

**Awakening the Consciousness of the Labor Movement:
The Case of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers**

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PREFACE

I visited Immokalee, Florida for the first time in March 2003, through a seminar sponsored by the Center for Social Concerns at the University of Notre Dame. As a part of the seminar we had the opportunity to stay with migrant farmworker families and also pick tomatoes in the fields. As I was out in the fields, under 90+ degree weather, I mainly thought about my father and his family—having to work in the fields when they first immigrated to this country and not earning enough for a dignified life. Farmworkers provide the most important labor in our society and yet they are the worst paid and often toil under the worse working conditions. In Immokalee, we also had the opportunity to meet the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in their tiny office in the center of the town. I was amazed by all the work they were doing and I quickly became involved with the Taco Bell boycott they were leading by participating in actions and sharing my experience and what I knew about the boycott with other students.

It is important to mention that I write this thesis not just as an observer of the CIW, but as an active participant in the struggle for fair food that the CIW is leading. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire states that “No one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality. I cannot be in the world decontextualized, simply observing life.” After being conscious of the exploitation of workers that takes place in the fields of Immokalee and in many other places, I believe that we are left with a choice—do we (both farmworkers and consumers) commit to the struggle for justice or do farmworkers continue to let themselves be exploited and consumers continue to participate in the exploitation? We cannot remain neutral. And I

think it is important to mention that although I am objective in my analysis, I am also committed to the CIW's struggle for justice.

At Notre Dame I helped organize our "Boot the Bell" campaign to pressure the administration to cut our athletic sponsorship contract with the local Taco Bell franchisee. This school year I became more involved with the boycott and with the CIW when I was chosen to be on the Student Farmworker Alliance steering committee, which helps organize students to work in solidarity with the CIW and the campaign for fair food. In October, I participated in the Northwest Taco Bell Truth Tour as a translator and in March 2005, I again participated as a translator and speaker in the Taco Bell Truth Tour to Louisville, Kentucky. After graduation, I am heading to Immokalee to work with the Student Farmworker Alliance and Interfaith Action to work full-time with the CIW's struggle for farmworker justice and fair food.

I dedicate this thesis and all my work with the CIW to my father, Eliezer Gonzalez.

INTRODUCTION

On March 8, 2005 history was made. The 3-year national boycott against Taco Bell, led by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), ended after Taco Bell and its parent company, Yum Brands, agreed to meet the demands of the farmworkers who pick the tomatoes they use in their products. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers was demanding a one cent increase for every pound of tomatoes that Taco Bell buys to nearly double the salary of tomato pickers who had to pick 2 tons to earn \$50 and had been earning the same wages since 1978; a strict code of conduct that guarantees that there are no violations of human rights in the fields and obligates Taco Bell to cut contracts with companies who violate the code; and 3-way dialogue between Taco Bell/Yum, the tomato companies, and farmworkers to continue to improve wages and conditions for farmworkers and to put pressure on other corporations to take responsibility as well. The agreement is historic because never before had a small group of immigrant farmworkers been able to bring to the table a huge corporation like Taco Bell and Yum Brands, which is the largest fast food industry in the world. It also sets a tremendous precedent in the movement for fair food and corporate responsibility. The victory is also not just a victory for the farmworkers but for the social justice and labor movement as a whole.

Immokalee, which in Seminole means “my home,” is a migrant farmworker town in Southwest, Florida—a town that for many years did not exist on a map. Immokalee is considered the heart of Florida’s \$600 million tomato industry and the area is a major source of winter produce sold in the U.S. But more than a town, Immokalee is considered a labor reserve of Mexican, Central American, and Haitian workers. And according to a Justice Department official, Immokalee is also ground zero for modern-

day slavery¹. For many years, physical and verbal abuses were everyday occurrences in the fields of Immokalee. Wages are very low and workers often do not earn enough to pay for their rent at the end of the week. There are no benefits and most workers do not have a contract that guarantees them work the next day. In many ways, Immokalee is an employer's dream and a labor organizer's worst nightmare and this is probably why organizers have stayed away. But rather than wait for organizers to go to Immokalee to organize the workers, the workers have organized themselves and are forming a movement that no one expected.

Since 1993, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has taken on the challenge to organize Immokalee but this is not an easy task. There are several obstacles to organizing. The first is that farmworkers are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act passed in 1935, which guarantees workers in other sectors the right to collectively bargain and form a union. Some states, like California and Washington, have passed their own Labor Relations Acts to include farmworkers, but Florida still lags behind. A second obstacle is the high mobility of workers. Most of the workers are migrant farmworkers and therefore do not spend the entire year in Immokalee, leaving at different periods to follow the crops along the east coast or even the Midwest. And many other workers leave Immokalee entirely, lured by higher wages and more favorable working conditions in other industries. Ethnic and language divisions pose a third obstacle. Although the majority of the workers speak Spanish, for many, Spanish is not their first language and often they only speak an indigenous language, like Mixtec, Kanjobal, Quiche, Tzotzil, and others. The fourth obstacle is that a large proportion of Immokalee workers are

¹ Bowe, John. "Nobodies: Does slavery exist in America?" in *The New Yorker*. Issue: April 21 & 28, 2003. pp. 107-108.

undocumented. Although more and more organizers see undocumented workers as less of an obstacle, for many years this scared organizers. All of these obstacles are advantages to the employers in Florida, looking to lower their labor costs. The employers have taken advantage of these conditions paying sub-poverty wages and, in cases of slavery, not paying them anything.

Faced with this picture, the CIW's organizing in Immokalee has taken an innovative approach. Because many of the workers in the CIW experienced severe repression and exploitation, and some were organizers, in their home countries, the organizing process in Immokalee has drawn directly from the experience in communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, at the heart and soul of the CIW is popular education, which is very common in many social movements in Latin America and the Caribbean. By raising the consciousness of individuals and helping them become aware of their oppression, popular education aims to empower the poor and those who had been kept out of decision-making structures. It is not passive learning, in which a teacher supplies all the information, but rather collective learning towards action for social change. The motto of the Coalition, therefore, is "Consciousness + Commitment = Change."

Another tool of the CIW is leadership development, which is open to any and all the members. The primary goal is to constantly broaden the leadership base of the organization, especially because of the high turnover. The practical leadership of the organization is open and fluid, and is shared by any number of active, informed members. But although there is a practical leadership, there is no hierarchy like in most

organizations. Everyone has the opportunity to participate and contribute. And so, another motto of the CIW is “We are all leaders.”

In the absence of the traditional organizing tools available to most other workers in the U.S., the CIW has used powerful political actions to create a growing pressure on the agricultural industry to negotiate fundamental changes for farm labor. These actions also serve as an additional tool for building awareness and leadership within the movement. Some of the actions include three community-wide general strikes, a thirty-day hunger strike by six members of the CIW, a 2-week, 230-mile march across south and central Florida, and a national boycott of Taco Bell, a major buyer of tomatoes picked in Immokalee.

The CIW has gone from a few workers meeting in a room at a Church to nearly 3,000 members with their own rented office, and just recently, their own community center. But even more significantly, the CIW has been very successful at building allies throughout the country, from political leaders and writers, to church leaders and students, who are realizing that the struggle in Immokalee is not just the struggle of a few workers in an isolated town, but a struggle that involves all of us and requires action from all of us. An example of this is the “Boot the Bell” campaign, led by the Student Farmworker Alliance and students across the country, which has resulted in 22 college campuses cutting their contracts with Taco Bell. The University of Notre Dame joined the list of campuses August of 2004 when it decided not to renew its sponsorship contract with a local Taco Bell franchisee. The decision came about after students organized, demanding the contract be cut, through letters to the administration, a 7-day hunger strike by one student, and 1-3-day(s) hunger strikes by 150 students. Students at Notre Dame and

across the country are realizing that as students and consumers we have the responsibility to demand fair wages and conditions for the workers who help provide the food, clothing, and other products we consume.

The CIW has also been able to link its struggle to the emerging movement for global justice through a growing network with other movements around the county and world. Because many of the workers in Immokalee are there after being forced from their countries by economic and political conditions often linked to World Bank and IMF policies, it is very easy to make the connection with the global mobilizations for economic justice like those in Seattle, Washington, Genoa, and the World Social Forum. In the age of corporations, the CIW and the Taco Bell boycott are leading the way in the movement for fair food and socially responsible purchasing.

The purpose of this thesis is to highlight and analyze this non-traditional organizing model in the labor movement as expressed through the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. The first chapter, then, will take a closer look at the history, methods, and strategies of the CIW. Insight into the organization will be observed through the voices of the members of the CIW. Because it is the workers and their voices and stories that are leading the movement that the CIW has built, it is important that their voices are also the focus of my work. However, it is important to mention that most of the responses are translated responses. Nonetheless, they are the workers' voices and it is through their voices that one can better understand the methods and strategies of the CIW. The section on strategies and methods is broken down into 6 sections—consciousness-raising, popular education, leadership development, political action, allies, and organizational structure. The second chapter will look at some of the issues being

discussed in the current labor movement. This chapter will look at new trends and directions in unions. The last chapter will be an analysis of the relevance of the CIW's experience for the labor movement. This will be followed by the conclusion. At a time in history in which union membership is in decline, the CIW model is an important one to analyze and consider. The CIW can provide us with hope and insight into possible directions to strengthen the labor movement. The CIW's experience with participatory, democratic methods of education and organizing; its explicitly political orientation and growing network of ties to the merging movement for global justice; its proven record for developing dynamic, young immigrant leaders from today's working class; and the recent victory against the world's largest fast food industry, are all examples of the valuable contributions the CIW can provide to the labor movement. The goal is to ultimately find an alternative way of organizing that could incorporate the CIW's strengths, one that could ultimately define a new direction for the labor movement and the struggle for global justice.

CHAPTER I: History, Methods, and Strategies

1. The CIW's roots

In 1993, immigrant workers began meeting and organizing, sharing their organizing experience in grass-root movements in their home countries of Haiti, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. Using a small room in the local Catholic Church, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, about a dozen workers formed the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a community-based organization, to respond to the sub-poverty wages, violence, wage theft, poor working conditions, and modern-day slavery they encountered after leaving similar conditions in their home countries.

