



When Workers Take the Lead

Leadership Development at the National
Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON)

A Leadership for a Changing World
Collaborative Ethnography

Nik Theodore

A Publication of the Leadership for a Changing World Program, Research
and Documentation Component, Research Center for Leadership in Action,
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University

Views Expressed in This Report

Consistent with the epistemic foundations of Cooperative Inquiry (CI), the findings, ideas and recommendations contained in this report are the product of the CI group's inquiry process. Accordingly, they are based on the experience and views of the participants of the inquiry group and do not necessarily represent the positions of the Research Center for Leadership in Action.

About this project

This collaborative ethnography is part of a series of ethnographies published by the Research and Documentation component of Leadership for a Changing World (LCW). Collaborative ethnographies offer in-depth and rich portraits of leadership within selected LCW organizations and communities. Locally based ethnographers and awardees negotiate the research questions and design the research in ways that will contribute to the awardees' organizational objectives and leadership practices. Therefore, each ethnography is unique in its focus, method, and writing style. Some incorporate creative modalities such as photography and video, which are nontraditional forms of representation in research. They all provide detailed information about the history of organizations, their leadership dynamics, collaborations, transformations, and development. To view other LCW collaborative ethnographies on the Web, go to: <http://wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/reports/ethnography.php>.

LCW's Research and Documentation component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. (For a description of LCW and RCLA, please see the inside back cover.) LCW uses three parallel streams of inquiry—ethnography, cooperative inquiry, and narrative inquiry—to explore questions related to the work of leadership. The program is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as the core of the research process.

RCLA is proud to present this work to the LCW community and other social change leaders.

About the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON)

This paper traces the evolution of a leadership development model that arose from the practice of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), an alliance of workers' rights advocates, day labor worker centers, community organizers, and day laborers. NDLON was founded in 2000 and comprises 41 community-based day laborer organizations in cities across the United States.

NDLON's mission is to strengthen and expand the work of local day laborer organizing groups, help them become more effective and strategic at building leadership, advance low-wage workers' and immigrants' rights, and develop successful models for organizing contingent and temporary immigrant workers.

Changing the societal structures that perpetuate abuse, exploitation, and repression of day laborers—and sometimes even violence against them—requires the active involvement of the workers themselves. However, real participation can only take place through collective processes that promote the development of critical thinking skills. Without enhancing the leadership abilities of these workers, change will not occur. Leadership development, as NDLON understands it, is a collective teaching-learning process with profound political implications. People educate themselves while transforming the reality in which they are immersed.

The NDLON model is based upon the principles and techniques of Popular Education, a pedagogical theory and practice designed to raise the consciousness of its participants and enable them to become more aware of how an individual's experiences are connected to broader socio-political forces.

Acknowledgements

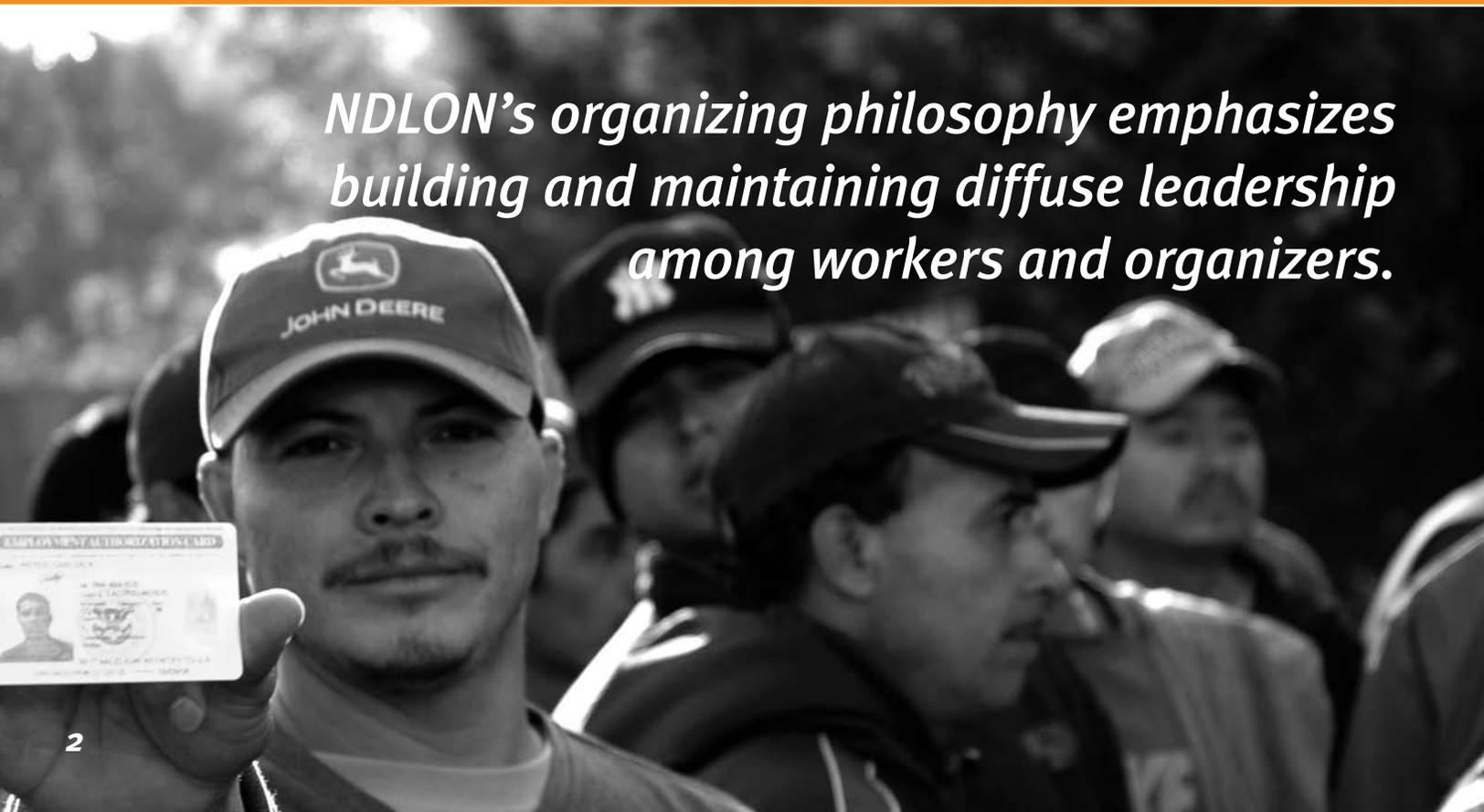
Photographs provided by and reproduced by permission of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network.

