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## Organizing Workers in the Space between Unions: Union-Centric Labor Revitalization and the Role of Community-Based Organizations

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### Abstract

Labor scholars tend to treat unions as the movement's constitutive organizational form. This practice excludes the movement-building efforts of community-based labor groups operating outside of the collective bargaining framework. This article examines the 'union-centric' character of sociological work on the contemporary US labor movement and explores the impact it has on analyses of its revitalization. Drawing on a case-study of the Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles, I show that community-based labor organizations mobilizing workers in the space between unions can play an important role in labor's renewal. I argue that broadening the way we conceptualize the labor movement, reconsidering who its members are, and including a wider range of organizational forms will strengthen analyses of labor's revitalization.

### Keywords

immigrant workers, labor organizing, labor movement revitalization, Los Angeles Garment Worker Center, worker centers

### Introduction

The US labor movement has been experiencing a steady decline in union density since the early 1970s. The portion of the workforce belonging to unions today is roughly 12 percent, half of what it was just 20 years ago. Over the last decade labor movement observers have been searching for ways to explain and reverse this trend in unionization rates. Sociologists have been at the forefront of this effort, developing a vibrant sub-field within sociology focused on the prospects of labor movement revitalization. Scholars working in this area have examined innovative worker organizing efforts taking place

outside the conventional collective bargaining framework through living wage campaigns, anti-sweatshop movements, and community-based organizing. These alternative sites of movement activity indicate that a portion of labor's revitalization may be taking place beyond the purview of trade unions.

The Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles is one example of a community-based labor organization (CBLO) seeking to organize workers outside unions. For a host of reasons, traditional unionization and collective bargaining in the garment manufacturing industry has become untenable. The industry is built on a complex system of outsourcing and small shop sub-contracting which produces intense competition between factory owners for orders from clothing retailers that drives down wages and leads to sweatshop conditions. The industry survives in part because it has access to a pool of vulnerable and politically marginalized workers, who are mostly undocumented immigrants with few employment alternatives and even fewer options for redressing workplace grievances. By organizing these workers, the Garment Worker Center (GWC) is filling the gap left by unions who left after it became clear that collective bargaining was not viable. The Garment Worker Center case suggests that community-based labor organizations may play a role in making labor a movement again. This is evident in its capacity to win back-wages, raise consciousness, foster collective identity among workers, and form coalitions with other labor groups. Through its many programs and mobilization campaigns the Center is doing movement-building work that is emblematic of, and may be necessary for, labor's transformation.

But despite the promise of this type of 'extra-union' movement activity, for the most part it has been excluded from mainstream analyses of labor revitalization. Scholars continue to treat unions as the movement's singular organizational form and the primary unit of analysis. As movement organizations, trade unions comprise the centerpiece of the movement's infrastructure. They enjoy historical, legal and cultural legitimacy that other movement organizations lack, and because they are recognized by the state, unions enjoy an additional degree of authority. As the mechanism by which organized labor leverages its market power to generate tangible benefits for workers, they will continue to have an important place in labor studies. But there are significant analytic and strategic consequences in treating unions as the movement's *constitutive* organization.

By reducing such a diverse movement to a single organizational form, observers overlook the revitalizing potential of labor organizations operating in 'the space between unions'. In light of research indicating a significant portion of promising labor movement activity is taking place outside of traditional unions, this union-centric focus is problematic (Sullivan 2004). Community-based labor organizations have the potential to increase the movement's membership base by including workers who are not, and are unlikely to become, union members. CBLOs organize workers in some of the most exploitative industries where traditional collective bargaining is not viable. Often these workers are undocumented immigrants, women and ethnic minorities who are generally underrepresented within the house of labor. Second, to the extent that labor revitalization requires labor to become a movement again, CBLOs may be better suited as *movement* organizations. Because unions are embedded within the legal framework of the

labor relations system, they are often prohibited or are otherwise reluctant to engage in direct action and other movement-style tactics. CBLOs, not burdened by these constraints, have wider latitude to utilize non-traditional tactics. Finally, it may be possible that trade unions in their current form – geared for collective bargaining in a Fordist system of production – may be ill-suited to confront the changes of a hyper-globalized, neo-liberal economic context (Farber and Western 2001; Moody 1997a). Farber and Western (2001) contend that any gains realized by increasing union organizing activity are likely to be offset by structural changes in the economy. If they are correct, new organizational forms may be crucial to labor's survival. If revitalization research continues to focus on trade unions, we may fail to recognize the strategic value of extra-union organizing.

These issues raise some important questions for those interested in labor's revitalization. Where does 'extra-union' activity fit into contemporary labor studies? What do these activities contribute to labor movement transformation and how might we assess their impact? And, how does the emphasis on unions prevent us from incorporating CBLOs into analyses of labor revitalization? These are questions I will address in the following pages. Using the Garment Worker Center as an example of a community-based labor organization, I argue that the union-centric quality of contemporary labor studies limits the range of organizational forms the labor movement takes, obscures the contributions of community-based organizations, and diminishes our understanding of labor's renewal efforts.

### Union-Centric Labor Revitalization

Several scholars have attempted to map and direct the growing body of academic research concerned with labor renewal (Clawson and Clawson 1999; Cornfield and Fletcher 2001; Nissen 2003; Webster and Lipsig-Mummé 2002). For the most part these efforts remain union-centric in orientation. Dan Cornfield and Bill Fletcher introduced the phrase 'sociology of labor revitalization' in a piece outlining a labor market segmentation approach to revitalization (2001). They propose assessing the health of the labor movement by using union density rates, union/non-union wage differentials, and certification election win rates. They advocate directing research to three areas: demand for unionization, labor organizing, and labor's self-revitalization efforts. Cornfield and Fletcher's analysis focuses exclusively on unions – a view made explicit by their contention that emphasis should be 'on the structure and function of existing labor organizations' (2001: 73). Their approach does not account for movement activity by community-based labor organizations because they do not (and cannot) impact 'union density', 'union wage differentials' or 'certification election win rates' – the key variables in their framework.

Bruce Nissen, another contributor to the sociology of labor revitalization, divides the field into two schools: value added unionism and social movement unionism (2003). The value-added school emphasizes labor-management partnering relationships growing from competitive necessity and the decline of adversarial relations between unions and employers. Social movement unionism on the other hand rejects business union practices and contends that 'unions must make common cause with other social movements and

ally themselves with the common good (Nissen 2003: 141).’ He believes this approach will be more likely to lead to labor’s renewal. Nissen’s embrace of social movement imagery reflects a view held by many labor scholars that to resurrect itself, ‘labor must become a movement again’ (Brecher and Costello 1990; Dreiling and Robinson 1998; Eisenscher 1999; Johnston 1994; Kurtz 2002; Moody 1997b; Robinson 2000; Sherman and Voss 2000; Turner and Hurd 2001; Waterman 1993). The meaning of social movement unionism varies but Nissen, borrowing from Ian Robinson (2000), defines it as an approach that is critical of current economic and political arrangements, views unions as part of a larger social movement for political and economic justice, and whose tactics do ‘not rely exclusively on conventional processes – electoral politics and collective bargaining – to advance their goals’ (Robinson 2000: 113).