Greg Asbed, elected staff member of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers

In the early 90's, there was a confluence (by a sort of historical coincidence) of politically sophisticated, experienced immigrants to Immokalee, people who in one way or another had been participants in popular organizing efforts in their home countries. After the coup against President Aristide in Haiti in 1991, his supporters were forced into exile, causing the second significant wave of Haitian "boat people", though this time people who were much younger, and more politically active, than the first wave in the 80's (which was more of an economic exodus). Among them, in particular, were members and trained organizers of the same peasant movement I worked with in Haiti, the Peasant Movement of Papaye—a movement that had developed an extremely impressive practice of popular education.

At the same time, the immigration coming from Mexico was growing increasingly Southern and Indigenous, with a large and growing number of immigrants coming from Chiapas and Oaxaca, bringing with them a rich tradition and recent experience of organizing and fighting for human, and in particular, indigenous rights. That combination, together with Laura's (my wife) and my arrival in Immokalee (with our own training and experience in popular education techniques and popular organizing from overseas), and the presence of people in the Catholic Church at the time who were interested in organizing and willing to lend space to an organizing effort, allowed the first groupings of workers to meet and launch the process that would eventually grow into the CIW.

The organizing vision was one structurally and ideologically very similar to organizing efforts in the home countries of Immokalee's population (Haiti, Mexico, and Guatemala, in particular), i.e. a participatory, grassroots-led organization with a broad base of leadership built on a foundation of consciousness (“concientización” in Spanish) that would fight to protect and advance fundamental human rights in a community where poverty, violence, and slavery were common. The problem, as we saw it, was that those conditions were faced by each individual worker, alone—a fight that no one worker would ever win. Thus, the broadest goal of the organization was to unite the community in an effort to confront, with one unified strength, the forces responsible for its poverty, violence, and slavery.

Two of our founding mottoes, in keeping with that vision and overarching objective were: 1) Consciousness plus Commitment = Change (placing consciousness as the first ingredient to change, reflecting the nature of our approach), and 2) “Golpear a

uno es Golpear a Todos” (sort of an Immokalee-zation of the old International Workers of the World motto: "An injury to one is an injury to all").

The organizing process began with about a dozen people who came together, through various connections, to meet at the church about the possibility of undertaking a concerted organizing effort. Those early meetings led to an initial participatory investigation for about 1 month by about 30 workers, who went out into the community (at work, at the laundromat, sitting with friends) with the goal of listening to and provoking discussions about conditions in Immokalee and visions of change. From that investigation, we began a series of weekly community meetings (reflections based on drawings depicting the problems uncovered in the investigation, as well as videos) and started a process of week-long leadership development workshops/retreats with people who expressed interest in being active leaders in an organizing process.

That process had been going on for just under two years when one of the area's most important tomato growers—Pacific Land Co.—tried to cut picking wages yet further (they had been stagnant, and in fact falling in real terms, for years). Since our organizing had been largely under the radar, Pacific had no idea what kind of reaction its wage cut would spark. As word of the cut made its way around town, the fledgling organization was there to provide workers, finally, with a structure through which to give a unified voice to their opposition to the cut. And we did. After a series of emergency meetings at the church, with hundreds of workers, outside, at night, the plans were made and the first general strike in the history of Immokalee was launched, where several thousand workers stayed out of the fields, led by hundreds of organized workers who

called the strike and occupied the central parking lot in town (where workers had been picked up for work for decades without incident) for five days.

The result was that the wage cut was rescinded, wages across the board were raised to draw people back to the fields, and the CIW was born. Because the informal organizing process that had been going on at the Catholic Church space for nearly two years drew too much attention to the church during the strike (the church was called "strike central" in the Naples Daily News), they essentially asked us to make our own way in the world after that.

2. Methods and Strategies

This section will look closer at some of the methods and strategies of the CIW. Consciousness-raising is the first method that is discussed, followed by popular education, which is one of the mechanisms used to raise consciousness. Then we will look at leadership development, political action, allies, and organizational structure.

Consciousness + Commitment = Change

Before effective change can take place to bring justice to workers, the workers and allies must be committed to their struggle and ready to take action. But before anyone can commit to the struggle they must understand why they are in the struggle and why it is necessary for them to organize and fight for their rights. The process of consciousness-raising involves analyzing one's individual and group's position and conditions in society. Consciousness-raising gives the workers the opportunity to analyze their situation, while searching for innovative solutions. Who can better understand the

exploitation farmworkers face than the farmworkers themselves? Therefore, the CIW fights to construct its strength as a community organization under the premise of reflection and analysis². Gerardo Reyes Chavez, is a given example of how this process takes place. Gerardo is 27 years old and from Zacatecas, México. He is a farmworker and elected staff member of the CIW. He tells his story of coming to the United States without having any consciousness about his situation.

In the struggle to survive in your country, trying to not drown in the misery, what you do is that you are so ingrained in the work and in the struggle to survive that you never have the opportunity to learn anything different. Some people go to secondary school when they are lucky, but the majority only goes to primary school and the dream to keep studying ends there. So when I got here I did not know anything. I knew I was coming and I knew I wanted to work to offer a different future to be able to break that vicious cycle that encircles the majority of Mexicans and I wanted the opportunity to learn things. In this moment I did not know what I would learn so I began working picking tomatoes. I learned, though, after I was robbed.

While I was working picking tomatoes, the contractor who was also Mexican did not want to pay us, and after this we decided to go pick oranges. We would spend some days in the oranges and other in tomatoes. We didn't really have a clear job and we didn't know if we would be here very long in this work. So everything was up in the air. We began to work picking oranges with a contractor who knew workers in Chicago. Those workers were soon going to arrive and we were looking for a place to live—a trailer. The contractor knew about a trailer that was being fixed and was going to be rented. At this moment we were staying in his bus for about 3 or 4 days. When the

² CIW literature: “¿Quiénes somos?” (“Who are we?”)

workers arrived, the story with the Coalition began. By coincidence those workers had been victims of a case of slavery near Swamp Sanctuary. When they arrived we began talking to them but we were mistrustful because a lot of things had happened on the way to getting here, on the border, to get here, at work, many bad experiences so we did not trust anyone. We met them and we began to slowly break the ice. They told us their story and we talked more. We then had our lives over the table. We were creating our friendship. Then the story with the Coalition began because they had asked help from the Coalition because someone in the town knew about what the Coalition was doing. They took their slavery case to the courts and won. The bosses had them and many other Mexicans and Guatemalans in captivity. They started going to the Coalition when they got back from Chicago and began to invite us and then slowly we became familiarized and began to participate. We participated in a march of 230 miles, from Ft. Myers to Orlando. This was the first action I participated in that was demanding justice. It was an action with a political end. More than political, it was pressuring the politics of the agricultural companies of the tomato industry which is what is more widely produced here. And it was this way that I became involved. After this I participated in almost every activity, every march, every protest and I began to learn more about what the Coalition is about.

I think that the clearest example [of the process of consciousness-raising] is that first, of all the majority of the workers, about 90% of the workers are in this country, working alone, away from our families. So for someone who is in this country, what you search is to work and to be the least amount of time you can far away from the family and to return. I think that the process of raising consciousness is very important and it is

reflected when a person thinks about and analyzes his/her life and the future. You think differently. You don't only think about the "me" but the "us". When we are here there is an urgency to make money, to be able to have the resources to make changes back home. There is also an urgency to go back soon because there is a family that waits for you, children waiting, and it is difficult to be in a country that is not your country, that is unknown, where everything is different. If no one works to awaken this consciousness or animate the participation of people using methods that help you analyze your own situation, there is no possibility to fight against abuses. What we do sometimes is that we talk about the importance of being together. A person that has a consciousness about his/her situation but is alone is no one.

Francisca Cortez, 22, is from Oaxaca, México. She is a farmworker and elected staff member of the CIW.

The goal of the Coalition is basically, at the community level, to educate and raise the consciousness that there is a struggle because of the low wages, because there is a lot of new people who come and don't know anything. And so it is a constant struggle.

Greg Asbed

Consciousness is central to both our internal organizing and our organizing at the national level—much more so (especially internally) than in most organizing efforts I know. Most US organizing is only tangentially about consciousness—the Alinsky model, which is still the primary model in use in most of US organizing work, sees any change of consciousness as the by-product of organizing action, while the primary focus of the organizers and members of any organization is fixed on concrete, winnable

change. The CIW, on the other hand, due to a number of factors (both its organizing roots in popular education and organizing models from Latin America, and by virtue of the constant turnover in the Immokalee community forcing us to make political education the top priority at all times for the newest members of the community) places a very high premium on consciousness. The approach we take to promoting the boycott nationally—through our self-produced media, use of theater, art, etc.—respects the audience's capacity for developing a new awareness around the labor conditions behind their food and to join the campaign not as a supporter, but as an ally moved to take action to change their own landscape (i.e. university students using their power to re-define the environment over which they have control).

Consciousness-raising has a specific agenda and so it is important to mention what the content is. It involves a power analysis to understand differences in power—reflected in political power, wealth and income, etc.—and what forces keep some groups of people oppressed. Consciousness-raising is also more effective when it takes place collectively. It is as a group, or community, that workers can unite their common struggle and then find the strength in their numbers to take action against the forces that are oppressing them.

Popular Education

Popular Education is a tool or mechanism for developing consciousness, or conscientization. Popular Education has been around for many years, but scholars often associate it with the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator. Freire criticized traditional education which he calls the banking concept of education—the idea that an

educator simply makes “deposits” in the students. In this system, the teacher teaches the students and students are taught; the teacher knows everything and students know nothing; the teacher talks and the students listen; the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined. This system, according to Freire, is reflected in other parts of society and is used to avoid the threat of student *conscientização* (conscientizing). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire states, “The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students’ creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (Freire 54). Popular education, on the other hand, involves dialogue; all parties involved are teachers and students. In the case of social and revolutionary movements, Freire points out that revolutionary leaders cannot think *without* the people, nor *for* the people, but only *with* the people, and therefore all social and revolutionary movements must include the people who are oppressed. He states,

Denial of communion in the revolutionary process, avoidance of dialogue with the people under the pretext of organizing them, of strengthening revolutionary power, or of ensuring a united front, is really a fear of freedom. It is fear of or lack of faith in the people. But if the people cannot be trusted, there is no reason for liberation; in this case the revolution is not even carried out *for the people*, but “*by*” *the people for the leaders*: a complete self-negation. (Freire 110)

There is no single definition of popular education. John Hurst, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, however, defines popular education as, at root, the empowerment of adults through democratically structured cooperative study and action, directed toward achieving more just and peaceful societies within a life sustaining global environment. Its priority is ordinary people—the poor, the oppressed, those excluded from full participation in the political process, the disenfranchised people of the world—

who comprise the majority of the world's population. The Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research also at the University of California at Berkeley characterizes popular education according to three central themes. First, popular education is community education, aimed at empowering communities through cooperative study and action. Secondly, popular education is political education, with the goal of collective social change toward a more equitable and democratic society. Finally, popular education is people's education, traditionally aimed at those communities who are excluded or marginalized by dominant society³.

