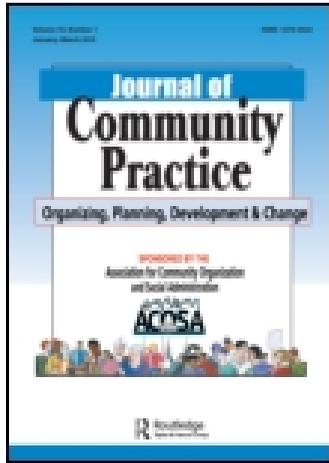


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### Integrating Social Services and Social Change: Lessons From an Immigrant Worker Center

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## **Integrating Social Services and Social Change: Lessons From an Immigrant Worker Center**

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*Social workers have long grappled with the tension between social services and social action. Drawing on a qualitative case study, this article examines how a new type of community organization (immigrant worker centers) is navigating this tension. While attempting to maintain an organizing focus, the Great Lakes Worker Center also provided direct services to its members, undocumented immigrants and their families. Analysis suggests that like settlement houses, today's worker centers demonstrate the synergy between services and action. Current conditions, particularly for vulnerable populations, favor this hybrid approach to community practice that acknowledges individual needs while also pressing for social change.*

**KEYWORDS** *community organizing, immigrants, human services, social change, labor, worker centers, social justice, hybrid organizations*

### INTRODUCTION

For decades, social work scholars and practitioners have grappled with the tension between social services and social action (Brooks, 2005; Rothman, 1996; Withorn, 1984). In his landmark book, *Social Work as Cause and Function*, social work and casework pioneer Porter Lee (1937) described this tension as inherent to social workers' dual calling—to address systemic social problems and provide services to enhance the well-being individuals and families. Fueling this debate are assumptions about how focusing on social services may undermine more transformative social change. Social

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movement and community practice scholars have suggested that providing services not only redirects limited resources away from political struggle, but also may discourage an organization from using more militant tactics that could jeopardize public support for services (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2001; Kivel, 2007; Piven & Cloward, 1978). Additionally, critics argue that services may have a domesticating effect on a community. By ameliorating individual or family concerns, services may discourage people from questioning their subordinate position and joining together in collective action. Although there are also examples of productive ways to combine the two approaches, thus linking the more radical and mainstream traditions within social work, this tension persists in contemporary social work practice and education.

As this debate continues, the institutional environment and demographic context for community practice is changing. Rising inequality, extreme poverty, and a shrinking social safety net have left individuals and communities isolated and vulnerable. The effects of global capitalism are felt around the world, and many are forced to migrate in search of work. Meanwhile, protections for many workers have been reduced or eliminated. In response to these challenging conditions, new and noteworthy approaches to community organization are emerging. The growth of immigrant worker centers—multipurpose organizations designed to address workplace and immigration issues—is one example. Based on a case study of the Great Lakes Worker Center (GLWC), an immigrant workers' organization located in the Midwestern United States, this article explores how worker centers are responding to the changing institutional landscape. The goal of this article is two-fold. It seeks to (a) introduce worker centers as new sites for community practice and (b) propose ways that worker centers, as hybrid organizations, provide a model for transforming the tension between organizing and services in response to community needs.

The article begins with a definition and description of worker centers and a literature review on the concept of hybrid organizations in the context of social services and social action. Then, in tracing the trajectory of the GLWC, it examines how the organization navigated its commitment to social change, expressed through its focus on organizing campaigns and leadership development, in relation to the need for individual services by members. Analysis suggests that the current conditions, particularly for vulnerable and excluded populations, favor a hybrid approach that integrates social change through organizing and leadership development with direct services grounded in empowerment traditions. Discussion and implications for practitioners and scholars concludes with a call to transform the “social services or social change” (Kivel, 2007, p. 129) debate into a broader conversation about integrated approaches to socially just community practice.

## BACKGROUND

Scholars and practitioners have long been curious about the institutional dynamics of combining different approaches to community practice, including civil society, social movement, community development, and nonprofit service organizations (Hasenfeld & Gidron, 2005; Hyde, 1996; Piven, 1966; Rothman, 1996; Stoecker, 1995). For my analysis, I draw on the concept of *hybrid* organizations, defined as organizations reflecting “combinations of different elements—structural or institutional—that represent modes of more or less formal adaptation to environmental uncertainty” (Minkoff, 2002, p. 382).<sup>1</sup> Like Minkoff, whose work examined social change organizations and the tensions generated by combining services and action, my research is concerned with the integration of these different functions and activities in the process of serving vulnerable populations.

Scholars of social movement organizations (SMOs) have explored the specific tensions in combining grassroots, voluntary, activist approaches with more bureaucratic organizational structures. Studies of feminist SMOs by Hyde (2000) suggest that a hybrid approach may make organizations more adaptable in a hostile or unstable environment. Minkoff (1994, 1999, 2002) examined how the institutional dynamics shaped SMOs led by women, African Americans, and other minority groups between 1955 and 1985. Prior to the 1960s, many of these organizations provided direct services to members but did not engage in political or social action. Social movement politics (as well as changes in the political and resource environments) had a transformative effect, resulting in hybrid organizations that continued to offer direct services and engaged in collective action through organizing or policy advocacy. According to Minkoff, their hybridity allowed these SMOs to “manage environmental uncertainty and episodic change” (2002, p. 383) by drawing on established resource flows and the legitimacy of existing models.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, these hybrid organizations often faced challenges in defining their organizational identities and achieving equal legitimacy with multiple institutional sectors.

These institutional dynamics are relevant to an analysis of contemporary worker centers, but my analysis is equally concerned with the conceptual and philosophical dimensions of this dynamic. In *Serving the People: Social Services and Social Change*, Withorn (1984) explored these issues by tracing the problematic dynamic that, over time, pitted professionalism

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of hybrid organizations vary widely and can refer to combining multiple sectors (non-profit and for-profit) in single organizations; organizations that have different service orientations and client populations; organizations that draw on resources from multiple sources; and organizations that blend decision-making structures (e.g., bureaucratic and collectivist; Minkoff, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Bradshaw et al. (1994) also suggested benefits of combining existing models (Alinsky style and feminist organizing) when working with communities of color.

against radical social change and thus undermined the possibility of a more integrated approach to social work practice. In his essay, “Social services or social change?” Kivel (2007) levied a similar critique, arguing that more transformative attempts at social change have been undermined by the bureaucratization of SMOs. The nonprofit industrial complex has so thoroughly coopted social change that social services provided in this context do little to address the root causes of inequality and oppression and instead maintain the status quo.