Contents

<i>Organizing for Day Laborers' Rights</i>	2
<i>Dirigente Popular: The Organic Leader</i>	4
<i>Yielding Power, Embracing Commitment</i>	8
<i>Mobilizing Laborers through Education</i>	9
<i>Lessons from Back Home</i>	11
<i>Eager to Learn</i>	12
<i>When an Immovable Priority Meets an Unstoppable Desire</i>	14
<i>A Climate of Constant Change</i>	16
<i>Realities and Opportunities</i>	17
<i>The Next Step: Community Organizing</i>	20

Organizing for Day Laborers' Rights

NDLON's organizing philosophy emphasizes building and maintaining diffuse leadership among workers and organizers.



The National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) is a social movement organization situated at the intersection of punitive immigration laws, a labor market in the midst of restructure, heightened levels of worker disorganization, rampant workers' rights violations, and political backlash against undocumented workers and the organizations that defend their rights. It is a heterogeneous organization/network that operates according to a set of shared philosophies and principles with regard to democratic participation in decision making, the importance of safeguarding workers' and immigrants' civil and human rights, and the pressing need to balance power relations in the low-wage labor market more on the side of temporary workers.

At the same time, NDLON members embrace a multiplicity of approaches and tactics in the struggle to achieve these ends. Its members are autonomous organizations responsible for their own affairs, but they come together under the auspices of the network to advance a common agenda.

NDLON's organizing philosophy emphasizes building and maintaining diffuse leadership among workers and organizers, developing a critical consciousness among the day labor workforce, and uniting day laborers as a force for social change. The model of leadership adopted by NDLON is in part based on the need to engage in an ongoing process of leadership development. Rapid turnover in the day labor workforce and the severe economic pressures most day laborers endure mean that leadership development must be a collective enterprise.

Paulo Freire and Popular Education

Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire developed a keen sense of social justice at an early age when he experienced the effects of extreme poverty in Northeastern Brazil. Freire later attended law school but decided that his talents would be put to better use in education. His twin passions for his vocation and social justice eventually led him to author several books, one of which is widely considered seminal in modern education: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. His method of Popular Education encourages a dialogue between teacher and student that helps both to arrive at a clearer understanding of their culture and political context, while imparting new, practical skills to the student, such as learning to read or to speak a second language.

As a tool in this enterprise, NDLON has embraced Popular Education, often associated with the writings of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, which is especially well suited for the task. The system is sensitive to the social and political characteristics of knowledge, and through processes of collective learning, enables day laborers to increase their understanding of the social conditions that make an impact on their lives and prepares them to transform those conditions.

Dirigente Popular: The Organic Leader

*Organic leadership...is embodied both
in individuals and the collective, and it
embraces democratic principles...*



Dirigente popular (literally, “popular leader”) is the encapsulation of a loosely defined concept that has great meaning for NDLO member organizations. It implies an organic leadership embodied both in individuals and the collective, and it embraces democratic principles, especially regarding the right of those affected by decisions to participate in making those decisions. The dirigente popular is a leader dedicated to creating other, new leaders by facilitating and encouraging those around them to reflect and analyze, and to alter their actions based on this reflection. As practiced by NDLO, the concept of dirigente popular is infused with the principles of Popular Education, the methodologies of which are especially suited to fostering this type of leadership.

The creation of dirigente popular requires ongoing leadership development efforts among the day labor workforce.

Developing Leaders from Within

NDLO’s member organizations train day laborers to become volunteers and full-time staff for the successful operation of the worker centers. Most directors of NDLO’s organizations are immigrants themselves, and over half of the organizers are former day laborers. This commitment to developing leaders from within the day laborer community makes NDLO a unique force in the labor rights movement.

Elmer Romero, the Education and Leadership Department director at CASA of Maryland, a large immigrant rights organization, comments:

“I still think that leadership within the day laborer movement has to come from within it. It has to be found. And to be able to form leaders, it is necessary that we, those of us who work in organizations, go back...to that base.”