Nevertheless, Nissen’s characterization of social movement unionism illustrates the union-centric quality of revitalization research. He contends that social movement unions ought to become ‘champions of those oppressed by the US economic system’ and ‘make common cause with other social movements’ (2003: 141), while at the same time he confines social movement unionism to the workplace – the traditional ambit of trade unions. Warning against conflating unions with a broader economic justice movement, he argues that unions ‘may become the job or workplace locus for a broader movement for a wider notion of justice in many spheres. But they cannot *become* that broader movement, or primarily focus on the many causes beyond the workplace (Nissen 2003: 147 emphasis in original).’ This raises a critical question. If unions cannot and should not *become* a movement for economic justice, then what types of organizations are to lead workers in this struggle?

Unions are routinely treated as constitutive of the labor movement which makes it difficult to imagine how community-based labor organizations might be included. The problem may be a reflection of the difficulty of conjoining two empirically distinct concepts: social movements and trade unions. This issue is taken up by Dan and Mary Ann Clawson (1999) who contend that in order to regain power, the labor movement must experiment with new types of organization and seek fusion with new social movements. However, they acknowledge the difficulty of wedding unionism to a social movement framework.

The terms ‘union’ and ‘labor movement’ capture a contradiction. The ‘union’ is an institution, a legally constituted collective bargaining agent that represents workers in complex economic and juridical relations with employers and government. The ‘labor movement’ is a more fluid formation whose very existence depends on high-risk activism, mass solidarity, and collective experiences with transformational possibilities (Clawson and Clawson 1999: 109).

While Cornfield and Fletcher emphasize research of ‘existing labor organizations’, and Nissen sees a job-based social movement unionism, the Clawsons contend that labor’s revitalization will necessarily unite social movements and unions and will likely produce new organizational forms that differ from the unions of the past (Clawson and Clawson 1999: 104).

Many of these alternative forms exist in what Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss call the 'space between unions' (2004). They define this conceptual space as comprising a cultural dimension pertaining to the symbolic importance of the labor movement in the popular imagination as well as to 'the development of several new organizational forms that are coming to occupy the spaces between existing unions, between union and other institutions ... and between the labor movement and those stigmatized social groups previously excluded or ignored by it' (Fantasia and Voss 2004: 108).

A handful of labor scholars have explored this important theoretical domain (Cobble 2001, 2007; Faue 1991; Fine 1998, 2006; Gapasin and Wial 1998; Gordon 2005; Luce 2004; Slater 2004; Tait 2005). Fernando Gapasin and Howard Wial (1998) examine the potential revival of central labor councils as a strategic locus of labor movement activism. Stephanie Luce (2004) assesses the impact of living wage campaigns. Vanessa Tait (2005) provides a history of grassroots organizing efforts by poor workers since the 1960s. And Jennifer Gordon (2005) and Janice Fine (2006) focus on organizing low-wage immigrants via worker centers.

Janice Fine's (2006, 2007) work on the proliferation of worker centers in the USA creates the conceptual opening and provides empirical evidence to justify closer examination of the contributions of community-based organizations. I seek to take advantage of this opening and to extend her analysis. First by arguing that worker centers are only one of several types of extra-union organizations that might fruitfully be incorporated into analyses of labor revitalization. While worker centers are compelling exemplars, they are but one way to make the case for a more organizationally heterogeneous labor movement. And second I contend that these alternative movement organizations represent viable forms that ought to be considered legitimate labor movement actors in their own right. CBLOs are often viewed simply as means to increase unionization or as otherwise tangential to the 'real' labor movement. Trade unions may remain the dominant organizational form, but history and the current sociopolitical milieu suggests that they have flaws and that more flexible and less institutionally bound organizations might be needed to rebuild labor.

### *The Density Bias and the Space between Unions*

The roots of the union-centric labor revitalization research lie in the tacit assumption that union density is the principal source of labor movement power – a characteristic I call the *union density bias* (Sullivan 2009). Among students of labor, it is an article of faith that the proportion of employed workers who are union members is the best way to measure labor movement power. When density is low, labor is said to have little power and when it is high the reverse is true (Goldfield 1987; Rose and Chaison 1996). The validity of density as a proxy for labor power rests on the assumption that unions function as agents in the labor market, seeking to maximize influence by controlling a significant share of the supply of labor. Increasing the unionized portion of the labor pool translates into a greater capacity to win wage gains and other benefits through collective bargaining. If achieving high union density across many sectors of the economy is critical for leveraging labor movement power, then trade unions are necessary to achieve it. Since

union density is viewed as the best way to measure labor movement strength, scholars inevitably treat unions as the principal unit of analysis.

However, this conceptualization of the movement is based on a rather narrow slice of labor's history, specifically the decades from 1930 to 1970 when the New Deal labor relations regime functioned reasonably well. During this era unions enjoyed unprecedented state support and a political and cultural environment that made advances for large segments of the working class possible. But even in the best of times this arrangement did not include all workers. The Wagner Act did not grant agricultural workers, domestic workers, government employees, or managers the right to unionize. Moreover, women, ethnic minorities, and immigrants who predominated many of the excluded occupational categories, were disproportionately denied access to formal collective bargaining and unionization. Nevertheless these workers engaged in collective action, and developed novel approaches to organizing. And they did so, by necessity, outside the traditional labor relations framework.

While these efforts are often overlooked, several labor historians have attempted to highlight their significance (Boris and Klein 2007; Cobble 1991, 2001, 2004, 2007; Faue 1991; Milkman 2006; Slater 2004). Elizabeth Faue (1991) provides one important study in this vein showing that prior to the New Deal women played a key role in various types of community-based unionism through which issues concerning the natural intersection of labor, family and community were addressed. As Faue argues, the advent of a bureaucratic collective bargaining system shifted the locus of working class politics to the workplace and away from the community. This move established men as the principle actors of the labor movement since the workplace was a realm they dominated. The shift from the community to the workplace also established trade unions as the movement's primary organizational form as it was seen as best suited to negotiate the pay and conditions of workers. The results were that women, by being defined outside the realm of 'real' work, were also defined out of labor movement. Forms of political organization not centered on collective bargaining and the workplace suffered the same fate (Faue 1991).

Workers in the public sector are another group whose participation is often excluded from the main thrust of labor movement analysis. Joseph Slater (2004) studied organizing efforts by public workers who were legally barred from forming unions until the 1960s. He notes that despite not being protected by the NLRA, public sector unionization has exploded. Public workers now account for over 40 percent of all union members even though many states prohibit them from collective bargaining or exercising their right to strike.<sup>1</sup> Slater argues that despite this history of successful organizing, their efforts are viewed as being outside the scope of the 'real' labor movement of the private sector. His work raises questions about what may be lost by failing to incorporate the insights from the public sector into our understanding of labor's future.