Despite this enduring cynicism about the possibility of combining social services and social change within a single organization, there are notable examples to the contrary. Feminist alternative service organizations of the 1970s and 1980s provide a potential model for overcoming the “forced choice [of] change vs. helping” (Withorn, 1984, p. 2). Because they were focused on problems and populations (e.g., domestic violence survivors) who were invisible to the mainstream, these organizations were compelled to provide services while they organized to demand an institutional response. Some analysis suggests that providing services to excluded populations is “another means of challenging mainstream methods” (Hyde, 2000, p. 53) and thus consistent with social change goals. This logic is consistent with radical casework (Fook, 1993) and empowerment perspectives (Gutiérrez, 1990), which propose that realizing the social justice goals of social work requires simultaneous attention to individual needs and critical action to address root causes of individual and social problems.

#### WORKER CENTERS AS NEW SITES OF COMMUNITY PRACTICE

This study focuses on how the GLWC adopted a hybrid approach uniquely suited to the population (undocumented immigrants) and the social context. Worker centers constitute one of the newer organizational forms that combine different elements—organizing, services, and advocacy—in a single organization. Worker centers are independent, local, and largely grassroots organizations of low-wage immigrant workers and their allies. Although immigrant workers have always organized for improvements in their working and living conditions, worker centers are a relatively new organizational form that has expanded most notably since the mid-1990s (Fine, 2006). According to Janice Fine’s survey of over 120 worker centers in the United States, these organizations are distinguished by several characteristics. First, although they may receive support from mainstream labor unions, worker centers do not represent workers within the tradition of labor relations in the United States, nor do they pursue collective bargaining agreements. Second, worker centers focus on some of the most marginalized and excluded groups of workers: undocumented immigrants and other low-wage workers in manual and service jobs—individuals who, in policy or practice, are typically outside of

the purview of mainstream institutions. Finally, like the settlement houses of the 20th century that linked social change through organizing and policy with direct services and education for neighborhood residents, worker centers have developed an approach that involves a hybrid orientation linking services and organizing (Fine, 2011). They engage in a unique combination of activities—organizing around workplace issues, advocating on workers' behalf with local governments and agencies, and providing direct services related to workplace and other issues.

## METHODOLOGY

### The GLWC: A Case Study<sup>3</sup>

This analysis draws on data from a multi-year qualitative case study, conducted between 2006 and 2009, of the GLWC. Founded in 2006 by a group of students, community members, and some workers, the GLWC was a small organization seeking to provide organizing support, education, and services to a growing population of low-wage immigrant workers. These workers came from Mexico and Central America and worked in restaurants, hotels, private homes, residential construction, and other low-wage manual and service jobs. Data collection involved participant observation of GLWC workshops and meetings (2006–2008), in-depth interviews ( $n = 44$ ), and organizational document review.

I began volunteering with the GLWC soon after its inception in June 2006 and continued as a volunteer through December 2008. As a volunteer, I provided assistance at monthly membership meetings with logistical tasks (e.g., setting up before meetings) and occasionally provided language interpretation between Spanish and English during meetings. I participated in outreach campaigns (e.g., door-knocking in low-income neighborhoods) to invite community members to meetings and assisted in coordinating undergraduate volunteers. My involvement in the organization over time allowed me to develop relationships that facilitated this research and gave me unique access to a population (undocumented immigrants) that is often hard to reach and understandably mistrustful of outsiders and mainstream institutions.<sup>4</sup> Although my position as a volunteer aided my ability to reach interview respondents and to gain full access to organizational documents, I acknowledge that these ties may have influenced not only the types of

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<sup>3</sup> Names of the organization and all individuals have been changed, and all identifying information has been removed.

<sup>4</sup> These relationships were especially important given the increasingly repressive climate for immigrants during the period of the study. From 2006 to 2011, the United States experienced what is now known as the most aggressive immigration enforcement campaign in modern US history. In 2008 alone, we saw the largest ever workplace raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Camayd-Freixas, 2009; Meissner, Kerwin, Chihsti, & Bergeron, 2013).

data available but also interviewees' responses. As an interviewer, I took steps to minimize the influence of a previous relationship on interviewees' responses (e.g., by asking open-ended questions, including questions about any negative experiences with the GLWC, and by encouraging respondents to elaborate as much as they wanted in their answers).

Reliance on a single case carries obvious limitations in terms of generalizing findings to other settings. However, as a "revelatory case" (Yin, 2003, p. 43), the GLWC offers description and insight into a phenomenon (worker centers) previously unexamined by social work researchers. Moreover, this method, drawing on multiple sources of evidence, is well suited to the research question, which is more exploratory in nature—that is, seeking to understand how a new type of organization is navigating a familiar tension between services and social change. These data provide rich detail and indicate areas for future research on innovations in this new type of organization.

### Data Collection and Analysis

*Participant observation.* Over a period of 28 months (August 2006–December 2008), I attended 16 monthly membership meetings. These meetings were approximately 2 hr in length, and took place on Sunday afternoons. I often arrived early to assist with set-up and would stay after the meetings to have informal conversations with members and volunteers. I documented observations through jottings written during the meetings when possible, and wrote up full field notes that evening or in the days following the meeting.

*Document review.* The GLWC granted access to all organizational files for this time period, including flyers and advertisements for meetings; handouts distributed to members; mission statement and other foundational documents; fundraising proposals; and minutes from leadership team and Board of Directors' meetings.

*In-depth interviews.* Interviews were conducted with 44 individuals from three different subject populations (see Table 1):<sup>5</sup> (a) immigrant workers who participated in the GLWC;<sup>6</sup> (b) organizers and volunteers, including workshop facilitators, in the GLWC; and (c) service providers and other institutional representatives not directly affiliated with GLWC. Rather than use a sampling strategy, my approach was to interview every person who had been involved with the organization during the period of 2006–2009 who was available and interested in participating in the research. Recruitment involved

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<sup>5</sup> All quotes presented in the text are from interviews. Direct quotes from field notes are indicated with a footnote.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews with immigrant workers were conducted in Spanish. The author is (English-Spanish) bilingual and achieved certification as a medical interpreter in the State of Washington.

**TABLE 1** Description of Interview Sample by Subgroup

<b>Subsample and size</b>	<b>Criteria for inclusion</b>	<b>Description of sample</b>
Immigrant workers ("participants" or "members") ( <i>n</i> = 14)	Immigrant workers who participated in at least 6 monthly GLWC meetings in the course of one year.	Ages: 26–57 Male: 8 Female: 6  <b>Countries of origin:</b> Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador
Volunteers, organizers, leaders ( <i>n</i> = 14)	Volunteers, organizers, and leaders include board members and those who participated actively (2–4 hours/week) in the GLWC during at least 4 months in one year.	Ages: 19–55 Male: 7 Female: 7  <b>Categories:</b> undergraduate and graduate students; Americorps volunteers (students/recent graduates); professionals (faculty, attorneys, religious leaders)
Service providers ( <i>n</i> = 16)	Service providers must have contact with or concerns about services available to immigrants and/or other low-wage workers.	Age: (data not collected) Male: 7 Female: 9  <b>Types of agencies/organizations:</b> Direct service providers in domestic violence, public health (e.g., maternal/infant nurse), services to farmworkers, sectarian social services, local law enforcement, union leaders involved in Worker Center efforts.