Carlos Mares, a day labor leader working in San Francisco, is a model example of the leadership that can arise organically from that base. Raised in Mexico, he worked in construction-related occupations there, earning minimum wage while developing skills in carpentry and working with concrete. In 1992, Mares emigrated to the United States in search of better employment opportunities and initially settled in Los Angeles. He began work the day after he arrived, finding employment to be relatively plentiful in Los Angeles’s burgeoning day labor markets. He later relocated to San Francisco and engaged in local day labor activism. Mares provides details regarding his early day labor experiences:

“The first day was tough because they drove me to [a nearby suburb], and an [employer] took me to his house to remove weeds, but he didn’t give me any tools. He expected me to do it with my hands. I didn’t know [the weeds were poisonous]. I spent about four hours removing them, and then I went home. The following day, I saw that my hands were swollen.”

WORKERS IN DESPERATE CIRCUMSTANCES

Mares recalls that the competition among day laborers for jobs was fierce, just as it is today. “The one who would get into the truck would be the winner,” he explains. There was very little communication, much less cooperation, among workers. As a result, collective strategies to address abuses in the labor market were not possible. “When there was any trouble, the worker wouldn’t say anything at all,” he explains, and therefore abusive practices on the part of some employers continued. In addition, few workers’ rights organizations were active in day labor issues, and many workers, like Mares, did not know that organizations that assist low-wage workers even existed. This started to change in 2000, when laborers began to get organized.

...Competition was fierce...the one who would get into the truck would be the winner.

Day laborers organizing to improve wages and working conditions must confront basic issues of survival. Given the low pay and sporadic nature of work in the informal construction industry, many live on poverty-level earnings. In addition, the activities of unscrupulous employers, anti-immigrant organizations, and local law enforcement officials threaten the viability of day labor hiring sites, potentially jeopardizing workers' ability to secure employment. Carlos Mares comments:

“There used to be 20 or 30 [workers] living in the streets...It is obvious that the situation would make the workers lose control of their lives. To live in the street, to wake up in the morning because you are cold because it rained, not to have communication with your family. You want to go to a park to rest. You don't have any illusions...your life is drowning...The situation was very intense.”

Insights from Labor #1

NDLON's leaders always work within the context of a single, constraining reality: Day laborers first and foremost must confront issues of survival.

A TALE OF ORGANIC LEADERSHIP

Mares found himself thrust into a leadership role after a group of day laborers convened at La Raza Centro Legal to discuss what to do about ongoing police harassment.

“[I was] concerned about having work. I didn't know anything about leadership or getting organized. My only concern was to work and make money. This is how I was voted to be leader. There were 90 of us [day laborers] in a room and Renée [Saucedo of La Raza Centro Legal] said we should select a leader. It was a room a little bigger than this one, and I turned around to see 180 eyes looking at me. That feels incredible. So I said, ‘Me?’ And they said, ‘Yes, you can talk.’ Then they started to tell me lots of things. And I said, ‘It's a difficult decision to make. Let me think about it.’ I left for an hour and a half—I went to a small office. I didn't know whether to laugh, scream, or run away. So I thought about it. ‘What if I leave? What will happen? What about all the work we did during the week to develop this?’ It was like there had been an eruption. We couldn't allow that eruption to diminish. Renée came to talk with me. Patricia and Benito, too. They would talk to me, and I wouldn't say anything. So [finally] I said, ‘Okay, whatever happens, happens.’ I went back to the room and they were all there, and I said, ‘Okay. I accept.’ At that moment, our emergency was to do something with the police pressure. We needed somebody who would be a spokesperson with the message from the group. [I had] no experience at all...just my will, my enthusiasm.”

Following this initial experience, Mares continued his involvement as a day laborer leader, joining with other workers to raise wages at the hiring sites. But again, the difficulties of organizing this workforce contingent were ever present. The workers decided to try to establish a minimum wage of \$8 to \$10 per hour.

“We had meetings every week. But there was this situation: If we, the group of 90, wouldn't accept the jobs [below the minimum wage], other workers who weren't organized would take them. We had figured out who would work for more and who would work for less money. So our responsibility was to speak with these guys.”

I had no experience at all...just my will, my enthusiasm.

In some cases, a desperate worker would be prepared to work for far less than the minimum wage:

“He has his option. We can’t go against him. We’ve been through the same thing. You have to start to recuperate [get back on your feet], but not forever. If you always do it—if you accept the \$6 per hour—you will lower the wage for everybody.

“There are some kinds of people who...you talk to for a year, and they ignore you...It’s like talking to a rock. But maybe after a year or some months, one day these persons come to you and ask you how you are doing with your work. And you tell them you are charging \$8 an hour, and that you have a stable employer. What I learned through the network [NDLON] regarding leadership is that you don’t have to make enemies. You have to understand each person, and you have to find a way to make him [politically] conscious. Make him a friend, not an enemy.”

Like many other day labor leaders, Carlos Mares has participated in numerous leadership development and training sessions sponsored by NDLON and its member organizations. These organizations have sought to identify leaders, like Mares, from within the ranks of the day labor workforce, and then introduced them to the tools and methodologies of organizing in the day labor context. According to Pablo Alvarado, national coordinator of NDLON:

“[Y]ou have to have the skills of facilitating a dialogue with day laborers in the streets...And that’s where the technical information comes in. That’s where Popular Education assists you as a tool. But it is not just a tool, [there is] also the human connection. [Simply applying the tool] is not going to get you anywhere.”

Insights from Labor #2

One basic lesson in leadership helped NDLON leaders reach resistant constituents: They needed to abandon arguing and instead find ways to understand why a person might resist raising his or her political consciousness. As one leader put it, it simply worked better to...make him a friend, not an enemy.