For Popular Education for People's Empowerment, Inc. (PEPE), a non-profit, non-governmental organization based in the Philippines, popular education is education for social change that challenges the traditional way of “teaching” people, an 'education' that makes them passive learners; one that silences them and makes them conform. Popular education also challenges attitudes and social structures that oppress people. PEPE believes that the aim of popular education is to empower the poor and those who have been left out of decision-making structures, by helping them become aware of their own oppression. In other words, it conscientizes people. It is collective learning towards action for social change⁴.

Sung-Sang Yoo, a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at UCLA, argues that in every society, there is an educational tradition for the purpose of making it a more democratic society. Such an educational practice pursues the bottom up, community-based, human-oriented, and face-to-face education. According to Yoo, in general, popular education is assumed to maintain a certain traditional history and

³ “The Popular Education News.” No. 4. April 2003. http://www.popednews.org/popular_education_news%20Apr%2003.htm

⁴ Popular Education for People's Empowerment. “What is Popular Education?” <http://www.pepe.org/subdir/poped.html>

identity, to transmit popular culture and knowledge into the next generation, to reveal the hidden unequal power relationship, and to try to resolve it⁵.

For the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, popular education is fundamental. The founders of the CIW and many members, in the past and now, have had backgrounds in popular education because of the popular movements they were involved with in their home countries. The word “Coalition” alone involves a sense of collectiveness; the kind of collectiveness needed to carry out popular education. When I asked Gerardo what the word meant to him, this was his response:

In Mexico I had never heard that word. So the first time I heard it, it sounded very weird. I knew the word “collision” existed, like when a car hits another. I thought about an alliance or fusion of different metals. So that was the first thing that crossed my mind when I heard someone say “We are going to the Coalition” so I didn’t think about much than that. So then I began thinking that it really was a type of fusion but not between metals but of thoughts, ideas, of struggle, of people fighting against injustice.

We use methods of popular education that basically come from where popular education comes from, which is Central America, southern Mexico, Guatemala, Haiti, and other parts of the Caribbean, where popular education has been used for generations as a way to learn about life and to create a stronger community. Sometimes we improvise situations and things that help us reflect. We do this always not thinking about the “I” but the “we”. What do we want to learn? Every time we do a dynamic is not to give a class to someone but to learn about the experience others already have within the people at the meetings each Wednesday. It is an exchange of experiences. It is

⁵ Yoo, Sung-Sang. “Characteristics of Popular Education.” <http://www.paulofreireinstitute.org/Documents/poped-definition.html>

not a class to see who knows more. It is a class where we all know and we all learn from everyone. We are all students and we are all teachers in a certain way. People understand the principle that we are all leaders. It is something that we don't always think about when we are accustomed to seeing bureaucracies within different systems, in services or the government which are managed through power structures.

We are using this other model that, like popular education, comes from Haiti and other countries in Central America. In Haiti, the members of an organization, like for example a group that defends the rights of cane workers, the workers in the organization are farmworkers and have their land and work the land. They don't live off what they would make from other places like if they were a union for example. They live off their land and they organize but they don't organize the community. They live off their work but they don't go to organize the workers but to organize with all the workers. So that is big difference. There is no one person dictating what will be done. It is true that there are always people who participate more and because they do so sometimes they know more or can more easily express the message they are taking to the media and other places. But in this case, with the Coalition, we all have the same values even if we don't have the same abilities. One way or another we all are all equally important.

The issue of all of us being leaders is something that is always applied. After understanding this if we apply it together it is also a big difference. It is not about individualism or thinking about the "I" because that is what one arrives (to this country) thinking. "I'm going"

What we do to awaken consciousness, which has to start somewhere, is that first between the most active members we do "formaciones" (formations), where we analyze where we are going with the movement, we analyze what has been done up to date,

because sometimes there are new members and this is a way to keep present what we have lived and so that the new members can see the bases we are at now, the platform we are at to see where we want to get to. Based on this, we think about different things to animate participation but also to awaken consciousness and this is something that is applied to everything we do. We sometimes go house to house. We talk about different struggles that have occurred in this country and other places in the world. We talk about life examples as workers. We also do theatre, improvised among us and with the participation of members. It is something that is born there, at the moment; it is born and made there. The message is taken by the members that are arriving to other members. With the help of members that have been more involved, but it is made with everyone. We also use tools like drawings and sayings that are used in our countries. Through that we make analysis and comparisons like through a drawing that represents differences in power or that reflects an abuse towards a farmworker, or that shows the chain of exploitation of farmworkers like the contractor on top, the companies on top of the contractor, and the big corporations on top of the rancher. It is a chain based on the worker. We use these examples always to start this analysis between all of us, this interchange of thoughts, to at the same time have these types of reflections wherever we are at. This is how consciousness is born, when we do not know anything about any movement and you listen to something like this, it puts you in a position where you can't think about yourself and just surviving because there is something different, there is something that has to do directly with the future we come seeking.

Lucas Benitez, 28, from Guerrero, México. He is a farmworker and elected staff member of the CIW.

We use the method of popular education to tie us to all the different communities that exist in Immokalee. It's a method strongly rooted in Mexico, Guatemala, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, which is based on the need to raise consciousness. Though the workers from these regions who come to Immokalee are newly arrived, they recognize that these are the same methods of organization that existed in their country. They identify with them and see that, though their situation may be changed, they must become leaders in this new situation too. It may be a slow method in terms of raising consciousness, but it's a lasting one, and creates changes that will not disappear. It's been embraced by the grassroots and by the community.

The people who originally formed the Coalition consisted of people who used these [popular education] techniques [like movies, popular theater, and drawings] in rural organizations in Haiti, Mexico and Guatemala. They decided they had to use them in this new environment in order to find solutions to the problems of the Immokalee farmworker community.

Francisca Cortez

[The Coalition is] an organization where we all have the right to participate and be leaders in the organization. There isn't anyone who is more than another and so we also use the saying that "you are the student and I am the teacher and then I am the student and you are the teacher." And so we learn from each other. What one doesn't know, somebody else knows. And this is how the organization is managed. Basically, it is a door for all the people that want to bring their experiences from their countries. It is an open door for everyone to bring their practices and experiences and ideas so that something is done.

There are various methods [for carrying out popular education], depending on the knowledge of each person. Many people can't read or write, but they understand when they listen. We use drawings and videos. We have conversations. There are meetings in different languages because it is community of different languages. Even though the majority understands Spanish, many times it is difficult. But there are also all types of people in the organization and if they don't understand, we translate in their language.

Marcelino Sanchez, from Chiapas, México, is a farmworker and member of the CIW

Between all of us we are stronger. We do a web, with everyone holding it. If someone lets go of one end, it weakens and no longer has the same strength. By all of us participating, the Coalition is stronger. We do many examples (to help us analyze our situation). For example, a big person cannot be carried by another person alone. If another comes, they still can't lift him but between many they can. Another example involves chairs. A big group sits all bunched together. Then there is someone else sitting and even has 4 chairs to himself and is sleeping. He represents the grower. The poor are all bunched up together. The ideas for the dynamics come from all the workers and the staff. We talk about the meetings and what to do in them. We know there are new members so we do different dynamics to represent our situation as workers. The dynamics are directed between all of us. There is no single person directing. Everyone has the right to give their opinions.

Leadership Development

The CIW has many challenges when it comes to leadership development. The workers are highly mobile. Being an immigrant can also be seen as a challenge because you are not in your home country where you have a better understanding of the

structures. But, nonetheless, the CIW has been successful at developing strong leaders and remaining worker-led movement. Because we live in a society where we are accustomed to having a leadership, it is inevitable that some people in the CIW are viewed as “the leaders.” Some of these workers have been working with the CIW for a longer period and so they have more experience. But more than leaders, per se, they are inspirational guides or “animators”. The CIW is committed to a non-hierarchical structure where “Todos Somos Líderes” or “We are All Leaders.”

Lucas Benitez

We are rooted in the concept that we are worker-led. Each and every one of us is a leader, and we have to have ties, deep roots in the community.

Romeo Ramirez is a farmworker and elected staff member of the CIW.

The Coalition is based on the philosophy that it is from the people, for the people and that we are all leaders. It is different from other movements because in our movement for dignity, respect, and just wages it is the workers who are in the struggle and it is their voices leading the movement.

Francisca Cortez

As a community organization and not a union, the Coalition is different from unions in that unions are always looking for professionals whose profession is to organize the people and are always saying, “I am organizing.” On the other hand, we, the Coalition, every person has the opportunity to put their own thoughts to work and we are all organizing together.

Marcelino Sanchez

Here we don't distinguish races or anyone. We are all equals. We are all human beings. Anyone who gives an opinion; it's a good one. We respect everyone. We don't have hierarchies. In other organizations, the only one that counts is the leader. They don't take into account the opinions of others. Here it is beautiful because often there are good ideas that come out. Every person has the opportunity to let out what they are thinking and feeling. We respect them. We are all equals.

Rolando Sales, 24, is from Guatemala. He is a farmworker and elected staff member of the CIW.

The staff in the office, we don't decide the plans. The members meet every Wednesday and we talk about different issues and they take part in the decision-making process. We make an agenda, between all of us, of what we can do and how to resolve a problem. Nobody is the leader; we are all leaders. We all realize a job when we need to.

Gerardo Reyes Chavez

The Coalition is different from a union because there are no differences in power. We are an organization where we don't have one leader. No one is boss or director of the organization. We all do everything. We have a principle in the watermelon cooperative that says, "equal salary for equal work". Our pay is based on what any worker in the fields would make and we have no benefits. We choose this as our way of organizing.

