage Ordinance, making San Francisco one of the first of a growing number of cities with their own minimum wages.

In Houston, the alliances in support of worker initiatives have been more bipartisan, and, unlike in San Francisco, immigrant and worker advocates could not eschew potential partners in the business community. In 1996, the main opponents to the city's proposed living-wage ordinance predictably emerged from the business community. Powerful business associations, including the Greater Houston Partnership (Houston's chamber of commerce), the National Restaurant Association, and the Greater Houston Hotel and Motel Association, formed the Save Jobs for Houston Committee, which capitalized on residents' fears that jobs would leave the city and consumer prices would rise (Reynolds and Kern 2001). Following their cue, the media also warned that the initiative would result in mass layoffs for city police and firefighters, higher taxes, and price hikes (B. A. Smith 1996). Democratic Mayor Bob Lanier was ultimately swayed by business concerns about rising taxes and the growth of big government, and no city councilor actively supported the measure. In the end, the ballot measure failed at the polls with just 23 percent of voter support (Reynolds 2002).

The more modest efforts to pass a local ordinance to address rampant wage theft in Houston has relied on many of the same union, worker center, immigrant rights, and religious allies as in San Francisco. Donning the campaign's iconic yellow and blue T-shirts, supporters of the Down with Wage Theft campaign testified at various city council hearings and staged protests in front of City Hall. They also targeted public entities like the Capital Improvement Projects Commission and the Houston Independent School District, which contracted building projects to companies accused of wage theft and other egregious occupational safety and health violations (Fé y Justicia Worker Center 2012; Down with Wage Theft Campaign 2013b). City councilors initially opposed the Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance, arguing that it would duplicate existing state law (Kaufmann 2012). However, the campaign ultimately won the support of Mayor Annise Parker, a Democrat who played a key role in city council matters. Eventually, and to the surprise of many, the ordinance passed unanimously in November 2013.

## Different Issue Narratives

Immigrant and worker advocates in San Francisco and Houston also framed their campaigns differently. In San Francisco, advocates framed the living- and minimum-wage campaigns around the theme of social and economic justice for low-wage workers, who had not been sharing in the city's dot-com boom. San Francisco is a progressive city where Democrats dominate local politics, unions have significant political clout, and the business community has been under siege since the slow-growth movement of the 1980s. Here, advocates could afford to focus their message on improving workers' plight without having to placate the business community. However, each group of advocates articulated its own motivations for fighting for social and economic justice in the living- and minimum-wage campaigns.

Unions emphasized the potential to organize new low-wage workers, particularly at San Francisco International Airport and in the home-care industry. "The living wage provided a useful context for organizing," an organizer with OPEIU Local 3 commented, "especially among airport baggage screeners, retail workers, and security guards." Unions also were excited about opportunities to educate low-wage workers about their rights and get them activated in the labor movement. "About 80 to 90 percent [of home-care workers] are immigrants, and many were skeptical of this whole living-wage thing and didn't understand what social responsibility was or government accountability," an organizer with SEIU Local 250 explained. "We wanted them to come on board so they could learn to better advocate for themselves." Finally, unions welcomed the opportunity to build ties with community organizations, especially those serving immigrants.

For immigrant rights organizations, the living and minimum campaigns provided opportunities to educate San Francisco officials and the larger public about the difficult economic situation of especially many immigrants. "We always had a sense that the lowest-paid workers in the city were immigrant workers," an advocate with the Northern California Coalition for Immigrant Rights commented. "In fact, [immigrants] often work more than one job, and they're *still* having a hard time surviving. . . . We wanted [city officials] to see that there's something very wrong with that picture." Other organizations talked about the opportunities that the wage campaigns created to build their bases and organize marginalized communities. An advocate with Mission Agenda commented that the minimum-wage campaign was a good tool to train single-room-occupancy hotel tenants in the skills necessary to conduct a campaign. A staff member with the Day Labor Program similarly explained that "organizing workers is the only way we're going to make systemic change, especially if the laws are meant to benefit them. That's why we got our day laborers involved with the campaign."

Finally, religious leaders talked about living and minimum wages as issues of basic morality and human dignity. Father Peter Sammon, a member of the Living Wage Coalition, commented that it was a disgrace that “poverty-level wages” were paid to “thousands of workers in a wealthy city” like San Francisco. He urged city officials to adopt a living-wage ordinance that would allow people “to survive on what they earn and support their families without relying on public welfare for emergency health care and food stamps and other public assistance” (Sammon 2000). San Francisco’s Archbishop William Levada, who rarely participated in mobilizations, even published his plea for living wages as an editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Levada 1999).

As in San Francisco, members of Houston’s Down with Wage Theft Coalition challenged city government officials to prove their support for the city’s low-wage workers. The campaign mobilized state and federal law as well as moral and human rights imperatives to argue against the practice of wage theft. Two of the top campaign values were that “all work is sacred and deserves respect” and that “workers have the right to be paid for all the hours they work, to be treated fairly on the job, and to provide for their families with dignity.” Supporters frequently appealed to the commandment that “thou shalt not steal” and other scriptural texts, and they featured prominently the support of leaders from across faith traditions (HIWJC 2012). According to the director of the Fé y Justicia Worker Center, it was important to frame wage theft as a moral issue. Doing so, she commented, allowed the Down with Wage Theft Coalition to garner broad-based support for the Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance.