*Note.* GLWC = Great Lakes Worker Center.

calling potential respondents to invite them to participate in an hour-long interview. Of the first two groups—workers and volunteers/organizers—everyone invited expressed interest in the project and agreed to participate in an interview. The interviews took place in a variety of locations, based on where respondents felt most comfortable, and included public places (i.e., restaurant or coffee shop, public library, church) or in a respondent's home. Several interviews of volunteers and service providers took place over the phone, either at the request of the interviewee or because the person was no longer in the area. Interviews lasted an average of 54 min. The interview questionnaire included specific questions about a person's experience with the GLWC and consisted of open-ended questions, inviting participants to elaborate on their responses as much as they wanted. All but two interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

In terms of the sample, it is worth noting that there are meaningful race, class, and gender differences between the first two groups of respondents—(a) immigrant workers and (b) GLWC volunteers and workshop facilitators

(see Table 1). The workers were all Latino immigrants in manual and service jobs and the majority ( $n = 12$ ) was undocumented. The remaining two workers had previously been undocumented and were part of mixed-status families (i.e., families with both authorized and unauthorized members). The volunteers were students (law and undergraduate) and a few professionals (e.g., faculty and public interest attorneys). Racial-ethnic differences between and within these populations are notable. Among volunteers, approximately half of the volunteers were White, native-born citizens. The other half included ethnically Latino and multiracial individuals who were native-born or naturalized citizens. Several of these volunteers, including three of the workshop facilitators, were second-generation immigrants from Mexico and South America and native Spanish speakers. Although not a central focus of this study, future analyses will examine how race, class, and gender differences shaped the internal dynamics of the organization and its decisions.

Analysis was largely inductive. I began by coding a subset of interview transcripts and documents using line-by-line coding techniques. This initial step generated a list of focused codes and themes, which I then used in coding the remaining transcripts and documents. For each interview, I compiled case summary notes, which consisted of a brief summary and highlights from the interview along with *in vivo* codes. Integrative memos were used to link codes and discover themes across data sources.

### BECOMING AN “ORGANIZING ORGANIZATION”

From its inception, the GLWC, like many other worker centers, understood itself to be a hybrid organization. One of the founding members of the worker center and a long-term volunteer remembers the appeal of this multi-pronged approach:

We talked a lot about worker centers as being this really unique nexus of advocacy, organizing, and direct service . . . for some people it was, really the attraction to—an opportunity to provide legal services and ESL services and other kinds of direct support. And for others of us it was maybe an extension of advocacy into the realm of organizing, but it seemed like there was something particular about those three things coming together in one institution that really attracted the group of us who were part of that early conversation. (Beth, volunteer)

As suggested by Beth’s quote, combining these different elements allowed the organization to cast a wide net in terms of building a base of volunteers. But the decision to integrate these approaches in a single organization also produced tension about how to channel organizational resources and make

strategic decisions across these areas. This section examines how the GLWC experienced and acted on this tension while trying to maintain its identity as an “organizing organization.”

### Organizing Over Services

In one of its earliest funding proposals, the GLWC stated that its core goal was “to alter the balance of power between employers and workers, in favor of the workers, in our area—to rebuild some of the worker power that unions once possessed.”<sup>7</sup> Even as it acknowledged the hybrid configuration of activities, the GLWC understood itself to be primarily an “organizing organization.”<sup>8</sup> This orientation was influenced by the composition of volunteers and early leaders who came to the GLWC with labor and community organizing experience. In Leah’s words:

Our worker center was really, really adamant about making sure that organizing was a huge part of what we did. Because we have people there who came out of unions and came out of those types of organizations. But i know some of the other worker centers in the [national network] were much more focused on service and to some extent advocacy, and you know, they can make a difference and it’s definitely a place where people can go to get services . . . but it wouldn’t be the same type of organization. (Leah, volunteer)

As illustrated in Leah’s comments, although GLWC leaders embraced the hybrid approach to workers’ struggles, they firmly asserted that the organizing focus made them unique. Leah contrasts the GLWC with other worker centers that focus on services and advocacy and subtly suggests that although all three of the activities are important, there is something special about organizing, and without that focus, “it wouldn’t be the same.”

What does it mean to be an organizing organization? To the volunteers and leaders, organizing was the process of building power by developing the leadership of workers, waging campaigns against bad employers, and engaging those most affected in advocating for better policies and laws. By emphasizing organizing, the GLWC was also describing itself in terms of what it was not. A flyer distributed to new members read: “We are not a social service organization. We don’t work for workers but rather with workers.”<sup>9</sup> This insistence that it was not a social service agency reflects the skepticism of some community organizing traditions, and specifically, the

<sup>7</sup> GLWC Funding proposal, 2006a.

<sup>8</sup> GLWC brochure, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> GLWC flyer, What is a Worker Center?—Spanish, Sep. 2006.

view that services often involve “doing for others” rather than teaching them to “do for themselves” (Fine, 2006, p. 72).

The discursive focus on organizing is evident in the analysis of organizational documents in which leaders and board members describe the organization, its mission, and its accomplishments. The GLWC draws on an organizing frame by underscoring the collective nature of workers’ problems and the solutions to their problems. In one document prepared for workers and allies, the GLWC explains how and why an organizing strategy is called for:

In the worker center, we know that when there is a workplace problem that affects one person, that problem also affects others. . . . The best way of resolving problems is through organizing and building power as a group. In the worker center we will work together—alongside other workers and center staff—to resolve our problems and improve our conditions of work.<sup>10</sup>

To this end, GLWC volunteers started the organizing work by looking for “workers with problems” (GLWC Initiative meeting minutes, May 2006). The next step was not to fix these problems, but to identify potential leaders and see if there were a group of workers (in a sector or in a specific workplace) with problems who wanted to take action. In the following excerpt—the organizing update from the minutes of an early meeting of the GLWC board—this focus on finding groups of workers (rather than individual workers) with problems is expressed:

### Cases and Actions

We’re working on helping an individual from a packing plant and getting in touch with others at the plant to see who may be interested in improving conditions. We’re still working with [another worker center in the region] as picket line support for Hope Global workers’ organizing drive, and when things get going again with unpaid wages at the restaurant in Waterford we’ll help with that.<sup>11</sup>

The ultimate goal of these actions was to develop a campaign, either against a specific employer or group of employers.