YIELDING POWER, EMBRACING COMMITMENT

A key challenge to organizing, according to Alvarado, is yielding power and authority, because authority can be intoxicating:

“And not only intoxicating for you as a person but alienating to the day laborer, to the people [you] work with. Now, we’ve fought a long battle in Agoura Hills [a city in Los Angeles County, CA] for years, and we’ve seen the worst of the worst at that corner. And we’ve been there with the workers, the times when the cops were coming hard, we were behind the bushes filming the cops abusing the workers when they were soliciting employment in the streets. So we were there, and that’s the thing. Victor Narro [project director for the UCLA Labor Center and NDLOM advisory board member] understands it. I’ll tell you what Victor did once.”

“Around six patrol units and a lot of cops came hard on a day when he was having a meeting with the day laborers in Agoura Hills. So the cops came and [one of them] starts yelling at [Victor], saying, ‘I’m going to arrest these [expletive] and blah-blah-blah.’ Victor was telling him, ‘No, we’re having a meeting right now. They’re not doing anything.’ Victor was advocating, obviously, on behalf of the workers. At the end, the officer says, ‘Well, I’m going to arrest them right now.’ So Victor...puts his things down, and he just puts his hands like this [in front of him, to be handcuffed]. And the workers remember that. And that’s what it means. I don’t know how many people are ready to do that type of thing.”

“The cops stepped back. You know, that was powerful. And see, ten years later, the workers still remember, and they tell me, ‘That was beautiful.’ That doesn’t come after you go to a Popular Education workshop. It comes from somewhere else. I guess every person acquires it differently...Victor, to me, he’s a [true] Popular Educator.”

This episode in the long and troubled history of the Agoura Hills hiring site is more than a heroic act that challenged formal authority in the defense of workers’ rights. It also reflects a key element of NDLOM’s philosophy, shared by many grassroots organizing movements, of flattening hierarchies and reducing the social distance between workers and organizers. The encounter with law enforcement authorities is a dramatic example of the orientation toward organizing and community building that NDLOM affiliates and organizers practice day in and day out.

Empowering Workers

NDLOM’s organizing philosophy emphasizes building and maintaining diffuse leadership among workers and organizers, developing a critical consciousness among the day labor workforce, and uniting day laborers as a force for social change.

Mobilizing Laborers through Education

*Day labor worker centers have
been important sites for education
and leadership development.*



Like other NDLO member organizations, the Latin American Workers Project in Brooklyn, NY, offers educational programs that are based on a Popular Education methodology and are designed to meet the needs of low-wage, contingent workers. These programs also inform and guide the organizing and advocacy activities of the organization. Oscar Paredes, the founder and executive director of the Latin American Workers Project discusses how the organization has approached this work:

“At the Latin American Workers Project, we didn’t follow any ideology or model of leadership [being practiced in the United States] because we brought our own. What we do here is collect all the information that we need from our members and put it together. That is our method. We want to work based on the situations [facing low-wage immigrant workers]. And that makes us different and unique. The members feel part of this process or this struggle because they are a part of it. And they have the chance to contribute with their ideas.”

“We have weekly meetings in the worker center and at the corners. For example, we have meetings Mondays and Tuesdays. We ask, ‘What is going on here?’ And then we have general meetings and we work with them in workshops. When we started to organize, we started to talk about exploitation, the needs in the community, and about our needs. And we also talked about why we came to this country. We came to this country because in our countries, we don’t have the chance to live. We want to improve our standard of living. What are we going to do here if we are paid \$3.50 per hour in the factories [in the New York City area]? What are we going to do? We have to do something. We try to find out the main reason for being exploited here. One is that we don’t speak English. So okay, let us start to learn. This is our revolution. We always say that this is our revolution. Okay, we propose to learn English. We’re not interested in armed revolution. Our revolution is through education.”

“We started to organize English programs. First, we found the volunteers...who will teach you English. ‘So, what kind of English do you want to learn? What kind of English do you need?’ [One member said,] ‘I need something to help me go to the store with my son.’ Or, ‘I need something to help me when I’m working in the restaurant because I work as a dishwasher and I can’t understand what my boss is saying.’ Or, ‘I have to learn the names of my tools because I have problems with my boss because I don’t know them. He asked me to give him a meter, and I brought him a different thing. So he got mad at me and tried to fire me because he doesn’t have much patience.’ So we create our system, and in that process, we start to use Popular Education. [Our members] tell us which methods help them learn.”

Our revolution is through education.

LESSONS FROM BACK HOME

Carlos Canales is an organizer with the Workplace Project in Long Island, New York. Originally from El Salvador, Canales has been working as a day laborer organizer for many years. Like other organizers, he draws on his experiences in El Salvador, and applies their lessons and techniques to the situations he encounters on Long Island. Canales recalls one of his experiences with Popular Education, when working as an organizer in El Salvador, where *campesinos* [peasants] were encouraged to take a more prominent role in identifying community needs:

“The campesinos said, ‘We cannot write.’ ‘Well, you can draw,’ [the organizer said.] ‘It doesn’t work,’ [they protested.] ‘We cannot draw.’ [Laughter.] ‘What do you need here?’ [we asked.] And if the campesino said, ‘In our diet, we [can’t get] milk,’ then the interpretation was that we need to set up a program where a campesino can have a cow. So then the guy would draw a cow. He could not put the word ‘cow,’ but he could draw a cow. [If he said,] ‘I cannot draw a cow,’ [then we said,] ‘You put a head and a line here, and we agree that is a cow.’ That, to me, was Popular Education.”