We have several principles and philosophies about the issue of leadership. We do not search for leaders. We are not leaders either. We believe and know that each person is their own leader and that when this principle is understood and it is applied against injustice but when everyone is united is really when the power is in the people, in the community. One example of popular education we do sometimes to demonstrate this idea

is that we do a dynamic where we take some sticks and we take one and break it. The dynamic is about breaking one stick and then putting 3 sticks together and have someone come and break them, and then another. Then you put a stick for every person in the room or as many as you want and you invite someone to come and try to break them and then more people but they can't. With this we have a reflection about being a leader. What does it mean for us to be a leader for us? Being a leader does not mean knowing everything. We do not follow the lines of having one person with all the power or that represents a community. We follow a line that basically is connected to the line of each person where all of us can become involved how ever we can. When we do this example we think "this is a leader" and lets see what happens with one leader, it breaks. We then start a discussion. We put together 3 people who were leaders and what happened to them, they broke as well. With more work, but they broke. What happened when we put all of them together and everyone was in this bunch of sticks? They were not broken because when one learns that to make changes this does not live in one person but in everyone and this is when we really have the strength to change things and only by remaining together can we change things.

Political Action

In *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said,

“You may well ask, “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc? Isn't negotiation a better path?” You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored.”

From the beginning, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has not been afraid to use strong political actions to demand for their rights by dramatizing the situation so that it is not longer ignored. The “Consciousness + Commitment = Change” campaign was launched on October 1997, although there were some actions that had already taken place before 1997. The idea behind the campaign is that once the consciousness of the community has been awakened, the next step is to commit to the struggle and take action, which eventually will lead to change. The actions, though, have to be a part of a collective effort. One of the first major actions was a march to the home of a contractor who had beaten a worker for trying to drink water while he was picking in the fields. 500 workers marched to his house, carrying the worker’s shirt which was covered in blood. That day they made a declaration: “*Golpear a uno, es golpear a todos*” (“Beating one of us meant beating all of us”). This action launched the CIW’s anti-slavery campaign which since then has helped to free over 1000 slaves. The campaign is an innovative way, from the labor base, to eliminate modern-day slavery in the fields. Modern-day slavery is often based on debt-bondages. Workers in these conditions are forced to work against their will in isolated labor camps and guarded 24 hours a day by armed guards. They receive little to no pay and suffer extreme physical violence. The CIW aided the Department of Justice and the FBI in 5 cases by going undercover to obtain the evidence necessary. Through this campaign, the CIW has also raised awareness about these brutal conditions, whose roots lie in the sub-poverty wages that exist in the agriculture industry.

This first general strike took place in 1995 and the second strike was in 1997. Over 3,000 workers did not go pick in the fields for about a week. In 1998, six CIW

members went on a 30-day hunger strike, receiving strong public attention. Religious leaders tried to intervene to make the workers stop. As a result of the hunger strike, one tomato company increased their wage rate to five more cents per bucket.

In 2000, the CIW took their struggle outside of Immokalee by leading a 230-mile march from Ft. Myers to Orlando, Florida. Immokalee, which for many years had been lost and forgotten, was finally being recognized. For the first time, consumers were seeing the faces and hands of the workers behind the products they eat every day. The result of these actions since 1997 was a 25% wage increase to 450 workers which later extended to thousands more workers after Governor Jeb Bush intervened.

In 2001, a new phase began for the CIW. They took their struggle outside of Immokalee and Florida to the entire country by launching a national boycott of Taco Bell, one of the major buyers of tomatoes picked in Florida and along the East Coast. Taco Bell is a part of Yum! Brands, which is also the parent company of Pizza Hut, Long John Silvers, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and A&W. Together they have a purchasing cooperative, the United Food Purchasing Cooperative, whose goal is to find the cheapest price possible for the raw products they use. By demanding cheap tomatoes, Taco Bell and Yum! Brands benefit from the exploitation of farmworkers, which is reflected in sub-poverty wages, lack of benefits and protections, and modern-day slavery. In the same way that they can demand cheap, fresh, and juicy tomatoes, they have the power to demand that the tomatoes they buy do not come from “sweatshop” or slavery conditions.

In 2002, the CIW led a Taco Bell Truth Tour across the country to the Taco Bell headquarters in Irvine, CA, stopping along the way to speak to faith-based communities, students, and consumers. When they got to Irvine, CA, over 50 workers and allies

participated in a 10-day hunger strike. Taco Bell ignored the CIW's demands, claiming that they had no responsibility for workers that they did not directly employ and that they were being targeted unfairly.

The CIW continued to organize mini tours across the country and national tours each year after 2002. Students began to organize and formed the Student Farmworker Alliance (SFA), which launched the "Fair Food Friday" campaign, in which students protested at the local Taco Bell on Fridays, and the "Boot the Bell" campaign, in which students mobilized their campuses to cut contracts with Taco Bell or prevent a Taco Bell from being placed on their campus. Churches also continued to put pressure by sending letters and calling Taco Bell and Yum! executives. In 2003, Taco Bell finally agreed to meet with the CIW and the Presbyterian Church was present as the third party. While negotiations took place, though, the pressure from the CIW and allies continued to build momentum. In 2004, the Taco Bell Truth Tour made an important stop in Louisville, KY, home of Yum! Brands, where the CIW and allies participated in an 8-mile march and action outside of the Yum! headquarters. In California, the CIW and allies did a 44-mile march from East Los Angeles to Irvine.

By the end of 2004, the mood had changed. Taco Bell and Yum! had finally acknowledged that they were responsible for the conditions of the workers at the bottom of their production chain, but they were still not prepared to meet the demands. However, in 2005, as the CIW was getting ready for the fourth Taco Bell Truth Tour, they were ready to meet again and discuss their course of action. Half-way through the 2-week Taco Bell Truth Tour, an agreement was signed between Taco Bell/ Yum! and the

CIW in which Taco Bell agreed to meet the three demands and the CIW agreed to end the boycott.

The boycott proved to be an effective political tool even though in the beginning and even along the way, there were many who were skeptical, including close allies of the CIW. Many argued that it was better to target legislation than corporations like Taco Bell. But in our day, corporations have proven to have more power than the government in many ways. It is the large corporations that benefit the most from low wages and exploitation and because they have so much power, it is their responsibility to change these conditions. Taco Bell has acknowledged that and will now serve as a leader and example for all other corporations. The workers picking tomatoes for companies that Taco Bell buys from will benefit from higher wages and better working conditions. But in order for this to benefit all farmworkers, the change needs to be industry-wide and so other fast food and supermarket corporations need to be involved as well. The victory in this battle, though, will lead the way in the movement for fair food and corporate responsibility.

Allies

From the size of Immokalee, it can be difficult to believe how many people and organizations across the country have heard of this place and more importantly, are participating in the struggle the Coalition of Immokalee Workers is leading. The diversity among the people and organizations is even more impressive. The Coalition counts on the support of people from different walks of life and from all points on the political spectrum—from the most leftist, Rage Against the Machine-listening youth to

right-wing conservatives. Students and people of faith played a critical role in the Taco Bell boycott.

In the religious community, the Presbyterian Church was the first denomination to support the Coalition by endorsing the Taco Bell boycott. Other religious endorsers include the National Council of Churches, Pax Christi USA, United Methodist Church, Alliance of Baptist Churches, United Church of Christ, and many others. Religious leaders actively participated through presentations to their congregations about working conditions in Immokalee and the Taco Bell boycott. In January of this year, 2005, the Coalition, together with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami, Disciples Home Missions of the Christian Church, the Peace and Justice Office of the Diocese of Venice, Interfaith Action of Southwest Florida, the National Council of Churches of Christ, National Farm Worker Ministry, Pax Christi USA, the Presbyterian Church USA, the School of Theology and the University of the Poor, the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, the United Methodist Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, and St. Thomas University, put together the first-ever symposium to celebrate the legacy and teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King in Immokalee. The symposium, “Human Rights and the Struggle for Fair Food: Making Dr. King’s Dream our Reality”, brought together over 200 people of different faiths, from across the country, to Immokalee to learn about the struggle in Immokalee and the Taco Bell boycott, share what their congregations are already doing to support and strategize about how to continue to take the message of the struggle to others to mobilize them to take action.

Students, especially college students, have in many ways played the most important role in the struggle. This is mainly because young people are Taco Bell's target market. Students across the country have organized trips to Immokalee to see first-hand the working and living conditions, protests at their local Taco Bells, and campaigns to get rid of Taco Bells or contracts with Taco Bell on their campuses. The first university to close a Taco Bell restaurant because of the boycott was the University of Chicago, after students organized not only the students on campus but also community members to pressure the university's administration to cut their contract. In only 3 years, 22 universities closed Taco Bell restaurants, cut contracts, or prevented a business relationship with Taco Bell.

One of the tools students have used in their organizing has been the Student Farmworker Alliance, a network of students across the country organizing "Boot the Bell" campaigns. Student Farmworker Alliance, SFA, was born in Immokalee after the need for more strategic student organizing was evident. SFA works closely and in solidarity with the Coalition, and also shares office space. The solidarity work of SFA is achieved through two initiatives: Education and Action. The first initiative deals with raising awareness about the plight of farmworkers. Organizers lead various educational activities and create opportunities for students and farmworkers to come together in an exchange of knowledge and experience. Specifically, this initiative includes such activities as worker/student-led workshops, alternative spring breaks in farmworker communities, internships with farmworker organizations, and film festivals. Through education, organizers gradually build a larger base of activists whose knowledge of injustice in the fields of the U.S. leads them to act in solidarity with farmworkers. In turn,

this base of supporters continues to educate their local communities about the reality of farm work. Students and youth then seek opportunities to work side-by-side with farmworkers towards the democratization of agricultural labor relations. This includes joining farmworker-led actions, organizing for better working and living conditions in farm work, engaging in research projects aimed at empowering farmworker communities, and working towards policies of sweat-free cafeterias and restaurants on our campuses.

The CIW has also developed strong relationships with other community and labor organizations. The United Farm Workers and PCUN (Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste) have both endorsed the Taco Bell boycott, as well as The Garment Workers Center in Los Angeles, South Florida Jobs with Justice, and other labor rights organizations. The CIW also counts on the support of writers like Eric Schlosser (author, "Fast Food Nation"), musicians like Bonnie Raitt, political leaders like Congresswoman Linda Sanchez, actors like Martin Sheen, and educators like Noam Chomsky.

Marcelino Sanchez

I believe that the Coalition is well-known and has the support of many other organizations, students, people of faith, Catholics and non-Catholics. It is well-known. This makes us feel stronger. It gives us valor to know that we will win our struggle and what we are asking for.