### Campaigns

The centrality of campaigns for the GLWC is revealed in minutes from board meetings and fundraising proposals. Taken as discourse, fundraising

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<sup>10</sup> GLWC Welcome Statement—Spanish, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Worker Center Initiative meeting minutes, June 30, 2006.

proposals offer a unique perspective on an organization's self-understanding. The genre of these proposals is aspirational, as they describe what the organization seeks to do and they show how the organization wishes to be perceived by outsiders. Fundraising proposals are also directly influenced by the criteria and preferences of the funder. Despite the complexities of using these data, the content reveals a shared emphasis by the GLWC and funders on the role of organizing campaigns as a primary method for institutional change.

The following examples are excerpts (with emphasis added) from proposals written from 2006 to 2008. One proposal requests funds for research to inform future campaigns (GLWC Funding Proposal, 2006b):

The data we collect on common problems faced in workplaces . . . will help us to plan **campaigns** that go beyond challenging discriminatory employer practices. If, for example, we discover that the most common problem in the restaurant sector (regardless of employees' race or national origin) is employer failure to pay extra for overtime work, we may suggest to the GLWC Board that we make that failure the focal point of a **campaign**.<sup>12</sup>

Another proposal to a faith-based organization sought to develop workers' leadership so that they can identify and lead campaigns (GLWC Funding Proposal, 2007):

This goal [of improving the conditions for workers in our community] can best be achieved through a **campaign** that builds the capacity of leaders, engages new workers in our organization, and solidifies support from institutional and individual allies. Such a **campaign** aims to pressure local employers to act affirmatively in providing a safe work environment free from discrimination and intimidation.<sup>13</sup>

Yet another proposes a specific campaign based on research conducted with restaurant workers (GLWC Funding Proposal, 2008):

The GLWC's Restaurant Workers' Rights **campaign** will help fight for a living wage and acceptable workplace standards for restaurant workers. This **campaign** will unite and empower low-wage workers, as well as provide an opportunity for the community to take action on a local issue

<sup>12</sup> This proposal was directed at a private foundation that provides support for community based research. The proposal secured \$15,000 for the GLWC from this foundation.

<sup>13</sup> This proposal, requesting funds to hire an organizer, was not funded.

of interest to the general public—restaurants. The need for a **campaign** in [this city's] restaurant sector is especially dire.<sup>14</sup>

To suggest that the need for a campaign is “especially dire” further supports the idea that the GLWC viewed campaigns as a central expression of its organizing orientation.

The relative success of the GLWC in securing funds through these proposals reveals that funders, too, supported campaign-oriented organizing. In this sense, the GLWC's organizing focus, expressed here through the language of campaigns, was also a product of the resource environment, and specifically, foundations' interest in funding worker-centered campaigns. Although there were alternative approaches available (for example, adopting an individual case strategy, assisting workers one by one with wage claims or other problems), the GLWC continued to talk about its vision in terms of collective change through campaigns against employers or to change laws.

In the fall of 2006, just months after its founding by a group of community members and students, the GLWC embarked on its first workplace justice campaign. Several workers from a local Pita Bread Factory had been attending the monthly meetings of the GLWC. In late November, they learned that a customary holiday bonus had been canceled because of quality problems, according to the managers. The concerned workers, along with GLWC volunteers, began meeting with workers in their homes on days off or following their shifts. These conversations revealed problems far beyond the canceled bonus: mistreatment by supervisors, favoritism, sexual harassment, health and safety issues, lack of adequate training, line speed-ups, and restrictions on bathroom breaks. As the list of problems grew, so did the group of workers interested in taking steps to improve their conditions. By January 2007, the effort that started with a single worker had grown to include more than a dozen. The GLWC was beginning to realize its mission—to target bad employers and improve conditions through collective action.

After gathering support from other workers and supporters, a delegation of GLWC representatives—workers, board members, and clergy—went to the factory to deliver a demand letter outlining their grievances to the owner. At first, the factory owner expressed concern about the workers' complaints and stated that he was willing to meet with them to address the problems in the plant. However, soon after the initial meeting, the owner's attorney advised him to cease contact with the workers or the GLWC regarding the letter. The volunteer attorneys working with the GLWC tried again to persuade the company to meet directly with the workers, but the owner refused. Over the next few months, the company made small changes to improve the conditions. The supervisor who was accused of mistreating

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<sup>14</sup> This proposal, directed at a corporate foundation and focused on hiring an executive director to lead the organizing activities, was funded for \$15,000.

workers was moved to a different shift, and as a result, workers' concerns about favoritism and sexual harassment diminished. But the owner's refusal to meet with the workers quashed the organizing momentum. Workers lost interest in pursuing changes, and by early summer, several of those who had been involved in the campaign quit their jobs at the factory out of frustration.

### Developing Indigenous Leaders: "Every Worker is an Organizer"

Like any good community organizing effort, the GLWC articulated that workers should lead the movement to improve the conditions at their workplace. In describing its philosophy, the GLWC wrote:

Our model for leadership reflects a belief that every worker is an organizer. Indeed, workers are in the best position to solve their own problems; leadership development provides the tools that will better enable them to do that.<sup>15</sup>

To that end, the GLWC created processes through which workers would develop and direct the organization. Its desire to be a worker-led organization was sometimes overshadowed by the participation of university students and faculty in the organization's decisions and activities, but the composition of the Board of Directors (elected in January 2007) reflected a commitment to worker leadership.

The Board consisted of several people who would be considered typical directors—a religious leader, university professors, a small business owner—but in other ways it broke the mold. The number of young people reflected the GLWC origins as part of a student activist group. And almost half of the board consisted of Latin American immigrants working in low-wage industries—domestic work, fast food and family-style restaurants, light manufacturing, food processing, and residential construction. Although the organization struggled to navigate differences of language, nationality, age, culture, and class, this diversity reflects the organization's consistent aim to provide places for workers to shape the organization and exercise leadership.

In its organizational practice, the GLWC further operationalized its commitment to worker leadership by engaging its immigrant members in outreach activities designed to educate the wider community about workers' rights. Beginning in September 2006, the GLWC held a series of workshops for members in how to do outreach through knocking on doors and house

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<sup>15</sup> GLWC funding proposal, 2006b.

calls with coworkers. As described in the following funding proposal, the GLWC integrated the outreach into the monthly membership meetings:

At Workers' Rights Committee [monthly] meetings . . . members receive training on a specific aspect of workers' rights and then, in teams, go to talk with workers in their homes (in low-income apartment complexes and trailer parks), sharing information about their rights and the GLWC as well as gathering information about new workplace problems.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than employing professional organizers, the GLWC sought to train and support as many worker leaders as possible to recruit new members and learn to identify organizing issues through these one-on-one conversations.