But this is more than a story of a community resident being cajoled into participating in a community meeting, and it is more than a simple exercise in community participation. Rather, even in this story, there is a fundamental reworking of the rules of participation.

“... [I]n that instance, the tactic [we] were using, the intention was that instead of looking for arguments for why the campesino shouldn’t participate, [we were] looking for arguments for why the campesino should participate...They can think. They have ideas. We have to learn how to read their ideas. They have their own philosophy. They have their own way to solve the problem that we can’t know because we don’t speak the language of the campesinos.”

Insights from Labor #3

In trying to get the campesinos to participate in community organizing, leaders looked for ways to turn barriers into opportunities. If the campesinos couldn’t write, for example, then they could draw.

Canales explains why it is so important to deliberately encourage the participation of workers in decision-making processes:

“When the people come here [to the United States], especially the day laborers and the factory workers, they don’t even have the idea that they have the right to participate. That was not the legacy in our countries... To me it is important that the workers understand that the only way they’re going to change their life is through their own participation. They are claiming territory on whatever has to do with their day-to-day life. Since the beginning, we have told them, ‘You have to participate in the problem solving here.’ They said, ‘We don’t know [how to].’ ‘Well, I’m assuring you that you know how to do it,’ I told them.”

U.S. Day Laborer Population by Region of Origin*

Region of origin	Percent
Mexico	59
Central America	28
Guatemala	14
Honduras	8
El Salvador	5
United States	7
South America	4
Caribbean	2
Africa	<1
Other	<1
Total	100

*Valenzuela, Theodore, Melendez, and Gonzalez: 2006

EAGER TO LEARN

Many organizers report that some day laborers are keenly interested in education and critical analysis. Day labor worker centers have been important sites for education and leadership development. Renee Saucedo works for La Raza Centro Legal as well as the San Francisco Day Laborer Program, a worker center operating in the Bay Area since 1990. The worker center has made a strong commitment to worker organizing, education, and leadership development following a Popular Education model. Saucedo provides examples of the range of educational activities offered at the worker center:

“There are different types of Popular Education that we do, three main categories. There is a structured classroom-type Popular Education...there’s the street corner education...[and] there’s campaign-related Popular Education. So the more structured [classroom-type of education] involves every Wednesday afternoon, when we have a Popular Education class. It’s on our calendar. The workers know that we have it every week, what time and where, and we have different topics. The vast majority have received primary education and are starving for information. That’s why the civics classes are so popular.

We’re all capable of being leaders.

“We talk about globalization and forced migration. We talk about sexism and racism. We have this ‘power pyramid.’ The power analysis. And [we discuss movement building]: ‘What does it mean to be a leader?’ And that’s where we discuss the fact that being a leader doesn’t mean that you have special perks or being a leader doesn’t mean that you think of yourself as more important than the rest. Everyone is a leader at the Day Labor Program. People just show it in different ways.

Courses Offered at the San Francisco Day Laborer Program

- The Mission and History of the Day Labor Program
- At-Will Employment
- What Is Popular Education?
- The Political System of the U.S.
- Finding Work in the U.S.
- The History of Workers in the U.S.
- How to Prepare Oneself for an Interview
- The History of Immigration to the U.S.
- How to Negotiate with Employers around Job Safety

Saucedo goes on to explain:

“...[W]e do an analysis, ‘Well, these politicians, do you think they’re leaders?’ ‘Yes, yes.’ ‘Why?’ [We ask], ‘Well, how about José? Do you think he’s a leader?’ ‘Ahh,’ they start laughing. ‘José, you’re not a leader.’ And then we examine that. ‘Well, why...why do you think he’s not a leader?’ ‘Because he’s just a day laborer.’ And so we talk about, ‘Well, what are the characteristics of a leader?’ ‘Why did you think that this politician was a leader, and the day laborer isn’t?’ And so we go through that analysis. And then, by the end, they say, ‘Okay. Yeah. I see that.’ So we’re all capable of being leaders. So that’s the more structured weekly classes and meetings and retreats for the leaders. Then we have the on-the-corner Popular Education. And we do that also about once a week. Even though we do outreach for other things, we do Popular Education once a week.

“Other types of more structured Popular Education we do is to have retreats and special sessions for people who identify themselves as leaders in the Program, like the coordinadores [coordinators] who are democratically elected by the membership...

***It’s education...as a power tool.
That’s how we look at it.***

“It’s education for the sake of using it as a power tool. That’s how we look at it. So talking about globalization or talking about ‘knowing your rights’ is a tool for people to feel more confident to be able to participate politically, or it’s a tool to understand a larger context when we struggle for things here locally. It’s always something to be used concretely, not just for the sake of sharing information...I think that a huge component of Popular Education is developing that trusting relationship with people and making very clear that this education is to be used by them for some kind of political or other goal that they have for themselves.”

Insights from Labor #4

Discussions about what leadership really means helped to empower laborers and place trust in leaders who came from their own ranks.