Organizational Structure

Francisca Cortez

At this moment we have almost 3,000 members. Any person can be a part of the organization. Being a member means that you take responsibility in the movement, participating and putting your ideas to practice together with the ideas of the others. Being a member does not just mean, "I am with the Coalition and the Coalition defends me." When you get the card, which has all that is necessary, your picture, your data and that you belong to an organization, the card is not valid if you don't give it value. So it is us giving our own value to the card because the economic value of the card is \$5 for a year and a half but it is worth nothing if you don't understand the organization. The cost of the card is basically to print it and for the plastic. There is not other cost. There are no benefits for being a member, like unions that have benefits. Every person gives the card their own value and this is the benefit the card has. Anywhere you work and you work with other people, they can ask you what the Coalition is, and if you don't know and you only went to get your card, you are not going to know what is going on.

Many members that have the cards and have gone to other places, like North Carolina, South Carolina, or Virginia, many times they call us at the office or during the Wednesday meetings and they tell us, "The card served me for this: they didn't want us to go to lunch or rest and we used the card and they told us, "no problem, rest or eat". They also use it to cash their own checks without the CIW staff having to be there to help them. As staff, we are the ones working in the office but we are nothing without the community. And so they themselves utilize the card in that way.

The board of directors and staff are named by the community. The board of directors is made up of people who are more stable in Immokalee and have been there longer and know the community. The members of the staff are named by the community

during the general assembly, which is done once a year. This is how we are named. Every year the idea is brought up to the community again and the community decides if you stay or leave. The community decides because they see what you do and if they see there are no advances or whatever they can say that they need to choose someone else, that you are not the right person. But since we started no one has said that anyone has to leave because they know we are working with their ideas and without them the staff is nothing. Even though sometimes, we, the staff, make decisions but they come from the community and what they decide. When we are doing the big actions, there are a lot of ideas and all the ideas are placed in the table and we look at what we are going to do and why and that's how it's done. If we take action on our own, the members will not participate because they do not agree with that and when they decide what is going to be done they have to be there to participate.

Gerardo Reyes Chavez

To be a part of the staff, we have a general assembly every year. They are chosen by the Coalition, not by other members of the staff. In some cases, it is decided to hire someone if there is a lot of work but it is still something that has to pass through the general assembly so it only a provisional decision. If the general assembly says no then that person is removed from the staff. That has only happened once because of the urgency with all the work upon us and the general assembly was still far away. The assembly voted and was in agreement. Every member of the staff receives the salary they would receive picking tomatoes, which is basically a misery. It is something that the Coalition has adopted as a model because if you want to change a situation in which you are not in then it doesn't make sense. It is like someone coming in with a lot of

knowledge and with a studied methodology, and a salary and privilege that no one else will have. And this goes against the idea that we are all leaders because the leader is not the one who knows everything, who has a higher position, the leader is the one who is in the situation and that is living in and still after being in that situation fights with everyone else. It is something completely different and I don't think or know other organizations in this country that do this. Our salary is based on what a worker makes in the fields and this is something that was agreed in the general assembly. None of us have health insurance either. None of us have paid vacations or any kind of benefits like overtime and we always work about 7 days. And this is something that makes the difference because thanks to that each year we can cut our expenses with the simple fact that we do not receive wages that in other places people receive 30-60,000 per year. By not paying ourselves that or benefits, we take that and use it as a weapon to be able to do national tours for up to 15 days with 100 workers. That is about sharing this idea that we are all leaders. There is no difference between one worker who works picking tomatoes and someone who is working to take the message outside of Immokalee or within Immokalee with the new people.

Strategy for truth tours is formulated by the staff. They set times according to the schedules of students, workers, allies. It's a question of timing. The workers decide the actions that will be done. These ideas are shared with allies to get feedback from them and to strategize in their communities.

We are 8 staff members right now. We each have our own abilities and this is how we function. There is no boss saying, "You are going to do this, you are going to do that." Everything is done through meetings. We get together and talk about what needs

to be done. Each person thinks of where they believe they will be more effective, where they want to work or dedicate more time. This is how, for example, Mathie talks to the Haitian community and spends the majority of his time in the cooperative [a store inside the CIW's office]. The cooperative is part of the connection with the community because it is always open and people come because they know it is an organization and they know that what is done with the cooperative is to reduce the prices which are so high in Immokalee in the different stores. It is a way that each member can benefit because they are saving a bit more. I am, for example, working with Max on the radio, and so is Romeo. Between all of us we do a little of everything and when we have little time we focus on different things where we each have a particular role.

The General Assembly is something that is done once a year and is done based on how the season is going. Everyone is welcome to the Coalition even if they are not members. If some abuse is going on we are there, not to give service because we are not an organization that gives services but to together with the workers that is being abused search for a solution and follow this process with the worker so that he realized that there are ways to defend yourself because an abuse can present itself again. It is not like going to Legal Aid and having them take your case and then tell you they will call you later. This is not attacking the root of the problem. Perhaps this solves the problem but it does not give the worker the opportunity to do it for himself. It is like the saying in the bible about giving fish for someone for a day, which is good because hunger is tough, but if you teach them to fish their own food then they will no longer need someone else to give them fish.

The general assembly includes all the members of the Coalition. In fact, it is the only meeting of all the meetings, where it is a requirement to be a member of the Coalition because the decisions that will be made have to be made by members who are people who have been in the organization and know how the process is managed and the importance of their voice in the decision-making. When a worker doesn't know too much about the Coalition, their vote is outside of the square that has to do with the struggle and that is why it is a requirement. It is the only meeting where you do have to have a membership card.

The formations [strategy meetings] depend on the moment we are at. In them we discuss a little bit of everything, from things being done in the work of the Coalition, from everyday things like how we take the message to people, how we charge something, how we understand a law proposed or things coming from different angles, or more complicated things like how we develop our philosophy and how we can deepen in our principle that consciousness plus commitment equals change, comparing this with everything that has been part of the journey marking the boycott or the struggle of the Coalition since its beginning. To understand this, it takes time, but it is important. These are some examples. Some formations are more about analysis than planning. Others are about planning; others about learning something new—they are like classes we are all following. In other formations it is about making the connection with new workers and the ones we have been participating longer. In others it is about making our connection to religious people and people in universities to make strategies together. The majority of the time there is analysis. All of the strategies we do and the way we carry them out come from the formations. We try to have one every month but sometimes they are

farther apart when there is a lot of work. When we don't have a lot of work they are done every 2 or 3 weeks.

Formations take place in Wednesday meetings, protests, events, within the community and in other states. Any worker can participate, whether they are members or not. In fact, many of the members that don't have their official card, they are like members and they consider themselves and we respect this but we always motivate everyone to have their card. In the case of the general assembly, we let them know ahead of time, in every meeting, that if they want to participate, they can, but they have to get their membership card. To get your card, you have to go to 2 meetings. In the first, you listen to what is being talked about...different themes, but they all have to do with workers, you also learn a bit about what the organization does. You sign up and then you go before the next meeting to take your picture and give your data information and at the next Wednesday meeting, after the meeting you get your card. That is a guarantee that every member that has a card has heard at least 4 hours, which is not a long but a good beginning, about what the Coalition is. It is also something that the general assembly decided for this process to be like this.

Decision-making in the Coalition depends on the type of decision. If it is a decision about where are we going with the struggle, what is the next step, then it is something that all the members that have been there and want to be there decide. If it is a decision about other issues like the new center, it is a decision that is communicated in the Wednesday meetings to get feedback and based on that we decide if we do it or keep exploring it. We look for a way that the idea is clear before anything is decided. We also make decisions through the board of directors. This board is basically a

requirement to be a non-profit organization and there is a president, secretary, so forth. This is a requirement for applying for funds. This is something they ask for because they are accustomed to power structures and structures of hierarchy. For us, it is simply members that are on the board but understand all the principles of the Coalition and there are no differences of power. Things are decided by the board that is made up of workers. There is always someone from the staff that is there to present what is going on or the decision that needs to be made, or analyzing. The board is where everything that is happening in the movement is kept. They always know what is going on and they vote when something needs to be decided. When a new person is hired to be a part of the staff, there are understandings about having to be a farmworker to be on the staff and that the salary will be the same as a worker and that you will not be a leader but will be working with many for the same end. The board of directors can say if they are in agreement and then this is presented to the general assembly. They can say they agree, or not, or that they are not ready to make a decision.

The Coalition is different from a labor union because there are no differences in power. We are an organization where we don't have one leader. No one is boss or director of the organization. We all do everything. We have a principle in the watermelon cooperative⁶ that says, "Equal salary for equal work". Our pay is based on what any worker in the fields would make and we have no benefits. We choose this as our way of organizing.

Lucas Benitez

⁶ Some of the members and staff of the CIW work in a watermelon cooperative during the summer.

We're not a top-down organization. All (of our actions) really depend on the rank and file, the grassroots, so in that sense, perhaps, that's our identity. Where we differ from many unions is in that we operate from a basis of constant political education of our members which facilitates participation. We also take on community issues, like housing or police misconduct, as an integral part of our work. These are probably the two most important distinctions.

Gerardo Reyes Chavez

The major reason (why we chose this model of organizing) is because we are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act. We have transformed these limitations into virtues. If we were a union we could not declare a boycott against a corporation or company that we don't work for directly. We could ask other people to boycott them. But when we have the ability to take the streets ourselves and give presentations ourselves so that people hear our stories from our voices, then that makes a huge difference. So in a sense, the fact that we are not a union, at this moment, has taken us to a different level. If we were a union we would have already brought all the agricultural companies to the table, but the idea that it is the corporations that benefit the most from this would have just ended as an "idea". At this moment we are in the national spectrum, because it's not just about changing the agriculture industry, but also the way corporations do business, and the consciousness of consumers. If we were a union, we probably would have already won several battles within the agriculture industry. But since we are not, we are winning an even greater battle by awakening the consciousness. And the result that we hope for in the end is a most just wage that makes possible the business of these corporations who give all their work. And this would bring about systemic change.

I think that in the time that we are living we have to do things outside of the traditional because things are not like they use to be. For example, unions have a lot of power, a lot of economic and political power, and their voice carries a lot of weight. But as unions have grown, one thing that didn't exist before was the existence of large corporations and the power that they have. And so now the way that we play this game has to be different—it has to be alternative and effective.