At the November 2006 meeting, Rosario, an animated Guatemalan woman who had attended several GLWC meetings with her husband and children, suggested that one of the outreach teams go to her old neighborhood, *La Guatemalita*. A housing complex on the East side of town, *La Guatemalita* (literally, Little Guatemala) had acquired its name because over half of the units were occupied by Central American families, the majority of whom came from the eastern region of Guatemala. Accompanied by two other volunteers, Rosario led her team in doing house visits with individuals and families living in the one-story duplexes. In prior door-knocking efforts, when cold-calling people in apartment complexes and trailer parks, the non-immigrant volunteer organizers typically stood in doorways or in stairwells talking about the GLWC and getting information about the persons' work experiences. But with Rosario as their guide, the team was invited to sit down in the living rooms as people shared their stories and asked questions of the volunteers. In this sense, Rosario's knowledge of, and connections to, the community served to deepen the conversation about workplace problems and employment rights. In a more mainstream social service organization, Rosario's leadership and indigenous connections to community members might never have been discovered or developed.

### From Individual Problems to Collective Solutions

The strategy for talking with people about their problems reflected the organizing principle that workers have to take responsibility for the problems rather than expecting someone else to solve them. During house calls, volunteer organizers engaged people in conversations about issues at work but did not offer to resolve their problems. Lisa, one of the volunteers on Rosario's *La Guatemalita* team, remembers that

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<sup>16</sup> GLWC Funding proposal, 2006b.

One woman really want[ed] to talk to us about how her employer had committed some, what she thought was some discriminatory act, maybe—I don't remember if it was—fired her? Or cut her pay, or something along those lines, and she wanted help . . . and we said, you need to come to the meeting. (Lisa, volunteer)

By encouraging people to come to a meeting rather than helping them on the spot or referring them to another service provider, the GLWC reiterated its purpose: to provide a place for workers to learn from each other, see their individual problems in a broader context, and develop strategies to address the lack of power they experienced in dealing with their employers.<sup>17</sup>

The door-knocking efforts had only modest success in recruiting new members. Most of the people who came to monthly meetings were there because someone they knew had invited them. However, the impact of door knocking on the volunteers (both immigrant workers and students) who participated in the outreach should be noted. According to Antonio, a founding board member and active participant in GLWC outreach, the GLWC went beyond simply transmitting information to workers but succeeded in “empowering workers to—not only to know this information but to deliver it themselves. And so people really began to learn this in a way that they began to teach others.” Through the formal outreach and more informal conversations that happened in homes, churches, and workplaces, the GLWC was training people to talk about workers' rights and inviting them to be part of a larger conversation about how to improve the situations workers in the community.

During most of its first year, the GLWC's commitment to organizing around workplace issues appeared unwavering. GLWC leaders estimate that by January 2007, they had reached out to more than 200 workers through canvassing apartment buildings and trailer parks. From January–April 2007 the GLWC had supported a group of workers bringing a collective grievance against their employer. This last experience with a failed campaign underscored two issues affecting the organizing potential: limited capacity and an increasingly hostile political environment. Because it was small and depended largely on volunteers, the GLWC struggled to do what is required in an effective organizing campaign—conducting strategic research on the company and plant, securing support from outside unions and other organizations, and building a big enough base of workers to wield power with the employer. A second issue had to do with the increased risks associated with organizing in a changing social and political environment. In 2007, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had stepped

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<sup>17</sup> In the instance that a worker had an emergent legal (or other) problem, the person was referred to a volunteer GLWC attorney who was able to provide free consultation and assistance for workers with problems that could not wait until the next monthly meeting.

up its efforts to target, detain, and deport unauthorized immigrants in many US communities.<sup>18</sup> In the surrounding community, homes and workplaces were being raided by ICE and police; individuals were being arrested and detained, and parents were being separated from their children (Meissner et al., 2013; Sanders et al. 2013). GLWC members were among those affected. Over the next year, the urgency to organize around workplace issues faded into the background as community members' fears turned to a more basic need—to avoid arrest and detention and keep their families together.

## INTEGRATING SERVICES AND ORGANIZING

The preceding narrative illustrates how the GLWC functionally emphasized organizing by focusing on campaigns and by creating spaces for workers to lead and shape the organization's activities. In practice, however, the GLWC acknowledged that the needs of its members extended beyond the workplace and that some of their problems would not be addressed through an organizing strategy alone. The following excerpt from a proposal prepared in early 2007 acknowledges this reality:

While grassroots organizing and collective action form the core of our work, our long-term strategy also includes advocacy and, to a limited extent, services. We will improve the conditions for low-wage workers by increasing enforcement of existing laws and advocating for changes in local and state policies to favor low-wage and immigrant workers. Legal services also contribute to our overall goal of supporting workers in defending their rights. We currently work with a staff attorney from the [university based poverty law program] to assist workers in making claims against employers for lost wages, harassment and discrimination, and other legal violations.<sup>19</sup>

This explanation—how the GLWC combines services (“to a limited extent”) and advocacy—reflects the potential synergy between these approaches to change. Although the preceding section presents ways that the GLWC tries to emphasize organizing over and above other activities, further analysis reveals more ambivalence about the feasibility of achieving change solely through organizing and collective action. This section addresses the GLWC's relationship to services, and specifically, how and why the GLWC integrated direct services into its work.

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<sup>18</sup> We now know this period constitutes the most aggressive immigration enforcement campaign in modern US history. In 2008, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) reported 391,000 removals of unauthorized persons—up from 291,000 the previous year (Lopez, González-Barrera, & Motel, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> GLWC funding proposal, 2007.

## Individual Services, Education, and Empowerment

The initial focus on services was two-fold: to help with individual workplace problems that required individual legal assistance (e.g., wage theft by employers) and to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 2006, GLWC volunteers designed an ESL curriculum with organizing examples and content around workers' rights (e.g., how to talk to your boss about errors in your paycheck). The semiweekly ESL classes at the local Methodist church began using the curriculum, and the GLWC also shared their workers' rights focused ESL program with a newly formed Worker Center in a nearby city.