WHEN AN IMMOVABLE PRIORITY MEETS AN UNSTOPPABLE DESIRE

Despite this impressive array of educational programs and activities, the organizers are under no illusions about day laborers' main priority, and that is to find work. But that does not diminish the powerful desire Elmer Romero has found among day laborers for education:

“For them, the priorities are related to work. But I do think that there is a big desire to learn. I think our day laborer community wants to learn the English language. When they have the chance they want to get qualifications, the ones who can’t read, want to learn how to do it. African day laborers want to learn Spanish. There is a desire to learn something. They want to learn how to use a computer, more about technology and more about economic development. I think the day laborers are figuring out that the corner work isn’t what satisfies them, and they are always thinking about starting small businesses—small companies and cooperatives.”

Insights from Labor #5

Popular education addresses issues that affect the daily lives of workers, and because of this, has proven a powerful tool in getting the community involved in the work of protecting laborers' rights.

Nevertheless, a day laborer's pressing need to find work usually takes precedence over educational opportunities. Francisco Pacheco, the East Coast field coordinator for NDLO, explains:

“Basically, there are two difficulties. One, that they are permanently looking for jobs, and this keeps the focus away from any other situation. They become active when there is a specific problem that they have to solve. Troubles with the police, immigration, bosses abusing them...That is when they put in more energy. The other problem is that laborers are people who are constantly moving from one place to the other, because they don’t have a stable job. And in winter, a lot of people go to other places—places where it isn’t snowing, warmer places. And then they come back again. For example, recently in New Orleans, I saw a lot of people from [Maryland].”

Insights from Labor #6

Offering a wide array of educational programs and activities, especially those addressing civics and immigration issues, provided needed information and stimulated laborers' desire to learn even more.

Carlos Mares offers this perspective:

“The reality is that not many people want to get organized. In Oakland, we have this particular situation that there are always new people coming [to the hiring site]. Now, for example, there are a lot of people from Guatemala coming, but they are Indians [native Guatemalans]. They don’t want to know anything about getting organized. They have been persecuted, assassinated, and not only in Guatemala. Indian communities have been ignored. What happened in Chiapas before the Zapatista Movement stood up with Marcos? Only with this rebellion has the [Mexican] government paid attention to an Indian community that needed schools, social services, and the government’s attention. That wouldn’t have happened with the Indian groups in Guatemala or other countries. In Mexico, Indian groups have always been living in poverty...And because of that, it is so difficult for them to develop [formal] leadership, to get involved. It’s difficult to convince them, but not impossible. You have to make friends with them...learn their language.”*

* The Zapatista Army of National Liberation is a revolutionary group composed primarily of Mayan Indians in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. The group’s main spokesperson and leader identifies himself as Subcomandante Marcos.



A CLIMATE OF CONSTANT CHANGE

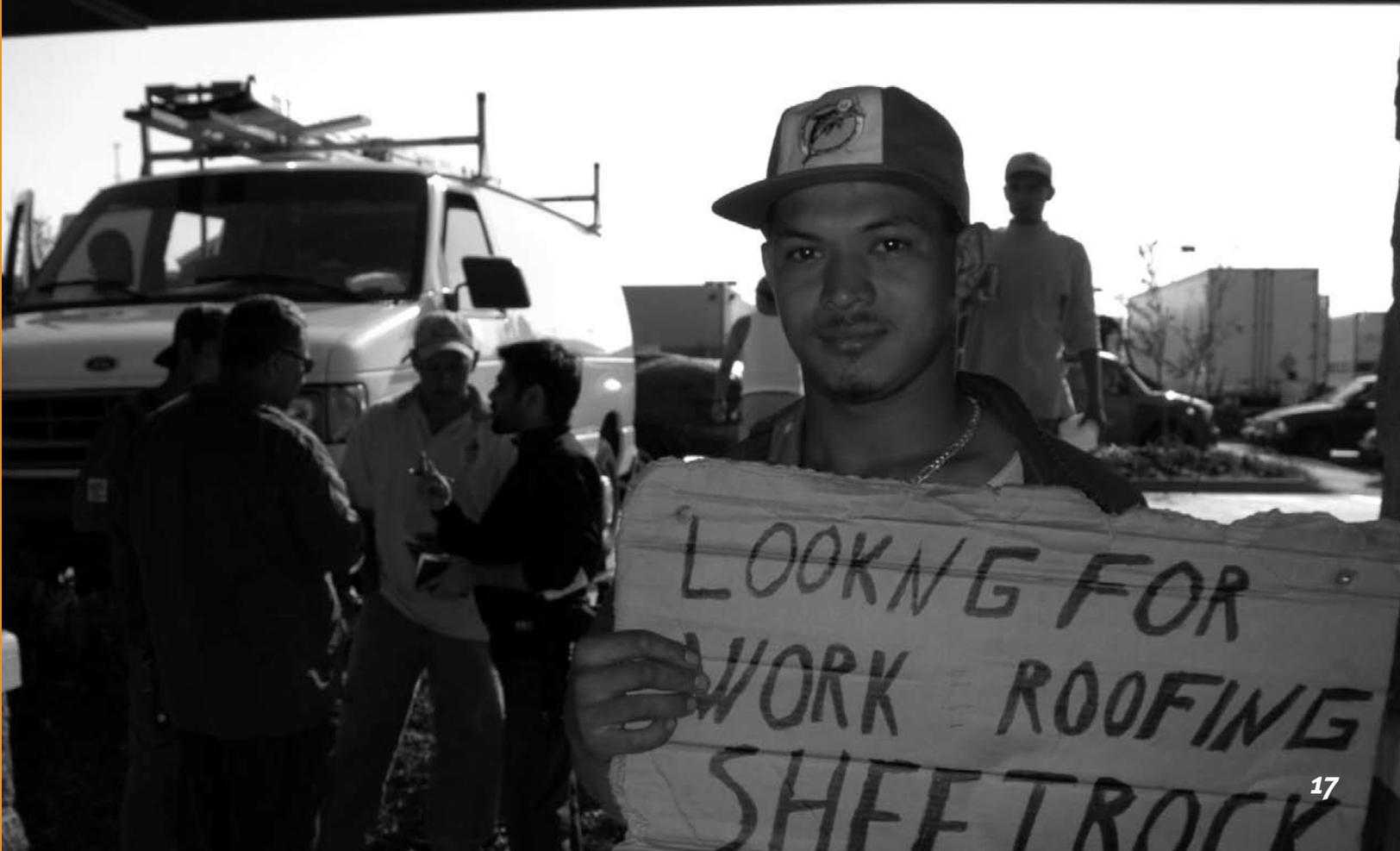
Many organizers identified the high mobility of the day labor workforce as a challenge to organizing, but it is a fact of life for these workers. Many day laborers cycle through this segment of the labor market, moving between places as well as between jobs in the “mainstream” labor market. Therefore, leadership development activities must be designed in a way that allows leadership to be cultivated among a mobile workforce (which can be contrasted with the case of tenant organizing, for example, where the population is relatively more stable). In organizing efforts among day laborers, this involves conceiving leadership development as an ongoing activity that is centered on the workforce present at any given time. Efforts are made to nurture leadership among the day labor workforce, even as it is understood that leaders may relocate to another area at any time in their search for work.