Finally, Dorothy Sue Cobble, one of the most prolific advocates of expanding the way we think of the labor movement, examines 'lost ways of unionism' to highlight how narrow our conceptualization of the labor movement has become (2001, 2007). As she points out: 'Historically, the labor movement defined itself broadly. It was a big-tent movement, taking in a wide variety of worker organizations, many of which pursued

goals other than contract coverage' (Cobble 2007: 9). The labor movement has an often neglected history of diverse tactics, fluid organizational structures, broad goals, and more inclusive membership standards. Failing to recall this history, Cobble asserts, leads to a limited view of labor movement that excludes workers who do not seek, or are not in the position to secure, a contract with an employer – more often than not low-wage workers, immigrants and women. Considering the demographic realities and changes in work, Cobble sees a broader view of the labor movement as necessary for revitalization.

The assumption of a fully functioning labor relations system that includes all workers is the implicit starting point for much labor scholarship. It is however an artifact of a relatively short period of time in the broad sweep of labor history (Silver 2003). It is fair to say that the system is now broken, at least as far as workers are concerned. Labor law and enforcement are weak. Businesses are openly hostile toward unions. And the state's posture toward the interests of workers is indifferent at best. In some ways we have returned to the pre-New Deal days when relations between capital and labor were more contentious and the state provided little support for unions.

If this 40-year period was an historical anomaly, it is problematic to base theorizing of labor revitalization on it. Focusing on market-based power and organizations that leverage it marginalizes workers who do not have access to unions or conventional forms of collective bargaining. If participation through trade unions is a precondition for inclusion in the labor movement, we are left with a narrow view of what the movement is, who its participants are, and what organizational forms it takes. Given the complicated history of working class organization, it is important to consider the impact this might have on our analyses of revitalization.

To the extent that scholars wish to generate new ideas, identify strategic innovations, and explore the possibility of making labor a movement again, the contributions of community-based labor organizations, poor workers' unions, living wage campaigns, worker centers, and other groups operating in the space between unions ought to be included. In order to assess the impact of these organizations, we must expand the traditional conceptualizations of the labor movement – particularly how it is defined and what organizational forms it can take. As Dorothy Sue Cobble argues, the 'official labor movement should reach out and expand, offering new mechanisms for group affiliation and embracing new strategies for worker advancement. It should move beyond contract unionism and become, once again, a more inclusive heterogeneous movement.' (2007: 9) As a contribution toward this goal, I offer the Los Angeles Garment Worker Center to illustrate the promise that CBLOs may hold as sites of labor revitalization.<sup>2</sup>

## The Garment Worker Center

The Garment Worker Center opened in January 2001 in a second floor office space in the heart of the Los Angeles fashion district. The Center is the product of a collaborative effort between four immigrant advocacy groups: Sweatshop Watch (SSW), Asian Pacific American Legal Center (APALC), the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles



(CHIRLA), and the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) who recognized that the needs of garment workers required an organization dedicated to addressing their specific issues. The GWC can be considered a successor to the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE)'s Garment Worker Justice Center, which closed after the union shifted its focus to organizing workers in other regions and sectors of the apparel industry (Jayaraman and Ness 2005). The union remains linked to the Garment Workers Center through its position on the Sweatshop Watch governing board – the organization that serves as the Center's fiduciary agent – however, it is not involved in day-to-day operations.<sup>3</sup> The Center is governed by a Board of Directors consisting of workers elected from among the ranks of the members. The Center is led by Director Kimi Lee, whose commitment to improving the lives of immigrant workers is born in part of her background. Her family emigrated from Burma in the 1970s and her mother worked in the apparel industry as a seamstress, experiencing the indignities and injustices characteristic of life in today's sweatshops.

The mission of the Garment Worker Center is 'to empower garment workers in the greater Los Angeles area and to work in solidarity with other low-wage immigrant workers and disenfranchised communities in the struggle for social, economic and environmental justice' (GWC 2004a). The Center pursues this mission through a variety of programs: advocacy, wage claim assistance, and educational workshops related to health, self-help, and political issues. In addition to these services, the GWC has also led a boycott campaign against Forever21 and was a key player in supporting Sweatshop Watch's campaign against Bebe – a high-end women's clothing retailer. Each of these components is discussed below.

### *Apparel Industry*

Apparel production is one of the largest manufacturing industries in California, generating \$24 billion a year and employing 78,100 workers state wide (CEDD/LMID 2007; LACEDC, 2003: 1). The industry is centered in Southern California where more than three out of four of these jobs are located. The region is also a locus of the industry nationally. The Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation reports that nearly 25 percent of apparel manufacturing jobs in the USA are located in Los Angeles and Orange Counties (LACEDC 2003: 3).

Over the last decade garment production has largely shifted overseas because of the supply of cheap labor. According to the California Employment Development Department, since 1996 the state has lost nearly 60,000 apparel manufacturing jobs (CEDD/LMID 2007). The remaining domestic production is under intense pressure to compete with their low-cost counterparts abroad. In this environment, garment producers look for ways to remain viable. One survival strategy is to focus on those parts of the industry, like women's fashions, that have short product life cycles. Although labor costs are higher for domestic production, in this segment rapidly changing product lines mean that quick turnaround is a competitive advantage for US manufacturers.

According to a US Department of Labor survey (in 2000) of registered garment factories in Los Angeles, 67 percent violate minimum wage and overtime laws (USDOL 2000). Edna Bonacich and Richard Appelbaum estimate that collectively, garment workers are underpaid \$73 million each year (2000: 3). They also note that 96 percent of firms are found to be in violation of health and safety regulations (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000: 3). These figures do not include the unregistered factories common in the industry, nor do they convey the human impact in suffering and humiliation suffered daily by garment workers who endure grueling 10–12-hour days, in hot, dusty conditions, doing the same repetitive task hundreds and thousands of times in the course of a day. Their pay is based on the number of pieces they sew and they must work quickly despite pain and fatigue to meet production quotas. Garment workers contend with constant threats and intimidation from their bosses; they are typically prohibited from talking to their co-workers, are denied bathroom breaks, and toil in conditions that often lead to respiratory ailments.<sup>4</sup> For all of this, workers are rarely paid the equivalent of the state's minimum wage and are regularly denied overtime premium pay for working more than 40 hours in a week. In fact, workers coming to the Garment Worker Center from 2001 to 2003 earned on average only \$3.28 per hour (GWC and Sweatshop Watch 2004: 4).<sup>5</sup>

These conditions persist for three reasons: the structure of the industry, lax enforcement of existing labor laws, and a vulnerable workforce. At the top of the industry are retailers, most of whom are massive and possess enormous leverage. A small handful – WalMart, Kmart, Sears and Dayton Hudson – are responsible for approximately two-thirds of all retail sales in the country (LAJCS 1999: 13). This buying power allows retailers to dictate the prices at which manufacturers must produce the apparel. Manufacturers occupy the second rung of the apparel industry ladder. Despite the name, they do not actually manufacture clothing; rather they design it and act as wholesalers taking orders from retailers and outsourcing production to factories where the garments are actually sewn. The owners of these factories, called contractors, represent the third rung of the production process. Contractors generally own relatively small shops employing a few dozen workers who sew and assemble the clothing. The competition is fierce among contractors and profit margins are razor thin. As a result, the contractors make their profits by 'sweating' them out of their workers, who occupy the bottom rung of the apparel industry hierarchy. Garment manufacturing is a classic example of a sweatshop industry, not only because the workers toil for long hours in awful conditions for low pay, but also because the structure of the industry is such that at each level profits are extracted from the price of the garment with the retailers and manufacturers taking the largest share.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, due to the hierarchical structure of the production process, and the contracting out of the actual work, those profiting most are able to deny responsibility for the wage and safety violations that increase their profits.