Additionally, free-market and small-government logics were crucially important for policy success in Houston, a city with a larger Republican and pro-business base than San Francisco. While cost-benefit analyses did not necessarily eclipse the moral and social-justice narratives, advocates had to embrace economic arguments as well in their messaging to build a winning coalition in support of anti-wage theft legislation. As a result, the fight against wage theft became a moral imperative as well as one that was crucial to fair market competition and economic growth. Several big and small companies in Houston argued that companies that engaged in wage theft challenged their right to fair market competition, and they became crucial allies in the thirty-four-member Down with Wage Theft Coalition (Down with Wage Theft Campaign 2013a).

While several influential business groups campaigned against passage of the ordinance, as they had done in San Francisco, other powerful business interests publicly supported the cause, even as their immediate economic interests were distinct from the moral and human rights focus of faith leaders, immigrant rights activists, and union representatives. Organizations tied to the housing development industry, like the Houston Apartment Association, spoke out

in support of the Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance. Even the Greater Houston Partnership argued that the ordinance was vital to creating a more level playing field for business owners (Morris 2013; Perez-Boston 2013b). Construction businesses, organized under a group called Construction Citizen, emphasized that the ordinance would help build a more socially responsible and sustainable construction industry (Construction Citizen 2013). This group also lobbied against the misclassification of independent contractors, a practice commonly used by unscrupulous employers in the construction industry to avoid paying taxes and deductions required by law. They also opposed immigration employer audits, striking another key alliance with immigrant advocates. With the support of these business interests, the Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance ultimately passed the city council with unanimous support. The ordinance was lauded as a victory for both businesses and workers in the city.

## Conclusion

The San Francisco and Houston experiences highlight how different cities provide different contexts for local labor rights campaigns. These two cities have, among other things, different immigration histories, different community advocacy legacies, different densities of civil society organizations, different partisan political cultures, and different state labor laws that influence city labor right dynamics. As a result of these differences, labor rights advocacy organizations need to adopt different strategies to navigate the particulars of an urban context. Advocacy groups in San Francisco and Houston not only set different policy agendas, but they also formed different alliances, adopted different issue frames, and ultimately secured different outcomes. The larger lesson for “right to the city” scholars is that while “the urban” has become a more prominent scale of organizing for marginalized populations, it is necessary to understand that city contexts differ and provide different opportunities and challenges for organizing. In other words, not all city contexts are the same.

San Francisco has a relatively strong labor movement and a denser infrastructure of civil society organizations, including those serving immigrants. This means there are more resources to launch campaigns and more opportunities to push for local policy overhauls. Conversely, Houston is a city with a weaker labor movement and a relatively sparse and underdeveloped infrastructure of immigrant rights organizations. Here, advocates must fight harder to influence the local policy-making process on behalf of immigrants and other low-wage workers, and as such, the policy agenda has been far more constrained, focusing primarily on more stringent enforcement mechanisms for existing laws.

Debates surrounding immigration enforcement, worker rights, and government economic oversight also have taken on different tones in each city, influencing the alliances that labor rights advocates in San Francisco and Houston could form. In San Francisco, a Democratic majority city favorably disposed toward immigrants and workers, there was a predictable polarization between worker advocates and business interests. Given strong support for stronger worker protections advocated by the Living and Minimum Wage Coalitions, immigrant and worker advocates had direct influence with supportive policy makers, which made an alliance with the business community unnecessary. Conversely, advocates faced more contentious battles in Houston, a city politically more divided than San Francisco. Here, powerful business interests became an important asset for the Down with Wage Theft campaign, and they spoke to the concerns of several conservative city councilors with whom immigrant rights organizations and unions had relatively little clout.

Finally, differences in urban context influenced how advocates could frame policies to address wage justice issues for immigrants and other low-wage workers. In San Francisco, the issue of proper compensation for working families was pitched primarily as an issue of social and economic justice. In Houston, the Down with Wage Theft campaign came to fruition through the efforts of grassroots organizing by workers who viewed the need for local protections against wage theft as a human right. The coalition, however, also had to allay fears of big government imposing unreasonable restrictions on employers. As such, the narrative that wage theft was an issue of unfair business competition that penalized responsible employers and small businesses became a powerful message in Houston.

Our examination of the wage and labor rights campaigns in San Francisco and Houston highlights the need for additional research on how city contexts influence advocacy to advance the rights of marginalized populations. For example, additional research is needed to understand how advocates strategize to promote the labor rights of immigrants and other low-wage workers in newer immigrant destinations where the low-wage workforce has fewer immigrants, the density of immigrant rights organizations is low, and union strength is minimal. Also, additional research is needed to understand how advocates in different cities can take advantage of the particulars of an urban context to grow their organizations, to tend coalitions and cement alliances, and to develop other effective frames and issue narratives that can influence policy makers. Finally, more research is needed to understand how successful organizing at the city level can be scaled up to influence similar organizing for labor rights at the state and national levels.

#### **4. CONTEXT, COALITIONS, AND ORGANIZING**

1. In May 2010, Governor Rick Perry signed into law SB 1024, expanding the ability of police departments across Texas to arrest employers who cheat their workers out of their pay. Immigrant and worker advocates, however, have argued that this new state law is inadequate to protect worker rights because of insufficient enforcement resources and the particular challenges faced by undocumented and limited English proficient immigrant workers struggling to navigate the state's complicated labor enforcement bureaucracy.

2. Exempted from the Minimum Compensation Ordinance in 2000 were contracts for goods, contractors with twenty or fewer employees, for-profit businesses with service contracts of less than \$25,000, nonprofit service providers with contracts less than \$50,000, and nonprofit contractors who could prove that compliance with the ordinance would cause them economic hardship. These provisions still hold, but as of January 2016 the hourly wage is \$13.34 for new and amended contracts with for-profits, and \$12.25 in the case of nonprofits (OLSE 2016).

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