The Unique Challenge of Migrant Day Laborers in Phoenix

Salvador Reza is involved with the Macehualli Work Center in Phoenix, Arizona. He was born in Mexico and moved to the United States when he was a child. Reza has worked as a community organizer in Phoenix for decades. Recently he has been working with food vendors, day laborers, and segments of the Latino community facing harassment by anti-immigrant groups. Reza explains that although most worker centers experience a steady flow of workers in and out of the local day labor market, Phoenix represents an extreme case because many migrant workers enter the U.S. labor market through this city on their way to other destinations. Worker empowerment and leadership development in this context pose unique challenges. Reza emphasizes that you have to have constant training. “It’s like open enrollment,” he says. “You try to connect them to whatever is going on.”

Realities and Opportunities

...Leadership development must be an ongoing activity that involves the day laborers present at any given time.



The realities of day labor mean that dirigente popular, if it is to be achieved, will reside both with individuals and the collective. The inherent instability of day labor employment; the pressing need to earn an income to support oneself and one's family; and the problems of immigration status, which cast a long shadow over the day labor market, all create significant challenges for organizing, worker empowerment, and leadership development. In response, NDLO member organizations have embraced the notion that leadership development must be an ongoing activity that involves the day laborers present at any given time.

As Minsun Ji, executive director of El Centro Humanitario Para Los Trabajadores in Denver, Colorado, explains:

“We don’t have leaders who stay with the organization...but we have an organizing goal to bring them into the organization...The bottom line for us is...it doesn’t matter where they go, at least there is some organization in a particular city that will continue to provide leadership opportunities. For example, there is a worker from Denver who is helping to open the worker center in Miami. We have to be really clear about following the path of these workers. Before they leave, we should tell them, ‘Hey, if you go to Seattle, contact CASA Latina. If you go to San Francisco contact [La Raza Centro Legal].’ That way when they arrive there they can continue to exercise their skills as leaders.”

Hilary Stern, co-founder and executive director of CASA Latina, an immigrant-serving organization in Seattle, Washington, echoes these ideas:

“The goal is doing leadership development [for people’s lives beyond the organization]. It often is the case that our strongest leaders are the ones who leave the organization the quickest. That’s the hardest thing for us in terms of developing our organizational structure. One of the ways that we have been able to maintain some of that leadership is by hiring people on at CASA Latina. The people who have been promising leaders as day laborers or in the women’s group then get positions. That has helped us keep some of the leadership with us. I think the challenge is training the next generation of leaders.”

Day laborer leaders will be a diverse group, but collectively, day laborers can build solidarity across lines of nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status. Self-identification as a day laborer can be the source of solidarity among workers as they unite in the face of exploitation, harassment, and poverty. This solidarity might also extend to other low-wage workers.

Oscar Paredes has seen this unity developing among a diverse day laborer population in New York City:

“We have Mexicans, Ecuadorans, Colombians, people from the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Paraguay, Argentina, Peru, Chile, and the West Indies. We also have Puerto Ricans, Jamaicans, Afro-Brooklynites, Chinese, and Koreans—people from everywhere. [They are united by] having the same situation. They already identify themselves as having the same struggles. We are brothers and sisters here. We are here for the same reason. We are looking for a job and a way to survive. When we have big parties here with people from every community, everyone talks about agriculture. [We have] exchanges about food: ‘You know, in our country we do this...’ Then they discuss the immigrant situation, the [Congressional] bills, and also about the police. ‘They gave me a ticket because I sold flowers in the street.’ ‘The same thing happened to us. I’m a laborer on Roosevelt Avenue, and they gave me a ticket because I was on the street looking for a job.’ So it is all connected.”

We are looking for brothers and sisters here.