While the structure of the industry contributes to the exploitation of those at the bottom, the system survives on an ample labor force willing to work in these conditions because they have few employment alternatives. They are vulnerable due to their undocumented immigrant status – 70 percent of whom come from Latin America and 20 percent

from South East Asia (GWC and Sweatshop Watch 2004: 6). Lack of documentation and English language skills compound the workers' vulnerability, making them unwilling or unable to demand even the most basic of rights granted to other workers. The plight of these workers has become all the more precarious since 9/11 and the subsequent political backlash against immigrants living in the USA.

For the most part, efforts to organize garment workers into unions have been unsuccessful, primarily because of the diffuse structure of the industry. The sheer number of factories, their small size, and the exceedingly low profit margins mean that even if unions could win contracts and pay raises for workers, the very act of doing so would likely drive the factory owner out of business (Bonacich 2000; Delgado 1993). In fact, UNITE abandoned efforts to organize the garment production industry because successes were rare and the factories usually closed down rather than negotiate a contract.<sup>7</sup>

### **Organizing Garment Workers**

The Los Angeles Garment Worker Center has stepped into the void left by unions and has aimed to improve conditions for workers in the industry. The GWC is part of a national growth trend in the number of worker centers which have risen from five in 1992 to 160 in 2007 (Fine 2006, 2007). These organizations recall earlier civic and mutual aid associations used by immigrants to gain entry to the labor market and middle class. Today worker centers primarily serve and organize communities of low-wage immigrant workers. Whereas trade unions generally organize specific firms, worker centers tend to organize by occupation such as day laborers, domestic workers, farm workers, and those working in the hospitality industry (Fine 2006).

Janice Fine, who defines worker centers as 'community-based mediating institutions that provide support to and organize among communities of low-wage workers' (2006: 11), provides a useful framework with which to examine the Garment Worker Center's approach to organizing. Like many of the worker centers Fine studied, the GWC utilizes a combination of advocacy, service provision, and organizing – tailored to the specific conditions of low-wage garment workers – to achieve its goals. There are four self-identified components of the GWC organizing approach: advocacy, education, campaigns, and coalition building. A fifth component, leadership development, was an evident goal but did not become explicitly part of its mission until after my fieldwork ended. While these categories differ slightly from Fine's model, they are remarkably consistent with her characterization of the methods used by worker centers in organizing communities of immigrant workers.<sup>8</sup>

### *Advocacy and Wage Claims*

Until recently, garment workers were at the mercy of unscrupulous employers and had little recourse in seeking redress for wage violations. However, a California law went into effect in 2001 giving workers – and the Center – an important weapon in the struggle for economic justice. The law, Assembly Bill 633 (AB 633), holds manufacturers and

retailers accountable as guarantors for wage and overtime violations incurred in the course of producing their products, even if they are not the direct employers. It was a tremendous legislative victory for garment workers and it gave the GWC the legal footing to advocate on behalf of workers to recover owed wages from the garment industry players who previously had been able to deny culpability. AB 633 increased the chances that aggrieved workers would be able to recover wages by using the Department of Labor Standards Enforcement wage claim process.

AB 633 created the foundation on which the GWC has built its organizing program, serving as a gateway to the Center for garment workers, becoming what Jennifer Gordon calls a 'path to participation' (2005). The wage claim process is typically the first contact workers have with the Center. They often learn about the GWC from friends or co-workers and decide to seek assistance. GWC staff members develop strong relationships in the process of working with the claimants and ushering their case through the bureaucratic grievance system. In addition to providing workers with the opportunity to regain their unpaid wages, the Center uses service provision and advocacy as means to recruit new members, develop credibility within the community, and build a base of worker leaders. This strategy plays an important role in its overall organizing model as Kimi Lee explained:

We don't do service just to do service. We do it for the organizing. Because again with this industry these workers are not used to anyone helping them and if anyone approaches them it's usually a government person or a contractor spy trying to see if they'll squeal or something. So the trust level is just not there. So, by providing the service, getting them a paycheck, showing them that we will help them for no cost, just develops that relationship where they see that we're not making money off of this. I mean we're not here to make money, we're here to help, and so for them because they've never had that it develops the trust, it also helps with immediate needs, just getting a paycheck for someone so they can feed their kids [so] they can provide for their family opens them up to political education. I mean, you saw last night we had these workers who were learning about the war and [while] it's not helping them get a paycheck, it's helping them ... go to other things and see other places and meet new people ... So there [are] some little things like that that just help to build a relationship. (Lee interview, 23 January 2003)

While trade unions have been maligned as of late for 'servicing' their current members rather than organizing new ones, the Garment Worker Center treats servicing as a key component in its organizing mission. In an interesting way, the Center seems to have turned the 'servicing' model on its head, using it as a means to recruit new members rather than simply addressing the immediate needs of its members.

### *Education: Consciousness-Raising Workshops*

The GWC also conducts regular educational workshops as part of its organizing mission. Topics vary, from health issues, to politics, to sessions addressing such issues as preparing

taxes and immigration law. If the wage claim process addresses workers' basic material needs, these workshops address their personal development and educational needs. For worker centers generally, popular education is a common feature and constitutes a central part of their organizing (Fine 2006).

At the GWC, these workshops are a way to maintain workers' interest in the Center, disseminate useful information, and build solidarity. As Kimi Lee describes them:

Each event is a way to bring workers to the center. And it's not just to bring them here to lecture at them, but so they can talk to each other. That's our definition of organizing. These workers are empowering themselves in coming and sharing their own problems and how they're fixing it and supporting each other. (Lee interview, 23 January 2003)

Some workshops cover expressly political topics and function as consciousness-raising opportunities. One workshop I observed addressed the Israel-Palestine conflict. Community experts made a presentation and screened a video that sparked a vibrant discussion that conveyed the workers' sophisticated political analysis of global events. Workers, many of whom had fled violence in their home countries, shared stories of their own experiences linking them to the situation in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> This meeting took place on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq and the discussion soon turned to the impact a war would have on immigrant workers. One worker commented 'The people going to fight are working people, whose work will be lost, and they're deporting workers, and they're being called terrorists.'<sup>10</sup> Discussions of global politics may appear at first to be outside the purview of a worker center's mission, but making these links between the global politics and the lives of low-wage workers is seen as vital to the Center's efforts to develop leadership as Joann Lo explained.