By developing work-related examples for the ESL classes, the GLWC program combined this educational service with its philosophy of organizing and empowerment, because a central goal of the classes was to improve people's ability to speak for themselves and defend their rights at work. The GLWC also assisted on occasion by interpreting and translating for GLWC members with limited English proficiency. Salomé recalls that although the organization was "dedicated to teaching," it also provided support with individual problems:

They [GLWC] have a lot of bilingual people, and often that's an incentive for people. If I have a problem, they can help me. They're completely dedicated to teaching, but also deal with whatever problem comes up. . . . You call there and you say, "I need help explaining this [to a supervisor]" and that was my case. Now I don't have that problem because I learned English, but when I first arrived and I had a problem at work, I couldn't explain it. I called [the GLWC], and . . . Leah [a volunteer] went with me and explained the problem, and because of that [my boss] took my concern more seriously. (Salomé, worker; translated from Spanish)

As this example illustrates, assisting with language bleeds into other forms of help and advocacy. In Salomé's case, it is unclear which aspect of the intervention, laid out in the following possibilities, made the difference: (a) The GLWC clarified the problem and facilitated a solution by addressing the language difference between employee and her employer; (b) as an outside organization, the GLWC motivated the employer to address the problem rather than risk negative publicity or legal claims; or (c) because she was accompanied by the GLWC volunteer, Salomé felt more

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<sup>20</sup> By services, I am referring to both tangible and intangible goods that function to help an individual and/or family. See Minkoff (2002): "Services include tangible goods and/or benefits, such as health care, financial aid, individual legal representation, and vocational training. Resources include intangible goods and/or benefits, such as education about legal issues, referral to welfare services, information about relevant issues, and knowledge of other individuals' experiences" (p. 398).

empowered in the conversation with her boss. Thus, this story illustrates the multiple, overlapping dimensions of a single instance of individual advocacy.

### Services and Leadership Development

Although most individual interventions did not directly advance the goal of building collective power, the GLWC saw this kind of service as an opportunity to develop the skills and confidence of emerging leaders in the organization. Carlos, a 57-year-old Guatemalan immigrant, had been attending the GLWC meetings since the fall of 2006. For 4 years, he had worked the lunch shift at a family-style chain restaurant doing food prep and bussing tables. In November of 2007, he called Anita, a GLWC volunteer, to ask for help with a problem he was having in getting time off from work. He had been saving his vacation for two years, and now he wanted to schedule his time off during an upcoming visit by his daughter, whom he had not seen in more than 5 years. “The managers were very racist, very discriminatory. . . . I had to practically beg them to give me the time off that I had earned,” he remembers. A meeting was arranged for a Monday morning before the lunch shift at the restaurant. Carlos and Anita sat on one side of the booth, across from the supervisor, a White woman in her 20s. Carlos describes what happened that day:

[Anita] came with me to the restaurant to talk with the managers . . . the manager that day, she agreed that—yes, that I had earned the vacation, but that the reason they hadn’t let me take time off was that there hadn’t been time—there was no one to cover me—but that wasn’t really the reason. It was that . . . since we don’t have the same rights as American workers here, they’re always manipulating us. . . . They think they can do whatever they want. (Carlos, worker; translated from Spanish)

As a result of this meeting, Carlos was able to schedule his vacation for the days he wanted, and he took the opportunity to request other changes to his schedule. At the next monthly meeting of the GLWC, Carlos spoke to other workers about how with the support of the GLWC, he was successful in making changes. In the months following, he continued to participate in and even led portions of the monthly meetings. In this example, the organization parlayed an individual service into a leadership development opportunity.

### Services as a Recruitment Tool

Providing individual services unrelated to workplace problems also became an entry point for immigrants to learn about workers’ rights and to get involved in the GLWC. One of the key GLWC volunteers, Kim, worked as a

staff attorney for the poverty law program at the local university. She recalled that workplace issues would surface in a variety of interactions and settings with her clients (who very often became members of the GLWC as a result of their interactions with her):

What was . . . very common was to be filling out, let's say, the application for someone for public benefits, and in that case you have to help them fill out the income information for their family, so, you know, they ask a lot of questions, about, the number of hours worked, and hourly wage, so then, you know, you would notice, like "Ok, let's say your husband's working in this establishment, and they're paying him six dollars an hour, which is a subminimum wage, and he's working 50 hours a week. You know, are you aware that the minimum wage is such-and-such, and overtime is such-and-such?" (Kim, volunteer/attorney)

In cases like this one, Kim provided the client with legal services (giving them information about the law and what they are owed, or assisting them with a legal claim), but she also talked with them about the GLWC and invited them to the next monthly meeting. The service was performed with an eye to teach the individual about her rights and address workers' isolation by involving them with the GLWC community.

### Addressing Community Needs and Priorities

Given the organization's expressed focus on workplace issues, why and how did the GLWC provide individual services for such a wide variety of problems? One explanation involves understanding the institutional context, and specifically, the enormous gap between the demand for services by Spanish-speakers and the capacity of existing institutions. Interviews with social service providers in the area revealed that the social service system was woefully inadequate in terms of meeting the needs of Spanish-speakers. In the face of this gap, and because the GLWC had attracted a large number of bilingual volunteers, it ended up providing more direct services and brokering help for individuals with outside organizations.<sup>21</sup>

The demand for Spanish-language services far exceeded the capacity of the existing community infrastructure. Although addressing the service gap for Spanish speakers was not part of the organization's expressed mission, the GLWC received many requests for help with nonworkplace issues. Members of the immigrant community were calling the GLWC with pressing concerns regarding public benefits, consumer issues, utility bills, and

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<sup>21</sup> These services included assisting members with consumer issues (utility bills, car insurance), translating documents from English to Spanish, calling a landlord or property manager for help with a housing issue, and legal services unrelated to work.

immigration. Individuals would often linger at the close of the monthly meeting to ask questions of volunteers who had more knowledge of community systems—questions like: Why were my children's food stamp benefits cut off? Can I get health insurance through the county health plan if I am undocumented? Where do my children get vaccinations? Even when volunteers lacked the specific knowledge to answer a question, they were often willing to research the answer or act as an intermediary. What mattered was that the GLWC had become a trusted organization among Spanish-speakers in the Great Lakes community: Immigrants were telling their family members and friends to call the GLWC with whatever issue—workplace related or not—and they were assured that their calls would be answered.<sup>22</sup>

A second factor that led the GLWC to provide more individual services over time relates to the issues generated by aggressive immigrant enforcement beginning in 2007. The crisis intensified in early 2008 when the state implemented a decision to require proof of legal status to get a driver's license or state identification card. Together, these conditions pulled the GLWC away from its original mission "to help [our community's] low-wage workers identify and advance their common interests . . . through organizing and collective action."<sup>23</sup> Although the GLWC continued to provide support around workplace issues, many more volunteer energy and resources were directed at preventing arrest and detention by ICE and helping people cope with the consequences of detainment and deportation of family members.

## EXPLORING CONSEQUENCES OF HYBRIDITY

The GLWC's experience reflects both struggle and possibility. Although the organization sought to maintain a social change focus through organizing, the political and institutional environment demanded a different balance of activities. First, the absence of a social service system capable of addressing the needs of Spanish-speakers meant that many GLWC members increasingly turned to the worker center for assistance with problems outside of the context of organizing around workplace issues. In addition, the dramatic rise in immigration enforcement made workers reluctant to take the additional risks necessary for organizing to be effective and created a human services crisis that ultimately overwhelmed the GLWC's ability to maintain its organizing

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<sup>22</sup> Although not the focus of this article, the issue of filling the service gaps also raised practical issues for GLWC leaders. Specifically, could the GLWC achieve a desirable balance of organizing and services in the given institutional environment? And then there were issues of competence: Although the GLWC may have been a trusted community resource, were volunteers providing high quality services to members?