CHAPTER II: The Labor Movement

Background

The United States labor movement has faced tremendous challenges in the past 30 years. Union membership has declined and the labor movement as a whole does not have the same political power it once possessed. As Dan Clawson states in *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*, “For more than a quarter-century unions have declined steeply, in numbers, power, public perception, and cultural appeal.” (Clawson 14). Only about 13.5% of the labor force is unionized and of those, less than 10% are workers in the private sector (Clawson 1). Many workers in the U.S. have become skeptical of unions and there are many actors that are purposely aiming to discourage workers from unionizing, including large corporations and even the government. Despite the attacks on labor, though, there have been some victories and people across the country continue to organize and work towards building a strong labor movement. The question, though, is how to build that movement? What strategies should be implemented? In this chapter I will provide a bit of background on the current state of the labor movement as a whole and this will be followed by some of the issues and ideas being addressed in the labor movement debate.

An important attack against the labor movement and unions came in 1947 when the Taft-Hartley Act was passed. The act established control of labor disputes on a new basis by enlarging the National Labor Relations Board and providing that the union or the employer must, before terminating a collective-bargaining agreement, serve notice on the other party and on a government mediation service. The government was also empowered to obtain an 80-day injunction against any strike that it deemed a threat to national health or safety. The act also prohibited jurisdictional strikes (disputes between two unions over

which should act as the bargaining agent for the employees) and secondary boycotts (boycott against a company doing business with another company that a union is trying to organize), declared that it did not extend protection to workers on wildcat strikes, outlawed the closed shop, and permitted the union shop only on a vote of a majority of the employees.⁷ As Michael H. LeRoy and John H. Johnson IV, University of Illinois professors of labor and industrial relations said in an article, "Taft-Hartley injunctions lowered public support for unions by portraying them as selfish economic actors who were harmful to the nation and altered the balance of bargaining power in critical strikes, usually to the detriment of unions."⁸ The Taft-Hartley Act has also been accompanied by union-busting initiatives by employers and large corporations; from interrogating workers and showing anti-union videos, to firing union supporters. Several states have also passed "Right to Work" laws that make it more difficult for workers to form a union because workers are not required to join or pay union fees even if they benefit from the union contract.

Our global economy has also changed dramatically to give more economic and political power to large multi-national corporations. Corporations seeking to increase their profits can go to countries where they can pay very low wages and have fewer labor rights and environmental rights restrictions. Workers who organize a union in their workplace run the risk of being fired, especially if they are in a "Right to Work" state, and even having their work place move to another country.

⁷ "Taft-Hartley Labor Act." *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. Copyright © 2005, Columbia University Press.

⁸ Reutter, Mark. "Taft-Hartley Strike-breaking Power a Political Anachronism." *News Bureau*. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. September 1, 2000.

Because our global economy has changed, many unions also changed to adapt to the economic structure instead of challenging it. Encouraged by U.S. labor institutional arrangements, business unionism emerged. The responsibility of union leaders in business unions is to improve the workers' material conditions, provide services to dues-paying members, and use the political process only to protect their members' jobs and economic well-being. The responsibility of members is to pay dues, and to strike when strikes are authorized. Most of the time, these unions are hierarchic and oligarchic.⁹ Business unions often do not concern themselves with the economic structures or other struggles outside of the workplace. The organizers in these unions, for the most part, are not workers themselves and they often make decisions without the input or participation of the workers. In many senses, business unionism encourages workers to be passive and not challenge their situation in and outside of the workplace. This, in turn, results in weaker unions and an even weaker labor movement.

Dan Clawson argues that there are three reasons for the decline of power in the labor movement. First and foremost is a relentless employer assault, backed by government policies that support employers and attack workers. Second is a drastic decline in labor's willingness and ability to mobilize: a decline in rank-and-file involvement, an increasing reliance on staff and other substitutes for worker power and solidarity. Third is labor's increased isolation: its separation from other social movements and sources of intellectual-cultural-political dynamism, and the consequent creation of a U.S. culture hostile not only to unions, but to the working class more generally (Clawson 15).

⁹Levi, Margaret. "Organizing Power: The Prospects for an American Labor Movement." *Perspectives on Politics*. 1:1 March 2003. 45-68.

Margaret Levi argues that there are three types of challenges: institutional, organizational, and ideological. Institutional challenges include the legal framework (i.e. the limits on unions) and inter-union rivalry. Organizational challenges have to do with the need to organize more workers to increase union membership and the need to build alliances with other movements. The ideological challenge is the battle between a pro-business/ neoliberal philosophy and the pro-worker that is focused on global justice.

But what can be done to revive the labor movement, not only to improve wages and working conditions for workers but, to build a strong social movement that can transform our society into a more justice, democratic, and equal society? Different people in the labor movement and labor scholars have different opinions about what should be done. According to Clawson, there is a need for a reversal in these larger trends: for labor to form alliance with other social movements; for those groups, not employers, to have cultural and political momentum; for a mass movement, not staff, to be taking leadership. An incremental strategy of more and more unions adopting “best practices” and recruiting better organizers wouldn’t do it. He agrees with Nelson Lichtenstein, who argues that, “For unions to grow again, American political culture has to change...Given the right set of ideological benchmarks, it does not matter all that much what kind of organizing techniques the unions deploy. In the 1930s and in the 1960s, all sorts of maladroit, stodgy unions did quite well¹⁰” (Clawson 15-16).

Current Issues

1. Democratic Unionism

¹⁰ Lichtenstein, Nelson. “Can Unions Change?” *The Nation*, September 3/10, 2001, p. 29.

One of the debates is over how to make unions more democratic and involve the rank and file. Most business unions strive to increase the number of dues-paying members and are not concerned with actually empowering the workers. The organizers of these unions are outsiders who essentially are “the union” (Clawson 10). The workers are not very involved in the decision-making process and it is the organizing staff that does all the work, including standing up to the management. Most unions have found that this approach is not effective because eventually you will lose the workers’ interest and their membership. An alternative approach is the “union building” approach. This approach aims to empower workers, to teach them and assist them in building the kind of union they themselves want, giving them the confidence, the solidarity, and the tools needed to stand up for what they believe in and win it (Clawson 10)

According to Richard Sanders (union organizer for Rhode Island Hospital), “More than anything else, a good organizer is a teacher. We are not leaders—though too many organizers fall into the trap and are, indeed, trained to think of themselves and act like the leader of the workers” (Clawson 10). Dan Clawson argues that a good organizer isn’t someone who just knows the law and what to expect from the employer’s anti-union campaign. More important, he or she brings out the best in workers, helps develop their talents and capacities, and makes it possible to forge a solidarity that is rooted in people’s small work groups but reaches beyond to include people the worker has not previously known. There are many variations of union-building approaches. Sanders’ version emphasizes identifying the leaders in each work group, the people that others look up to, that they go to if they have a problem, that they respect and trust. “We don’t win without them. And without them we don’t build the kind of union that members control and that

changes the balance of power at work.” If those leaders become the Organizing Committee, if they are publicly visible as pro-union activists, if they are involved in making key decisions about the campaign, if they each work to organize their department, then the unions has enormous credibility and power” (Clawson 10).

2. Organizing

a. Organizing vs. servicing existing members

Many people in the labor movement today are debating whether unions and labor organizations should be focusing on organizing more workers or servicing the existing members. Because of the decline in union membership, most people are advocating for organizing more workers. But organizing workers requires resources, and some would argue that these resources are taken from funds that go towards servicing existing members. Organizing more workers, then, can have a backfire effect if the existing members decide to leave the union because they are not longer receiving the same benefits and/or services, especially if the organizing process does not involve them. In other words, when they are not directly involved as organizers themselves. Supporters of organizing more workers, on the other hand, would argue that resources for organizing can come from bodies like the AFL-CIO and that the benefit of organizing more workers will be much greater because it will increase the strength of the labor movement as a whole.

b. Organizing immigrants and non-whites

One of the greatest organizing challenges for many unions has been organizing immigrants and non-whites. In the 1950s, the American Federation of Labor was often criticized for not organizing black workers and when the Congress of Industrial Unions

and other unions organized black workers they were accused of being communist because they wanted equality. But today, more and more unions are finding that organizing immigrant and non-white workers can be challenging but not impossible. Dan Clawson even argues that in some ways it is easier because many non-white workers face discrimination, especially if their supervisors are white, and so they are much more likely to mark and resent the conditions, and community members are more likely to offer support. A feeling of solidarity is more likely to develop when class coincides with color such that people can draw on a preexisting racial-ethnic consciousness (Clawson 92).

Another perceived organizing challenge is that undocumented workers are difficult to organize. However, undocumented workers have been organized numerous times. SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign and UNITE are examples of unions who have successfully organized undocumented workers. However there are still thousands of undocumented workers who are not organized and many believe that they do not have this right and that if they try to organize they will not only get fired but will also be deported to their country of origin. Undocumented workers are hired precisely because employers think they can pay them less than documented workers and not provide them any benefits or protections. Although employers run many risks because it is illegal to hire undocumented workers, the risk is worth it because they make a lot more in profits. They take advantage of the desperate situation that many of these workers are in. Documented workers see undocumented workers as their competition or enemy. So if they try to organize, not only do they run the risks of being fired or their workplace moving to another country, but also of being replaced by undocumented workers.

A strong labor movement will depend on the inclusion of all workers and this includes people of color and immigrants. Corporations have succeeded in dividing different groups of workers and only by uniting can they stand up to the corporations to demand their rights. But how do you unite groups of workers who often do not speak the same language or have very different experiences in organizing? These are challenges that workers and organizers across the country are addressing in the present labor movement.

c. Organizing in the Community

If the goal of the labor movement is to organize more workers, some are finding it is better to organize across trades and skills, or even outside of the workplace. But another reason for organizing in the community, in addition to the workplace, is to be able to address important community issues like housing, education, health, etc. The Wagner Act, National Labor Relations Board certification elections, and long-term signed contracts all brought major benefits to both workers and unions—but according to Clawson, the NLRA was probably also the greatest force limiting community-based unionism. Under the NLRA, an employer must bargain about wages, hours and working conditions. But, legally, the employer does not have to discuss any community issues and legally the workers can not go on strike over them (Clawson 97).

In recent years, many worker rights centers have been created to bring together workers from different trades and skills. At these centers, workers are able to discuss the issues they are facing in their workplace and in the community and they can have workshops and classes to learn about their rights or certain skills like English. They also provide a space to brainstorm about what to do and what actions to take as a community.