One of our goals is political education, so that's part of trying to do that ... It's important to us because part of being leaders is understanding the world and power dynamics and governmental policies. And understanding the connection of all that to their everyday life and working conditions. We've had workers who come from Mexico who form an independent union. We've had workers come from Bangladesh. I think it's important because we want to give people a vision and hope that 'Here's what other workers have done, and you can do it too.' I think that's a very important part of organizing too. (Lo interview, 17 January 2003)

The Center's efforts to develop leadership skills also have a gendered dimension. Women comprise the majority of garment workers and GWC members so it makes sense that issues of particular concern to women would be addressed specifically. Staff learned that women wanted to know more about how to deal with domestic violence, stress, and relationships (Domenzai interview, 21 January 2003). Many of these topics were of a sensitive nature and unique to these women's lives. Alejandra Domenzai explained the motivation behind starting the Center's women's support group.

We've decided it's going to be all women because the issues that they're facing have to do with things that are happening at their household ... [what] they were looking for is kind of a space that's safe for them to talk [which is] just kind of ironic. Some of these women are these amazing activists and leaders and they're out on the picket line chanting and organizing protests and yet they come home and their rights aren't being respected at home. They're intimidated. So it's one of these things too that where we look at the dynamics of 'Okay, as a woman, you know, and as a person, not just as a worker, do you feel empowered?' (Domenzai interview, 21 January 2003)

These educational workshops, be they about current political issues or personal development, serve as consciousness-raising opportunities and are key building blocks for the Center's organizing project. Not only do they serve as a vehicle to bring workers into the Center, but they help build leadership skills and empower workers in their work, civic, and personal lives.

### *Boycott Campaigns*

Boycott campaigns were also an important element of the GWC organizing strategy. At the time of my research, the Center was engaged in two campaigns against manufacturers of women's clothing, Bebe and Forever 21. In 2001, Sweatshop Watch spearheaded a campaign against Bebe that the GWC joined, assisting Chinese workers file wage claims against the retailer. In September 2001, the GWC launched its own boycott against Forever 21 after it became apparent that many of the workers coming to the center had wage disputes against factory owners with contracts with Forever 21. Targeting this retailer made strategic sense to the Center's staff. Kimi Lee explained.

After about four or five months of the center being open we sat down and said well we have an opportunity, we have workers from [Forever 21], we have a number of workers from different factories under one retailer. We thought about it and we did more research and said, this would be a very good campaign for us because it's an LA-based retailer, it will help us outreach to more LA workers, it brings in students, community, it's just a way to tie things together and it's something solid for the workers to move on. (Lee interview, 23 January 2003)

The national profile of Forever 21 and its sensitivity to negative publicity made it a good boycott target as did the fact that, as producer of time-sensitive women's fashions it would be less able to shift production overseas in an effort to diminish the boycott's effectiveness (Lee interview, 14 February 2002).

Targeting retailers rather than factory owners is a strategy predicated on the structure of the industry. Retailers and manufacturers contract with factory owners who then become the direct employers of garment workers. As a result, accountability for labor law

violations is externalized to factory owners, creating a buffer of culpability. Moreover, strategies aimed at factory owners were likely to fail – as the unions discovered – because factory owners often closed or moved the shop when wage claims were filed against them. The Center's strategy was to use AB 633 as leverage to force retailers to pay for the wage violations they indirectly profited from, while subjecting them to public pressure through protest actions that generated unwanted negative publicity for the retailer.

The boycott campaigns are the most visible manifestation of the GWC as a movement organization. Nearly every weekend during the boycott workers picketed local storefronts to publicize the injustices they suffered and to shame the retailer into taking responsibility for paying the wages owed its workers. Many Center members also took part in a nation-wide speaking tour in 2002 to highlight their working conditions and to apply pressure to Forever 21. Both of these boycott campaigns ended in 2004. In February of that year Bebe settled with the six workers who had filed wage claims against the retailer, and in December Forever 21 reached an agreement with 33 workers who had claims against them. Details of both settlements were sealed, but it appears that the terms were favorable to the workers (GWC 2004b, 2004c).

### *Coalition Building*

A final component of the GWC organizing program is its coalition work with other community-based organizations in Los Angeles. The Center is part of the Multi-Ethnic Organizing Network (MIWON) which is comprised of Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA), the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHRLA), and the Pilipino Workers Center (PWC). These groups routinely engage in joint actions under the MIWON banner with members turning out to support each other's campaigns. Coalition building is key to the Center's organizing agenda. Each staff member is involved in building and maintaining relationships with other community and immigrant advocacy groups. Staffers regularly attend the board meetings of their coalition partners and report on GWC activities and learn about the work other groups are doing. In addition, garment workers regularly participate in MIWON workshops that address issues of common interest such as learning their rights as immigrants or strategizing about procurement of driver's licenses.

Efforts to build and maintain coalitions paid off in a number of ways. GWC staff reported that they learned important strategic and tactical lessons from other groups in the coalition. For instance the decision to start a worker committee on Wages and Rights was modeled on KIWA's effort to organize restaurant workers (Kimi Lee interview, 23 January 2003). Also, the carefully cultivated relationships generated solidarity among different groups of workers and provided much needed support for their respective struggles. This solidarity often took the form of joining rallies and protest actions. In one, a demonstration marking the one year anniversary of the Forever 21 boycott, at least six other organized groups joined the garment workers, including the Immigrant Workers Union, ACORN, the LA Bus Riders Union, the International Workers of the World,

KIWA and Arts in Action, as they marched through the streets of Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the breadth of inter-ethnic solidarity embodied by this type of action, there were also examples of ongoing commitments. Perhaps the most prominent illustration of the depth of the relationship was between the GWC and KIWA in its campaign against the Korean owner of the Assi Super Market who had fired several Latino workers for trying to organize a union. Garment workers regularly joined the picket lines in support of the grocery workers, who returned the favor by joining picket lines at Forever 21 stores. At these events, striking grocery workers and garment center members wore the same bright yellow tee shirts emblazoned with slogans suggesting that their two struggles were the same. Many of their handmade picket signs made that point explicit. At one of these events I was encouraged to join the picket line and was given a sign written in Spanish that read: ‘Two battles, one war! Forever 21 and Assi Campaign’.<sup>12</sup>

### *Outcomes*

Garment Worker Center organizing has produced tangible benefits for low-wage workers. Most significantly, workers have recovered wages that would have been lost if not for the Center. A report issued in 2005 on the impact of AB633, the law holding manufacturers and retailers accountable for wages owed to workers who sew their labels, indicated that the amount workers recovered more than tripled since the Center began its work (APALC and Sweatshop Watch 2005: 20). As the Center’s Director put it:

We’ve gotten over a million dollars back for workers in two years. That’s more than the government. And that’s shifting the power dynamics ... the more we hold [retailers] accountable and hold all the levels accountable, they’re feeling it ... A million dollars was shifted away from them. So, even though the government estimates \$80 million a year is [unpaid to] garment workers, well we took one million back last year. (Lee interview, 23 January 2003).