<sup>23</sup> GLWC funding proposal, 2006a.

focus. This was not the intended balance of organizing and services according to the GLWC's mission, but this case suggests unanticipated benefits of combining the two approaches in response to uncertain environments. Using the lens of hybridity, this section synthesizes lessons of combining distinct but complementary elements and explores implications for practice.

### Benefits of Integrating Services and Organizing

Although GLWC leaders downplayed the role of services in their overall mission and operations, this analysis reveals ways that organizing perspectives can inform social services to support overall change goals. The following lessons suggest that a hybrid approach is consistent with empowerment perspectives, which emphasize the need to use the planned change process to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of clients (Gutiérrez, 1990). Specifically, it seems that the GLWC's approach to services (expressed in the types of services provided and the methods used to assist individuals) aimed to strengthen individual capacity and bring the community together for reflection and action on their common struggle.

*Services directed at meeting basic needs can enhance individual capacity for leadership.* In the case of the GLWC, services focused on providing individuals with tools (i.e., education, language) and support (i.e., serving as an interpreter, helping individuals navigate the social service system and access other resources) to address basic needs. The absence of institutional supports was often a significant barrier to immigrant worker participants' ability to focus on larger questions of workplace justice. Some services, such as assisting a parent in enrolling her child in Medicaid, provided relief from worry and created more space in that individual's life to consider taking on more responsibility in the organization. This lesson echoes findings from Brooks' (2005) study of ACORN's efforts to organize general relief welfare recipients in the late 1990s. The instability that characterized the lives of the recipients made it difficult for them to focus on organizing efforts. Brooks concluded that "if ACORN could help secure a benefit that stabilized a recipient's life, that individual would be more capable of getting involved in a workfare campaign" (p. 266). Neither Brooks nor I am suggesting a direct causal link between services and leadership. However, to the extent that mobilizing resources supports individual well-being and functioning, services may be necessary for creating the conditions for individual leadership development.<sup>24</sup>

*Services build trust with vulnerable populations.* Services also have instrumental benefits in terms of building relationships and trust—the

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<sup>24</sup> Synthesizing previous research on empowerment, Gutiérrez (1990) wrote that "Through advocacy and resource mobilization, the worker and client together ensure that the larger social structure provides what is necessary to empower the larger client group" (p. 152).

cornerstone of any organizing effort. Arturo Rodríguez, M.S.W. and President of the United Farm Workers explained that for excluded populations, services are a necessary part of empowerment. When asked directly about the role of providing services in organizing, he explained his approach and its rationale:

If somebody comes to you with a problem, I do something right away. Why? Because then they will be able to say, 'I trust this person. He's willing to take action' . . . You have to build trust with people. You're not going to get them to take risks if they don't trust you. (Personal communication, April 2011).

Drawing on over 4 decades of work with farmworkers, Rodríguez's comment reflects the possibility of using services to build rapport and demonstrate the trustworthiness of the organization. For communities excluded from, and mistrustful of, mainstream institutions, services provide a foundation for future work together. In the case of the GLWC, one sees several examples of how individual services strengthened an individual's relationship to the organization and increased the GLWC's credibility. Recall the example of Carlos, who was assisted by a GLWC volunteer in asking for vacation that he was owed. Following this successful interaction with his employer, he began to take on more leadership within the organization—first by sharing his story to the larger membership in the next monthly meeting, and later by facilitating different pieces of the monthly membership meetings.

*Services can be provided in ways to support overall organizing goals.* A final lesson has to do with how the GLWC provided services with a more or less explicit intention of building individual leadership and collective capacity. As stated previously, although the GLWC was admittedly a hybrid organization, its leaders had a reluctant relationship to providing services. Although I cannot know for sure, it is possible that this skeptical approach to services and desire to maintain an organizing orientation encouraged the GLWC to maintain social change focus even as it provided individual services to members. One of the first ways the GLWC provided a service was through education by developing and delivering ESL classes with a focus on workers' rights. This intervention was designed and implemented to increase individuals' ability to speak for themselves in resolving problems with their employers. Learning English and gaining the confidence and skills to negotiate workplace situations were part of individual empowerment. To that point, Salomé, one of the worker members, expressed that although once she relied on help interpreting in conversations with her boss, "now I don't have that problem because I learned English."

Another simple step in the GLWC approach to services aimed to reduce isolation by requiring individuals who wanted help with individual problems to attend the monthly meeting. Although seemingly small, this step reflected

the organization's commitment to building interpersonal power by helping individuals see their problems as part of a larger political and social struggle. Consistent with empowerment techniques, the GLWC encouraged conversation about the social structural origins of the oppressive conditions for low-wage immigrant workers. Individuals could receive help with individual problems (often before or after meetings, in conversation with volunteers), but the heart of the meeting involved putting workplace problems in a broader context and engaging in power analysis of the situation.

### Ongoing Tensions and Other Consequences of Hybridity

In this discussion, I have focused on the potential benefits of hybridity for the GLWC. Although emphasizing the complementarity of these approaches, I do not mean to suggest that the traditional tensions associated with combining organizing and services were eliminated. Within the ranks of the GLWC, leaders and volunteers expressed anxiety about the direction of the organization and specifically, concerns about its ability to maintain an organizing focus while attending to individual requests for assistance.<sup>25</sup> There was not always consensus: Although some volunteers embraced the idea of providing help to individual members, others viewed any individual service as an impediment to building power. These unresolved intraorganizational tensions mirror wider debates about whether social services undermine more transformative social change (Kivel, 2007).

A related, but often unexplored, issue is the question of how participants—in this case, workers—viewed the organization's orientation to services and organizing. In my interviews, workers were asked to comment on what the GLWC did well and what could be improved. In describing the strengths of the organization, they pointed both to benefits they had received as individuals (i.e., help resolving a specific problem at work or guidance in navigating outside systems, including social services) but also emphasized aspects of the organizing work that they viewed as beneficial (i.e., the social support function of the organization, the importance of monthly meetings, and the leadership skills they built through working with the GLWC).<sup>26</sup> In their critiques of the GLWC, workers often wished that there were more frequent meetings and greater attendance at meetings. These responses suggest that, unlike volunteers, who were preoccupied with achieving the right balance of organizing and services, the workers viewed and experienced the organization more holistically. These differences, although largely beyond

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<sup>25</sup> To some extent, this anxiety may have found its expression in hybridity—specifically, by motivating an ongoing emphasis on ongoing while providing services.