Many worker centers also offer social activities to build a sense of community. Worker centers embody the vision of a new paradigm, develop leaders, and create networks (Clawson 109). Worker centers have been very effective in communities where conventional unions have been absent, but they also have some limitations. According to Clawson, almost all worker centers define themselves ethnically—for example, the Chinese Workers and Staff Association. That is both a strength and a limitation. It helps to create unity within a group but does less than a good union to confront differences across racial-ethnic groups. Second, it is difficult to institutionalize the gains of most workers center activities. Day labor centers, for example, have been able to set base wages but this is often only for their particular site or corner and because they don't have a contract with their employers, this gain is not institutionalized. Clawson describes this as the “no-contract-just-organize” approach. Another limitation is that while unions are self-financing from the dues of their own members, worker centers depend on foundations for funding and often it can be difficult to find funding, especially when you are competing with so many other organizations. But regardless of these limitations, many argue that community-based organizing is better than no organizing. And as Clawson states, “a community-based labor movement that breaks down the barriers between “union” and “community,” mobilizes and connects a range of individuals and organizations (not just those defined by an existing employment relationship), and builds a social movement that transcends what we now mean by “union”” (Clawson 91).

3. Social Movement Unionism

Because the neoliberal assault made labor law largely ineffective, and because the age of flexible accumulation introduced a host of political-economic changes, it is often almost impossible for unions to win with the rules of the game as currently defined. Although the state may be used as one of many means of gaining publicity and mobilizing community support, there is no expectation that normal state processes can or will guarantee the rights theoretically contained in labor law. So more and more workers and unions are trying innovative new approaches that go outside the law, either entirely ignoring it or using it as one weapon in a larger mobilization. One new approach, self-consciously patterned on the civil rights movement, is the willingness to use civil disobedience. This often wins without going through the NLRB election process. The workers and union operate on the premise that in order to win they will have to act like a social movement (Clawson 91).

For example, under the current labor law system, workers who unionize may bargain only with their direct employer. But because many corporations and companies subcontract, often there are many others involved in the production and supply chain. Often those who benefit the most from workers' low wages are the corporations who buy from the employers that the workers work for. If the employers decide to pay their workers more, the corporations may replace that contractor with another who pays less. The workers and the contractor do not have the right to hold the corporations accountable, even if those corporations determine the price of the product and therefore the wages of the workers. According to Clawson, this situation coerces unions to become radical, innovative, and militant—the only way they can succeed.

Social movement unionism is the approach that counters business unions. Although social movement unionism also focuses on actual gains in the workplace, it goes beyond the workplace by being actively involved in, and often leading, the movement for justice outside—it is about also transforming society. Gay W. Seidman defines social movement unionism as,

Unions that act within an existing political and economic framework on the one hand, and labor movements whose constituencies spread far beyond the factory gates and whose demands include broad social and economic change, on the other. Theoretically, social-movement unionism is perhaps best defined as an effort to raise the living standards of the working class as a whole, rather than to protect individually defined interests of union members (Seidman 2).

It is important to distinguish between social movement unionism and a social movement. Lowell Turner, Harry Katz, and Richard Hurd say that the former is a type of unionism that mobilizes the rank and file for specific actions and gains; the latter is a broad, often uncontrollable social phenomenon that comes along at particular periods of history. While social movement unionism can make specific gains in organizing or politics, a widespread social movement is a force that can reform or transform institutions. Turner, Katz, and Hurd argue that labor activists in the United States promote social movement unionism in the absence of a broader social movement—but with the explicit goal of instigating that wider movement to provide the power necessary for institutional change (*Rekindling the Movement* 23).

A strong social movement requires alliances between many groups, not just those that work on labor issues but others as well. Clawson argues that the labor movement must fuse with other movements. In the 1960s, the labor movement was largely missing when a set of new movements arose to fight for racial equality, women's liberation,

student empowerment, anti-intervention, environmental protection, gay and lesbian liberation, and much more. He argues that the failure of labor and those movements to connect weakened both labor and those movements. Turner, Katz, and Hurd agree and say that what is still more disturbing is the lack of agreement and common cause among labor's natural allies. Today community action groups are more likely to maintain a careful distance than to follow labor's lead, and liberal political figures are cautious about too close a relationship (*Rekindling the Movement* 59). Clawson argues that if a new upsurge is to come, it will require labor and these movements to do far more to connect with each other and to take up each other's causes in ways that transform the movements that now exist. At the present time, the new AFL-CIO leadership actively seeks to connect labor to other social movements, but a large gulf still remains (Clawson 14).

Margaret Levi argues that the purpose for the labor movement to become an active partner in social movement coalitions is for it to reclaim its role in mobilizing votes on behalf of candidates and public policies. But there are many labor leaders and scholars that argue that union and labor organizations need to focus on organizing workers instead of working on political campaigns. Levi argues that labor unions must serve the economic interests of members while also encouraging membership engagement in larger issues of democratization, social justice, and economic equality. But making alliances and working with allies on campaigns outside of labor—although related—requires resources and time. The challenge though is that organizing is also an important concern and sometimes there are not enough resources and time for both, or are there? Can a balance be achieved?

CHAPTER III: The CIW and the Labor Movement

Gerardo Reyes Chavez

We know we have several limitations, economically and also in other ways. Unions have a lot of resources and we don't. If we were a union we could bring any company to the table. We are not a union because we are excluded from the right to form a union by law, the National Labor Relations Act. In the United States, agricultural workers do not fit in this law and this is because of the influence [in politics and the government that] the agriculture industry has had for so many years. We know that we can't be a union because of this law. And we know that because of how agriculture works, none of us have a stable job or contract even though we work every day. Because there is no contract we cannot say that we work for a particular company. One day you work with one company and the next day with another.

Unions have a lot of advantages because they are a part of a structure that is in many areas of the country. They have influence in legislation but at the same time we base our model of organizing on consciousness. In thinking of what could be considered a disadvantage because of the conditions in Immokalee and the difficulty of having a union with all these conditions, where you won't work under a contract, we take this situation, which in theory is a disadvantage, and convert it into an advantage. After analyzing who benefits from our poverty and where the majority of the tomatoes we pick go, we know that Taco Bell is one of the largest buyers. If we were a union, we could not protest against Taco Bell or make public declarations against Taco Bell. We could not organize anything directly. We would have to make alliances with students and religious

leaders and in other organizations and ask them to boycott Taco Bell for us. But in this case it would be sad, in reality, to know who is benefiting from your poverty and suffering, but not be able to stand up against them. In our case, we are directing our struggle. We are talking to people in politics, famous people, religious people, and students. We are taking our message directly to Taco Bell and its parent company, Yum Brands. This is something that no union could say. They could not say that “us, the workers who are fighting.” A union organizes workers; it doesn’t organize itself together with the workers. We organize between all of us.

Despite the limitations we have on resources—not having a large staff or too much influence and not being a big organization—we have been able to make people recognize our efforts. This is because we believe that consciousness is the base that moves any worker anywhere. First we plant the question: “What forces are oppressing me?” And then we search for answers but together with other workers in the same situation. In our case the answer is to bring the companies to the table and change that situation where we live with a stagnant wage for over 20 years. I don’t think there are many movements in this country that make that your question. There are many movements that fight against a force that oppresses a sector of the population but they don’t have the specific population or workers ask the question, analyze the question, and take action for themselves. This is something that is different. We fight against many forces that oppress us and despite knowing all the limitations we have, we are taking our message to many people in the country and we are creating, here in Immokalee, a base of leadership that will not only stay in Immokalee, but that goes anywhere where there are members of the Coalition that understand that the Coalition is not a building with 4 walls

or the members of the staff or the people who do house visits to talk about human rights, but that the leadership that comes out of the Immokalee is people who know that they are the Coalition and that without them the Coalition is nothing. It's something like the 3 musketeers, "All for one and one for all." So wherever there is a worker with a consciousness that has been in Immokalee and has been a part of this movement, there is a part of the Coalition in that place. There is a seed that at any moment can grow for itself. Most unions have a membership that is stable and for us it would be nice to have members who are always in Immokalee because we would not have to start every year with the same process of raising consciousness from the most basic things to deepening the roots of the problems affecting us. But at the same time we know that by doing this we are creating a base of leadership among all of us where each person takes the consciousness with them. In a union there are not many possibilities for this because people remain in one place and the consciousness that is created stays there and if it goes somewhere it goes through the voices of the leaders of the union. In our case, the representation comes from each one of us as workers. We are an organization that is considered by the companies as not legitimate in a way. But thinking of all the limitations we have and where we have gone, from being a town that was not on the map to being on the table, and not only be on the table, but to make the executives of one of the richest corporations of the worlds sit with us is something that has never been seen in history. You will never see a tomato picker speaking directly to the owner of a richest fast food corporation or the owner of any corporation. It is something that is unimaginable but we have done it. We did not do it alone or using a traditional way organizing and this is why we know that consciousness is the base of everything. It is

consciousness that has involved thousands of students across the country. It is consciousness that has made millions of people of faith, of different denominations, to endorse the boycott. It is consciousness that ensures that every time there is an abuse in any place and there is a worker who has heard about the importance of consciousness, does something, they make a report or find a solution. They don't just see the abuse and keep it. There is that difference. We are doing something that in theory would be unthinkable. We have been in important and well-recognized magazines. We have received awards for our work against slavery and the boycott. All of this is due to our way of organizing, getting out of the traditional. If the way of organizing traditionally was a place it would be a "corral" with tall walls where you know that you can go from one corner to the other but you know that outside these boundaries there is nothing. The way we organize is that we know these boundaries exists and that they exist when we don't think about what is beyond or that the dreams we have are impossible to reach; when we think only about strategy but we don't imagine bigger things than what has been achieved in a traditional way. We still don't have just wages, or benefits, but we have something more valuable in way, we have the understanding that we are going to win and that this is a matter of time. And that it doesn't matter how long it takes but that the victory we will win will be due to the profoundness of our actions and our journey in the struggle.

(This statement by Gerardo was 6 months before the victory against Taco Bell).

Although the Coalition of Immokalee Workers is not a union, it has a lot to offer to the current debate about the direction of the labor movement and how to build a

stronger movement. In this section I will highlight the CIW's contribution to the discussion about democratic unionism, organizing—across language and cultural barriers and community-based, social movement unionism, and political education/ raising consciousness.