In addition to such concrete gains, there are also intangible outcomes that contribute to the life of the labor movement, among them: formation of collective identities, consciousness-raising, and leadership development. While these outcomes are more difficult to observe, they are vital to a movement’s success. In interviews with workers these effects were often more important to workers than the monetary compensation won in the wage claim process. When asked to share what she had gained from her involvement with the Center, Rosa, a 55-year-old widow who has worked in the garment industry since she was 12, replied, ‘One of the most important things is that they’ve taught me to be able to express myself and talk because before I used to be very shy and very afraid of speaking.’ She gained enough confidence as a public speaker that she participated on a trip to the state capitol to lobby for passage of a law to allow immigrants in California the right to get drivers’ licenses. As she tells it:



I was one of those speakers, right in front of the deputies there ... I just felt very happy, to be able to stand in front of a person with such a high position – me who never even went to school.’ (Rosa interview, 1 May 2004)

The Center’s regular educational workshops – particularly the women’s group that deals with family issues, sexual harassment, health, and self-defense – were effective in building workers’ self-confidence and mitigating feelings of isolation. Lorena, a 32-year-old divorced mother of three young children, explained that she liked going to these meetings because ‘It gives you energy, it raises your self-esteem ... So many of us come here and most of us have similar problems but we come here and we give each other a lot of strength.’ (Lorena interview, 30 April 2004) Norma, who left Mexico when she was 18 and has been working in the apparel industry for nearly 20 years, explains the impact her participation has had in her relationship with her husband.

What the center has helped me in most is in defending myself from my husband because he is really jealous. Whatever he would tell me, I would do it. If he said don’t go out the door, I would stay in the house. And now at least I scream back, I go out and I come [to the Center]. He used to get mad ’cause I would come to the Center, and if he wants to come he comes but if he doesn’t then it is his problem. (Norma interview, 15 May 2004)

An example of how personal development, solidarity, and raised consciousness can lead to workers taking more active leadership roles is offered by 51-year-old Carlos, who came to the USA from Mexico five years ago. He describes the courage and self-esteem he gained through his involvement with the Center.

I lost the fear of not being able to talk back – the fear of not being able to demand my wages. And so also because like for example one doesn’t really know the work that goes on necessarily and one doesn’t speak English, you just feel like the doors are closing on you. But ever since I started coming to the Center, I started listening and hearing other people and not only valuing them for who they were, but also in myself, understanding that I’m something good. (Carlos interview, 16 May 2004)

Carlos now has taken it on himself to recruit new members by reaching out to his coworkers and friends, informing them of their rights, and encouraging them to ‘fight back’ as he and others at the Center are doing (Carlos interview, 16 May 2004). Carlos’s sentiments and actions suggest that he has taken ownership of the Center and its goals. Such evidence indicates that the Center’s organizing efforts are achieving their leadership development and consciousness-raising goals. Scholars of social movements have shown that a sense of efficacy is a necessary precondition for collective action (Gamson 1992).

*Limits of Worker Center Organizing*

While there are many reasons to believe worker centers and other CBLOs may play a role in revitalizing the US labor movement, they are not without shortcomings. Among the major concerns are how they are funded, their relatively small scale, and problems with relying on individualized legal cases. Perhaps the most fundamental issue for the GWC is the way it generates operating revenue. Without a large dues-paying membership, the Center relies primarily on philanthropic contributions and foundation grants for financial support. The lack of an independent source of funding can place the Center in a precarious position; and relying on foundation grants brings with it concomitant problems. First, these funds may dry up at any time. Funding organizations frequently limit the number of years an organization will be supported. Second, these funds often come with restrictions in how they can be used. This may encourage the Center to create new programs as a means to qualify for additional funding. Over time, the motivation to expand programs in pursuit of grants may threaten to over-extend organizational resources and undermine its core mission.

Another issue is that the scale of the GWC, and worker centers generally, may be too small to make meaningful change within the industry. With approximately one hundred members out of a local workforce of tens of thousands, fair questions arise about whether such a relatively small group might have an impact that could significantly affect pay and working conditions in the industry. Even considering the success of the boycott against Forever21, ultimately fewer than 50 workers benefited directly. Furthermore, the campaign took several years to complete, consuming a considerable share of organizational resources. The issue of scale can also be raised with respect to worker centers generally. While worker centers have proliferated over the last decade, currently there are only 160 in the USA (Fine 2007). As such they may be too disparate and localized to be considered an effective mechanism for labor revitalization.

There are also problems associated with relying on individual wage claims as a key component in an organizing plan. While assistance with wage claims brings workers to the Center, the danger is that once resolved, workers may withdraw their participation – a dynamic Jennifer Gordon discovered in her study of the Workplace Project (Gordon 2005). At the Garment Worker Center, some workers remain involved after their claims are adjudicated, but a significant portion become less active or drift away entirely.

Moreover, the wage claims strategy depends to a great extent on supportive politicians to enact relevant laws and regulators willing to enforce them. Even with laws on the books and sympathetic allies in positions of power, there is no guarantee that the laws will be effective. Under Democratic Governor Gray Davis – who signed AB 633 into law – enforcement was weak. A report assessing the impact of AB 633 found dramatic increases in the number of wage claims filed and the amounts being recovered, but workers were still receiving only one-third of the wages they are owed (APALC and Sweatshop Watch 2005: 22).<sup>13</sup> Even in cases where workers win a judgment, it is difficult to collect. GWC staff I interviewed identified this as a chronic frustration.

I think we've had a good success rate in the sense that like we make our case and we prove it and it's sound ... I think probably the trickiest part is even when workers win their judgment ... you're not always able to collect on that judgment ... so the deputy labor commissioner says, 'Yes, you know, we found that this worker is owed \$54,000,' and then what do you do? If the company closed, if they declare bankruptcy, they're nowhere to be found and you have no hope of collecting, which is what happens a lot ... it's like, about half of all settlements that we've gotten for workers haven't yet been collected. (Domenzain interview, 21 January 2003)

That such a small percentage of back-wages and penalties are recovered highlights the problems with depending upon the legal apparatus particularly when the political will to enforce the laws is limited.<sup>14</sup>

While worker centers have shortcomings, so do trade unions. Existing labor laws are not effectively enforced, the National Labor Relations Board process is broken, and many unions have struggled in vain to change their organizational cultures to make organizing a priority. While these problems pose challenges for unions, they are not sufficient to discount the important role they play in the labor movement. By the same token we should not dismiss worker centers and other CBLOs as potentially valuable players in labor revitalization due to their unique limitations. Given the general difficulty of organizing workers in the current political climate, it is important to focus on the strengths of different movement organizations and what they add to the larger project of labor renewal.

### **Analysis: Expanding Labor's Organizational Field**

The case of the Garment Worker Center suggests that community-based organizations are contributing to labor movement revitalization. They are raising consciousness, mobilizing workers, developing leaders, and securing tangible gains for workers. However, these contributions are obscured in a union-centric field of labor studies. To assess the impact that these and other extra-union activities have on labor renewal, it is necessary to expand our conceptualization of the movement to more fully develop – in both analytic and strategic terms – the space between unions. Doing so will highlight some of the inherent limitations of the trade unions as social movement organizations and help us recognize the ways that CBLOs may be better suited for some of the key movement-building needs necessary for revitalization.