<sup>26</sup> For analytical purposes I have separated workers' comments into these categories, mapping roughly onto *services* or *organizing*. However, in the interviews, workers spoke about these activities with more fluidity, moving back and forth between examples.

the scope of this analysis, raise important questions about how the social location of workers and volunteers shaped their respective opinions about services and organizing.

In addition to these intraorganizational tensions, there are also questions about how the multifaceted identity of the GLWC may have influenced its legitimacy with and relationship to outside organizations. As argued by Minkoff (2002), hybridity can affect interorganizational relationships both positively (e.g., by expanding an organization's pool of potential funders) and negatively (e.g., by making it more difficult for an organization to achieve legitimacy in multiple sectors). My data do not speak directly to these possibilities. However, the precariousness of the GLWC—as evidenced by its almost constant struggle to raise money to hire a full-time staff person—raises related questions about hybridity and its implications for sustainability. It is reasonable to speculate as to whether the organization's hybrid approach created additional barriers in securing support. For example, did the GLWC's dual focus on providing services and organizing workers reduce the organization's legitimacy with funders or other supporters that may have been more inclined to support one or the other—but not both? In this case, these questions remain unanswered, but future research would benefit from exploring how worker centers, as examples of hybrid organizations, fare in the larger organizational ecosystem.

## CONCLUSION

Like the settlement houses and mutual aid societies of the 19th and 20th centuries, today's worker centers demonstrate the synergy between organizing and services. I have argued here that a hybrid model was particularly functional for the GLWC because of the environmental conditions facing its members—specifically, the absence of social services for recent immigrants and the aggressive immigration enforcement by federal authorities and local police. Although there are both benefits and drawbacks to hybrid models, this case suggests ways that services and organizing can inform each other to advance an overall social change agenda.

The growing ranks of worker centers—now estimated at over 200 in the United States—suggests that the benefits this model are being experienced more widely. Although worker centers constitute a newer organization form, they are blending familiar approaches to change in what has been called a “bricolage of organizational archetypes” (Fine, 2011, p. 607). Nationally recognized organizations such as the Restaurant Opportunities Center, Garment Workers' Center, and Domestic Workers United have developed a model that integrates services (e.g., job training, legal assistance, and language classes) with collective action through economic justice

campaigns, legislative advocacy, and impact litigation.<sup>27</sup> Together these activities contribute to the overall goal of improving the conditions for workers in their industries.

That hybridity has become a hallmark of worker centers also suggests that this model is particularly well suited to working with immigrant populations. In part, one can understand worker centers' approach—combining organizing and services—as a product of immigrant exclusion. Where labor unions have largely abandoned the struggles of low-wage workers, worker centers have stepped in to organize a population in need of support. As explained by Fine, worker centers have also “filled the vacuum” (2006, p. 38) left by mainstream social institutions: “Like the settlement houses that provided spaces for immigrants to come together and obtain services unavailable elsewhere, many worker centers today function as gathering places and matchmakers between service providers and low-wage immigrant workers” (2006, p. 39).

Importantly, this approach is yielding results, as illustrated by these examples: The Restaurant Opportunities Center ([rocunited.org](http://rocunited.org)), a worker center for restaurant workers with local affiliates in 10 cities, has documented widespread abuse in the restaurant industry and organized workers to win increased wages, millions of dollars of back pay, and other benefits from major employers (Jayaraman & Schlosser, 2013; [rocunited.org](http://rocunited.org)). Similarly, the Workers' Defense Project/Proyecto Defensa Laboral in Austin, Texas recovered \$1 million in back wages for over 1,100 workers and passed a statewide wage-theft law criminalizing nonpayment of wages by employers (Greenhouse, 2013; [workersdefense.org](http://workersdefense.org)). And in 2010, after a 10-year fight, the New York based Domestic Workers United (a worker center consisting of African, Caribbean, and Latina domestic workers) lobbied for and won legislation in New York State establishing basic protections for its members in the first ever Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights (Ten Eyck, 2010; [www.domesticworkers.org](http://www.domesticworkers.org)). These victories are exceptional, and most of the worker centers in the United States are much smaller in scale (Fine, 2006). However, the growing interest in worker centers by funders and traditional labor unions suggests that this model is here to stay and deserves more attention by scholars, organizers, and educators.

This analysis raises several issues and questions related to hybrid organizations, worker centers, and community practice with immigrants and other vulnerable populations. First, more research is needed on how worker centers experience and discuss the tensions between organizing and providing services. My analysis suggests that the tension is a productive one and can enhance the overall goals of the organization, but it is unclear how the

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<sup>27</sup> For more information on these organizations, see [rocunited.org](http://rocunited.org); [garmentworkercenter.org](http://garmentworkercenter.org); and [www.domesticworkers.org](http://www.domesticworkers.org).

staff, volunteers, and members view the hybrid orientation of worker centers. Future studies should examine how other worker centers navigate the tensions of hybridity: Do they embrace a hybrid organizational identity? Do they emphasize distinct aspects of their work to different degrees depending on the audience? And, as worker centers have grown in size and scope, do the traditional tensions persist?

As suggested in the analysis, there is also a need to involve workers in this conversation. How do members of worker centers view the organization's focus on organizing and services? How do race, ethnicity, immigrant status, class background, gender, age, and other factors shape the different perspectives on this issue? And when there are differences between workers' and organizers' views on the proper balance of services and organizing, how are these differences addressed? Arguably, bringing workers' insights into this conversation would both enhance understanding and support the leadership development and organizing agenda of worker centers.

Another area for research focuses on questions about competence in hybrid organizations. Specifically, if organizations experience tension around the role of services in their overall mission, what are the consequences for service delivery, and how can issues of competence be understood and addressed? This issue surfaced when GLWC volunteers expressed concerns about the quality of services being provided to individual members and their own (volunteers') ability to provide assistance with limited knowledge and training. This issue is not specific to worker centers but could arise in any area where members of marginalized communities turn to volunteers or lay helpers for assistance. Worker centers, however, provide a unique context for examining this issue.

As the current political economy produces new experiences of vulnerability and exclusion, community practice will benefit from exploring new and innovative approaches. Worker centers suggest one model for "linking goals of practice and humane social services with the strategy and tactics of achieving broader social change" (Withorn, 1984, p. 230). Although worker centers may be pioneers in the contemporary effort to unite organizing and services, these lessons are applicable to other contexts and communities beyond undocumented immigrants. People with felony convictions, internally displaced or stateless people, and the poor in general are denied access to basic supports and recognition. In providing services to these populations, how are social workers engaging them in the struggles for social action and reform? They can begin by taking steps to ensure that service provision is enhancing individual capacity and leadership, building relationships and trust with marginalized communities, and providing opportunities to engage with broader economic and social justice campaigns. Following the lead of worker centers, social workers should explore the potential synergy between organizing and services and start to see social services as a vehicle for leadership development and an opportunity to advance a wider social change agenda.

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