The CIW in some ways applies union-building approach that Clawson discusses, in that the workers are empowered and involved in the decision-making process. But the difference is that all members of the CIW are the teachers and the learners. The workers are not empowered by people outside but by each other. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, Paulo Freire comments that “one of the most objectionable errors of political militants, especially those of the messianically authoritarian kind, has always been a total ignorance of grass roots comprehension of the world. Seeing themselves as bearers of the “truth” that no one can refuse, they regard their sublime task as one not of proposing such truth for consideration but of imposing it without question” (Freire 77). In the CIW, the bearers of the “truth” are the workers themselves. No one can understand their situation better than themselves. Together, the workers learn from each other and their experiences. This model is based on popular education. After understanding their own situation through popular education and conscientization, it is the workers themselves that lead their movement for justice. There are few organizations and unions that are truly worker-led, but the CIW is one of those organizations that is and this is an example that those in the labor movement can follow.

Although, in many organizations, it is difficult to have a completely non-hierarchical structure, especially when the membership is so mobile, the CIW is completely committed to having a non-hierarchical structure and continues to work on

leadership development while stressing that every member is a leader. In our society we are accustomed to always having a leader or group of leaders and so it is difficult to understand why an organization would claim that they have no leader. But it's not that there are no leaders in the CIW but that all of the workers are leaders and those workers who stand out as "the leaders", whether it's because they have been around longer or work as staff, understand that they are working dialogically with the other members. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire states that, "Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress" (Freire 159). Although hierarchies sometimes serve for organizational purposes, they can also be oppressive and if one of the labor movements' goals is to end oppression, then the structures within the movement cannot be oppressive. The CIW's model shows that an organization can be committed to a non-hierarchical structure and still be organized effectively so that there is accountability within the staff and membership.

Freire also argues that there is an importance difference between organizing *for* the oppressed and *with* the oppressed. The organizers in the CIW are the workers themselves—they organize together instead of one group organizing another. However, there are other people working with the CIW who are not farmworkers. Many of these people are students who intern for a semester or two. Some people work for Student Farmworker Alliance and/or Interfaith Action, but working directly in solidarity with the CIW. Because of the technical knowledge and English skills that these individuals bring to the CIW, some of the things that they work on involve: promoting fair food campaigns, fair food research, technical, logistical, and office support, material production, and

fundraising. It is important to note that these individuals focus their work on organizing the people outside of Immokalee, or the allies—students, faith-based communities, unions, political figures, celebrities, professionals, grass-root organizations, NGOs, etc. They are involved in the decision-making process when it comes to decisions that have to do with organizing the people outside of Immokalee. And so, these allies work *with* the CIW and not for them or to support them. But organizing the community in Immokalee and decision-making are the roles of all the CIW members—the workers. In many unions today, the workers are hardly involved in the decision-making process and they are almost always organized by “outsiders” and not workers. These “outsiders” are usually educated people who recently graduated from college. Although it is a great benefit to have people who are educated and trained working with the workers, it is important that the relationship between organizers and workers is dialogical.

For many years, racism plagued unions across the country. Workers were divided and immigrant and black workers were often used as scabs. Times are changing, though, and unions understand the importance of organizing together with immigrant workers and people of color. But this can be a tremendous challenge especially if the workers you are trying to organize speak a different language. The vast diversity that exists in Immokalee is a great challenge. Many workers are indigenous and speak a wide range of languages, for example. But the CIW has been successful in organizing across language and cultural barriers by working with different workers who serve as liaisons and can communicate with specific groups who speak other languages. This way all workers can be involved and can understand what is being done and how, and they can also provide their input and ideas, which often come from their experiences in their home countries. They also do

radio talk shows, on “Radio Consciencia”, in different languages to celebrate the diversity and provide a space for those who speak a language other than Spanish or English to feel comfortable and address their issues. The CIW has, therefore, proved that although organizing across language and cultural barriers is challenging, it is not impossible and instead is absolutely necessary and beneficial to strengthen the movement.

Many people know the CIW for their campaign against Taco Bell and so many think that all of the CIW members are tomato pickers. But because the CIW is a community-based organization, not only do many of the workers also pick other crops but they also do other jobs outside of farm labor. However, all the workers are low-wage workers and so they have this in common. The CIW, therefore, works in many ways like a worker rights center by organizing outside of the workplace as well. A big problem in Immokalee and the surrounding areas is that sometimes workers are not paid or are underpaid, so the CIW has been active in standing up for the workers and getting back their wages. The CIW also analyzes issues outside of the work place like many worker rights centers. Many workers come to the CIW with concerns about abuses by the police, for example. The radio station also provides a space for other issues to be discussed and to dialogue about possible ways to address these problems. Most of these problems are linked to the root of the problem in Immokalee, which is sub-poverty wages, and so it is important to focus on the root but also address the other problems that affect the community. In the same way, unions should address issues in the communities where their workers live.

Although the CIW is not a union, I would argue that it works as a social movement union and is also a part of the larger social movement. The CIW has been able to focus on their own local struggles in Immokalee while connecting them to the wider social justice movement and taking their struggle outside of Immokalee. A clear example was their participation on the “Root Cause: Global Justice from the Grassroots” campaign which involved a march and protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Miami, FL in November 2003, a People’s Tribunal, and a Community Impact Report. The campaign was organized by the CIW together with the power U Center for Social Change (an environmental justice organization) and the Miami Workers Center (an organization that works on issues of public housing, welfare rights, and economic justice). The CIW has been able to connect their struggle with the anti-free trade movement, as well as with other struggles. As Lucas Benitez stated in the Community Impact Report, “Thousands of us who finds ourselves in Florida have been obligated to leave our countries because of the consequences of the free trade agreements that have flooded our countries’ markets with cheap agricultural products from the United States and Canada, making it impossible for us to sell the crops that we have grown for generations.”¹¹

The Taco Bell boycott and now the victory have placed the CIW as the leaders in the Fair Food movement to democratize and bring corporate responsibility to the entire food industry that is often based on the exploitation of farmworkers. So although the CIW will remain a grass-root organization based in Immokalee, it has also taken the role of leading a national movement that goes beyond Immokalee. In this movement the CIW

¹¹ Coalition of Immokalee Workers; Power U Center; Miami Workers’ Center. “Root Cause: Global Justice from the Grassroots”. Community Impact Report. November 11, 2003.

has not been alone and the movement will continue to grow. The struggle for fair food is not just about farmworkers but involves our entire society and so alliances have been extremely important to the CIW. The CIW has built strong alliances with students, faith-based communities, professionals, unions, grass-root organizations, politicians, non-government organizations, and more in the U.S. and around the world. These alliances will continue to grow and to be strengthened as the CIW plans for their next and future campaigns.

Freire stresses that, “It is necessary to go beyond rebellious attitudes to a more radically critical and revolutionary position, which is in fact a position not simply of denouncing injustice but of announcing a new utopia. Transformation of the world implies dialectic between the two actions: denouncing the process of dehumanization and announcing the dream of a new society” (*Pedagogy of Freedom*, 74). The CIW is announcing a new utopia and dreams of a new society where workers are treated with dignity and respect, while receiving a just salary under good working conditions; where consumers understand that we are undeniably connected to farmworkers and all workers that help produce the products we consume; and where corporations take responsibility and do not subsidize their profits through exploitation and the dehumanization of workers. In the same way, unions across the country can together announce a new utopia and make stronger links with the movement for social justice. This is the only way that we can truly bring about change and works towards a more equal society.

Unlike the situation in many unions, political education, or conscientization, is at the heart of the CIW. Freire describes conscientization as a requirement of our human condition. He states, “It is one of the roads we have to follow if we are to deepen our

awareness of the world, of facts, of events, of the demands of human consciousness to develop our capacity for epistemological curiosity. Far from being alien to our human condition, conscientization is natural to “unfinished” humanity that is aware of its unfinishedness” (*Pedagogy of Freedom*, 55). For the CIW constantly working on conscientization is especially crucial because of the high mobility of the workers. Each season new workers arrive and many of them have never analyzed their work or the situations they live in. Some recently arrived to this country and so they are unaware of their rights and others are skeptical that anything can be done to achieve change. Many unions often push political education aside because they are more focused on the actual material gains for the workers. But how can workers truly remain committed to their struggle if they don’t have a full understanding of it and have never really analyzed it? Furthermore, how can workers connect their struggles with other workers and therefore to the global movement for justice if their consciousness has not been awakened? Through conscientization, not only do the workers understand and analyze their own struggle, but because this process takes place as a group and not an individual, they are able to build solidarity and strength as organized workers. They also understand that there are other workers in this country and around the world who are a part of the same struggle. Together they analyze the forces that oppress them and together they organize and take action, in solidarity with other workers, to achieve dignity and justice.

CONCLUSION

The non-traditional organizing style of the CIW is not necessarily new. Grass-root organizations around the country and the world use similar styles. There are unions in the past and even some in the present that also use similar styles and tactics. In an interview with the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (San Francisco Chapter), Lucas Benitez comments:

Despite its well-earned reputation as hostile territory for labor, the South is home to several of the most militant organizing efforts in the country today, including the fight of the Charleston longshoremen and our own campaign here in Immokalee. Creative, community-based and highly politicized organizing campaigns are increasing common, including UNITE for Dignity in Miami, Black Workers for Justice in North Carolina, and the Miami Workers Center. These all display a grassroots militancy growing up in the heart of the South. In some ways, the South's anti-labor atmosphere actually made these new aggressive organizing tactics necessary to shift the balance of power between workers and their employers and win even the most modest changes. Today the South has undergone a dramatic shift in population that has transformed its labor force, especially the low-wage workforces. In some ways, the South has more in common now with 21st century Los Angeles than it does with 1960s Montgomery. That doesn't negate the importance of Black workers here. It simply means that there is an important new issue in the Southern reality—the rapid and widespread influx of immigrant workers.

This influx of immigrant workers is not only providing important labor in our society but also bringing organizing methods that, although are not new, are often not highlighted enough or are associated with the past. As unions debate their strategies in

the year 2005, it is important to see what immigrant workers have to offer to the debate and to turn to organizations like the CIW for example, especially since the CIW has proven results. The CIW's methods or philosophy may not apply to all groups of workers but it is nonetheless important to learn about and understand this model and this story of victory—one that can awaken the consciousness of the labor movement, commit us to the struggle for dignity, justice, and equality, and result in social change and a much better world.

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