#### *Limits of the Union Form*

An important feature of trade unions is that they are creatures of the state. Unions are legally protected by the state, guaranteed the right to exist, and can compel employers to negotiate. However, their institutionalized status within the labor relations system also limits unions as *movement* organizations. They are bounded by legal constraints that

restrict their tactical repertoire, determine who its members can be, and prescribe the terrain on which it fights. This in turn affects strategic calculations about where, how and who they organize.

These limits are especially evident with respect to tactics. Unlike social movements that operate primarily outside existing institutionalized channels and rely heavily on civil disobedience to publicize grievances and leverage collective power (McAdam 1982), many extra-legal tactics are denied to unions. The sympathy strike for example – outlawed by the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 – was a tactic used successfully to pressure employers and to expand labor struggles beyond the workplace. But engaging in sympathy strikes (or other prohibited job actions) now places unions in jeopardy, subjecting leaders to criminal charges and the union to significant fines.<sup>15</sup> Union trustees are understandably reluctant to pursue strategies that endanger organizational resources. The net result is that a highly effective tactic has been removed from the labor movement's arsenal.

A union's relationship with the state also plays a part in how it defines membership. Unlike other social movements that set their own membership standards, to become a member of a union a worker must be an employee within a recognized collective bargaining unit. By accepting this arrangement labor has effectively abdicated its authority to determine its membership. This was not always the case. Historically, labor had much broader criteria for membership predicated only on workers pledging support for labor movement goals (Cobble 2001: 88–9).

David Brody (2005) raises a related point regarding the role of the state and the asymmetries it produces. He notes that as New Deal labor policies evolved, certification elections directed by the National Labor Relations Board became the mechanism to establish unions. This effectively made employers a party in the process used to determine union membership. Brody contends that making union membership contingent on an election gives employers the opportunity to influence the workers' decision to associate. Whereas employers are able to freely associate with industry associations acting in their interests, in order for workers to join the union of their choice they must first win an election that employers will contest in a setting that employers control. The impact of this policy is evident in the decline in union win rates and labor's increasing reluctance to use the NLRB election process in their organizing. The effectiveness of this policy to suppress unionization also explains capital's opposition to the Employee Free Choice Act which would eliminate the need for unions to hold elections that employers have become so proficient in winning.

Another limitation of unions as movement organizations is that their strategic orientation toward contract procurement often prevents them from organizing some of the most exploited groups of workers. As we have seen, traditional unionization and collective bargaining is not a viable option in industries like apparel manufacturing where profit margins are razor thin, competition is intense, factories are small and mobile, and where many workers are vulnerable due to their citizenship status. The history of union organizing efforts in this sector suggests that even though workers want to join unions, organizing victories are often Pyrrhic as factory owners close or relocate their operation rather than pay union wages (Bonacich 2000; Delgado 1993). Consequently, trade unions have largely abandoned the industry, a prudent move for an organization whose

primary objective is securing contracts. It makes little sense to invest scarce resources where there is little pay-off either for the unions or for workers who win recognition.

However, this scenario illustrates how that a union's primary role is as an agent within the labor market rather than as a movement organization. Its strategic decisions are ultimately based on whether it can successfully negotiate a contract. Therefore in industries where this conventional goal is untenable, unions will not engage. This raises some important questions. What does that say about the efficacy of a working class movement if its principal organizations are unable to organize workers in the greatest need? If unionization is not an option for the most marginalized and vulnerable of workers, what are they to do? If a contract is the only legitimate goal, and unions are the only mechanism through which workers can participate in the labor movement, tens of thousands of low-wage workers are summarily excluded. Community-based organizations may actually be better suited to organize workers in these sectors. In many cases they are the only available option.

### *CBLOs as Labor Movement Organizations*

The limitations inherent in the union form highlight the value in considering alternative organizational forms and the role they might play in labor's revitalization. While community-based labor organizations do not possess the resources that unions do, they do have some important advantages. Operating outside the existing legal framework that governs – and often constrains – unions, they are able to adopt organizing styles more characteristic of social movement organizations. While unions must calibrate their strategic course to stay within the bounds of the law, CBLOs are relatively free to engage in civil disobedience and other forms of direct action used by social movements. CBLOs are not constrained by the same cost-benefit calculations as unions, which proceed with an organizing effort only if it is likely to produce a financial return on the invested resources. Because they are outside the confines of the labor relations regime, CBLOs are able to organize workers who would otherwise not be reachable, and therefore are able to expand the movement's membership base in ways that unions cannot. In short, CBLOs are capable of acting like a social movement organization in large measure because they are *not* unions.

In order to fully appreciate the impact of extra-union organizations, we must move beyond the union-centric conceptualization of the labor movement. Students of social movements recognize a diverse set of organizations through which movement goals are achieved. For instance organizations as diverse as the Black Panthers, SCLC and the NAACP were viewed as part of a wider black civil rights movement. In social movement studies, myriad groups comprise a movement's organizational field and this diversity has been found to be an asset (Armstrong 2002). A similar lens could be used by labor observers whereby unions would be treated as one of several possible organizational manifestations of the movement.

While the Garment Worker Center is not pursuing traditional collective bargaining, it is advancing labor movement goals by mobilizing workers, cultivating pro-labor identities, raising consciousness, developing leaders, striving to improve wages and working

conditions and building alliances within and across communities. CBLOs such as the GWC have prefigurative qualities resembling labor's most celebrated unions. We might think of community-based labor organizations as 'proto-unions'.<sup>16</sup> Over the short term, these proto-unions contribute to the broader goals of the movement by addressing the immediate material needs of workers not served by unions, and over the long term they establish a foundation on which future unionizing efforts might be built.

Expanding labor's organizational field more in line with other social movements might also lead to seeing community-based labor organizations as *movement centers*.<sup>17</sup> In his classic analysis of the emergence of the black civil rights movement Aldon Morris (1984) argued that movement centers were the organizational precursors to the explosion in movement activity in the 1960s. For the contemporary labor movement, Los Angeles is much like the movement centers Morris described in Montgomery, Tallahassee and Birmingham at the advent of the black civil rights movement. The GWC and its MIWON allies rely on strong community ties, share resources and are becoming sites where leaders are trained, common group interests crystallize, and tactics and strategies are developed.<sup>18</sup>

Whether we conceptualize community-based labor organizations as proto-unions or movement centers, analyses of labor revitalization will be enhanced by including them. Continuing to treat labor as an organizationally homogeneous movement excludes workers in marginal economic sectors, limits tactical options, and leads to an unnecessarily narrow, and ultimately self-defeating, definition of movement membership. While it may be pragmatic for trade unions to abandon certain industries or eschew more aggressive movement tactics, these decisions belie the fact that unions are functioning primarily as agents in the labor market, rather than as social movement organizations. If revitalization is dependent upon labor becoming a movement again, it makes sense to include groups that act like one.

## Conclusion

At a moment when political and economic conditions are rapidly eroding the collective power of workers, it is imperative that labor observers expand their analytic framework to capture the full range of activity contributing to labor's renewal. While trade unions have been and will remain key organizational actors possessing considerable resources and legal standing, they are not the *only* organizational form the labor movement takes. Nor is collective bargaining the only legitimate mechanism by which to achieve movement goals. Community-based labor organizations like the Garment Worker Center are playing a role in labor's revitalization. The Center is recovering lost wages, fostering movement identities among workers, building coalitions with other labor groups, and developing movement leaders. However, these efforts go unrecognized largely because they do not contribute to conventional goals of increasing union density and securing contracts. Moreover, workers active in extra-union organizations are not counted as participants in the movement because they are not *union* members.

Despite the use of social movement imagery, labor scholars continue to treat labor analytically as something other than a movement. Trade unions remain labor's constitutive organizational form even though most social movements embrace a variety of organizations, all of which are considered to be part of 'the movement'. The tendency to conflate 'the movement' with 'unions' excludes movement activity occurring outside the established labor relations system and ultimately undermines efforts to conceptualize labor as a movement.

In many respects, extra-union organizations may be in a better position to act like a social movement because they are not constrained in ways unions are. Their location outside the collective bargaining framework not only gives them greater latitude to use militant movement tactics but it also fosters innovative approaches to organizing. Further, in those sectors of the economy where collective bargaining is not currently viable, community-based labor organizations provide opportunities for workers to organize that they otherwise would not have. Finally, if Farber and Western (2001) are correct that any gains from increased union organizing activity are likely to be offset by structural changes in the global economy, the future of a movement that relies exclusively on trade unions is tenuous. In short, labor's survival may depend on it taking new forms.

The time has come for labor scholars to re-examine some of our most taken-for-granted presuppositions. There is a need for more research that rigorously explores the space between unions, and a commitment to incorporate it into analyses of the contemporary labor movement. Community-based labor groups like the Garment Worker Center are engaged in movement-building work that is emblematic of, and perhaps necessary for, labor revitalization. However, the union-centric quality of labor studies makes it difficult to recognize these contributions or to assess their impact. Revitalization research and theorizing will be strengthened by expanding our definition of the movement, reconsidering who its members are, and broadening the range of organizational forms the movement takes. Regardless of their union status, immigrant workers toiling in the sweatshops of Los Angeles and mobilizing for economic justice are among those who deserve to be counted as full members of the labor movement. And their organizing efforts ought to be recognized for the role they are playing in its renewal.

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## Notes

- 1 Slater makes a parallel argument to the one being advanced here, contending that labor historians have failed to incorporate lessons that might be learned from scrutinizing the dynamics of public worker organizing and in particular its relationship to the private sector and the wider labor movement.
- 2 My examination is based on research I conducted at the Center from February 2002 to June 2004, which included fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews with staff and garment workers, and analysis of the Center's written records. My choice to study the Garment Worker Center was based on findings from previous research showing that community-based organizations, and worker centers in particular, were key sites of labor revitalization (Sullivan 2004). The most intensive fieldwork took place over four months from December 2002 to March 2003 when I spent time as a participant observer, attending staff, membership, and board meetings, sitting in on training and educational workshops and attending social events, like the Chinese New Year Celebration. I also observed and participated in protest actions the organization was involved in, including mass demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq, regular informational pickets of Bebe stores in the Los Angeles area, and a larger protest demonstration with the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) in Santa Monica. Finally, I attended coalition meetings and actions with other community-based labor organizations with whom the GWC is affiliated via the Multi-Ethnic Immigrant Organizing Network (MIWON), most often in support of striking grocery store workers at Korea Town's Assi Market. During my fieldwork I interviewed the five staff members of the GWC and Sweatshop Watch who worked closely on GWC projects. In the spring of 2004, upon receiving additional funding from the National Science Foundation, I returned to the Center to conduct interviews with 10 garment workers. These interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. In this piece, the names of workers have been changed but those of Center staff have not. Finally, the Center provided considerable access to their files and written records including membership lists (from which interview subjects were randomly selected), intake records, and wage claim case information. I also drew on publicly available text documents written by or about the Center.
- 3 Thirty community-based organizations, labor unions, and civil rights groups combined to found Sweatshop Watch in 1995 on the heels of the El Monte sweatshop incident where 72 Thai workers were discovered living and working in slave-like conditions. See Wong and Monroe (2006) *Sweatshop Slaves: Asian Americans in the Garment Industry*.
- 4 For more in-depth analysis of the garment industry see Bonacich and Appelbaum (2000) *Behind the Label: Inequality in the Los Angeles Apparel Industry*; Bonacich (2000) *Intense Challenges, Tentative Possibilities*; Esbenshade (2004) *Monitoring Sweatshops: Workers, Consumers, and the Global Apparel Industry*; Su and Martorell (2001) *Exploitation and Abuse in the Garment Industry: The Case of the Thai Slave-Labor Compound in El Monte*; Ross (2004) *Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops*; Rosen (2002) *Making Sweatshops: The Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry*.
- 5 If this were not enough, garment workers are often gouged again when they cash their checks. Unscrupulous check cashing services charge fees, reducing their take-home pay further, and sometimes their payroll checks bounce altogether. Many workers report showing up for work to find the factory has shut down or moved without giving them notice. Workers in this situation are often owed wages that they will never see.
- 6 For a good overview of the definition and dynamics of sweatshops, see Ross (2004) *Slaves to Fashion: Poverty and Abuse in the New Sweatshops*.
- 7 UNITE formed in 1995 when the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) merged. UNITE merged with the



Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees (HERE) union in July, 2004 to form a new union called UNITE HERE.

- 8 The GWC was one of Fine's nine case study sites and we conducted our research at roughly the same time. Research done concurrently and independently by two researchers gives us a rare opportunity in qualitative research to evaluate the reliability of the findings. While Fine's study was national in scope, our respective analyses of the L.A. Garment Worker Center are remarkably consistent, suggesting a considerable degree of reliability (see Fine 2006).
- 9 Author's unpublished field notes, 22 January 2003.
- 10 Author's unpublished field notes, 22 January 2003.
- 11 Author's unpublished field notes, 16 November 2002.
- 12 Author's unpublished field notes, 8 November 2002.
- 13 The report also notes that the average amount recovered per worker from 2001 to 2004 was \$1365 and that only 15 percent of guarantors against whom claims are filed pay anything to workers (APALC and Sweatshop Watch 2005: 20–24).
- 14 The APALC report indicates that the Department of Labor Standards Enforcement (DLSE) is woefully understaffed and has been reluctant to pursue all available avenues to enforce compliance of retailers, manufacturers and factory owners with existing labor laws (APALC and Sweatshop Watch 2005).
- 15 In a recent notable example the New York City transit workers' strike, which was illegal, crippled the union financially and resulted in the union leaders being jailed. The workers lost the strike.
- 16 Janice Fine (2006: 247) refers to worker centers as 'pre-unions'.
- 17 Janice Fine draws a similar point with regard to Morris's concept and worker centers (Fine 2006).
- 18 Worker centers may represent another of Morris's concepts, movement half-way houses which are where social change resources are developed, tactical knowledge is shared, media contacts made, workshops held, knowledge of past movements stored, and vision for society nourished. (Morris 1984).

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