Francisco Pacheco has observed something similar in the Washington, DC, area—creating worker solidarity through Popular Education:

“My experience was in Maryland with African Americans, Africans, women, and all types of Latinos. I believe that there [is a strong day laborer identity]. The need to work is the most immediate fact. The need to have more work, that’s their first issue. People are here because they want to earn money, and they want to have a lot of work. The other necessity is good wages. I think those are the two most important ones: work and better wages. Then, there are others, for example, vocational technical education, where you can include English lessons, carpentry, and other skills. The other issue is immigration. African Americans care little for that. They really don’t care about that, but the rest do. I think those are the main subjects—the respect for immigrant rights, for workers rights and that includes people from here, there, and everywhere else. That’s what is needed, but there are methods. Methods can involve workers’ assemblies, sports events, celebrations like Thanksgiving. For example, at CASA of Maryland we had a nice experience with Thanksgiving. A group of African Americans started to talk about their story, their [ancestors’] arrival long ago. The Africans told us about all the sacrifices they make to come here. They come by plane, they have to pay a lot of money, get a visa, and then they come here and they don’t have papers anymore. And the immigrants that come from South America told us how they have to go through Mexico and Central America in order to get here. They all have their own story. People also tell about their immigration stories, how they came. It is also very educational.”

Insights from Labor #7

By finding a common identity in common experiences through Popular Education, groups of workers began to cross ethnic and cultural divides to unite into larger, more powerful organizations.

Elmer Romero, a trained popular educator, sees opportunities for Popular Education curricula to allow participants to deeply explore questions of identity and to do this across lines that might otherwise divide day laborers:

“It can help a lot. That is why I back the idea that Popular Education has to work hard with diversity and identities. We have to create, first, a good curriculum. And I know there is lot of curriculum regarding diversity, but from my experience, it lacks the methodological part. It lacks the participative methodology. We have to integrate the methodological part into the diversity curriculum and reconstruct it together. And that’s possible. And we need to invest in resources because, well, one of the things that helped [in Latin America] was cooperation. It helped to create a Popular Education movement with quality. This needs money. The money has to be there. You shouldn’t be trying to save money on this.”

Renee Saucedo, for one, is ready. She says that “...One thing that we want to do collectively...is Popular Education around black-brown unity, around African American-immigrant unity. It’s Popular Education within the context of campaigns, which has been extremely effective.”

Pablo Alvarado, too, sees an opportunity to break down the barriers that divide workers. “We get people [together] and we humanize each other as we interact with each other.” This sentiment is shared by NDLOL organizers who work each day to build solidarity, develop leadership, and defend workers’ rights. They strive to build community where they are and to include all who pass through the space of this community.

THE NEXT STEP: COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Salvador Reza sums up where this movement is heading:

“My dream is that out of all the connections we have in the community that we can expand to real community organizing...For that, you need a more complex [organizational] infrastructure than what we have right now. I think the [day labor] work centers can be a catalyst to do that. Who do you have in the work center? You have the community in the work center. Well, you take that and then go into their needs in the barrio, their real needs.”

In this way, the worker center becomes even more deeply embedded in the community and operates as a point of contact for an increasingly large segment of that community. No doubt this will require worker centers to evolve and develop into a different type of institution. But with an established presence in the community and with the lessons and practices of Popular Education, it is possible that worker centers could become even more important sources of organic leaders—a true dirigente popular.



Acknowledgements

The members of the Leadership for a Changing World Research and Documentation team at the Research Center for Leadership in Action would like to acknowledge the many contributions of co-researchers, partners, and other social change leaders in LCW who have been active participants in shaping our learning. We want to particularly thank the Ford Foundation for its generous support of the LCW program and the Research and Documentation effort.

About the Leadership for a Changing World Program

Leadership for a Changing World was a program of the Ford Foundation that recognized and supported community leaders known in their own communities but not known broadly. In addition, it sought to shift the public conversation about who are authentic leaders to include the kinds of leaders participating in this program. Each year from 2001–2005, Leadership for a Changing World recognized 17 to 20 leaders and leadership groups. Awardees received \$115,000 and participated in semiannual program meetings, collaborative research, and a strategic communications effort. LCW was a signature program of the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Institute for Sustainable Communities and the Research Center for Leadership in Action at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service.

About the Research Center for Leadership in Action at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University

The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) promotes practice-grounded, social-science based, interdisciplinary research that will help strengthen both the theory and the practice of leadership in public service. The Research Center for Leadership in Action is based at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. It was launched in August 2003 with support from the Ford Foundation.

Members of the Research and Documentation Project Team include:

Bethany Godsoe, RCLA Executive Director
Sonia Ospina, RCLA Faculty Director and LCW Research Director
Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla, RCLA Deputy Director and LCW Program Director
Erica Foldy, Affiliated Faculty Member
AiLun Ku, Programs Manager
Jennifer Dodge, Research Associate
Waad El Hadidy, Research Associate

For more information about Leadership for a Changing World and the Research and Documentation Component, visit wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/ or call 212.998.7550.

Credits

Strategic Communications and Planning (SCP) provided editorial support on this project.
Jesse V. Elmore provided design services.

© 2009 by RCLA



Research Center for Leadership in Action NYU Wagner

Research Center for Leadership in Action
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service
New York University
The Puck Building
295 Lafayette Street, 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10012-9604

212.992.9880

wagner.leadership@nyu.edu

<http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership>