



# THE EMERGING ROLE OF **WORKER CENTERS IN UNION ORGANIZING**

— A Strategic Assessment —

**JAROL B. MANHEIM**



**U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**  
Workforce Freedom Initiative

A Working Paper Prepared for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce | November 2013



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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines some of the actors, strategies and tactics behind the worker center movement in the United States, with a focus on the relationship between worker centers and traditional labor unions. Particular emphasis is placed on the activist foundations that fund a substantial portion of the worker center movement, and on exemplars of the centers themselves. The worker centers are seen as performing certain core functions, most notably organizing, that have historically been reserved for the unions themselves, but in social and economic spaces where most traditional unions have not been able to operate successfully. By reaching out to and through worker centers and their allied community organizations in the hope of capturing the benefits of this community-based grassroots organizing, and in some instances by mimicking center-like structures within the traditional union framework, the AFL-CIO and various international unions are hoping to reverse the long-term adverse trend in union density that threatens their power. The essay concludes that, to the extent they are successful in achieving this, their efforts may have the unintended consequence of fundamentally altering the labor movement itself.

## JAROL B. MANHEIM

Jarol B. Manheim is Professor Emeritus of Media and Public Affairs at The George Washington University, where he developed the world's first degree-granting program in political communication and was the founding director of the School of Media and Public Affairs. He received his bachelors degree in political science and economics from Rice University, and his masters and doctoral degrees in political science from Northwestern University, the latter in 1971. He is a past chair of the Political Communication Section of the American Political Science Association, and played the lead role in establishing the journal *Political Communication*. In 1995 he was selected by CASE and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as the District of Columbia Professor of the Year.

Professor Manheim has been described as one of the world's leading authorities on campaigns against business, and as "one academic who truly understands the real world, the tough world of business and the rougher world of advocacy." His 1994 book, *Strategic Public Diplomacy and US Foreign Policy*, remains influential in shaping both scholarship and practice in that field. Reviewers characterized his 2001 book, *The Death of a Thousand Cuts: Corporate Campaigns and the Attack on the Corporation*, as the definitive work on contemporary union strategies. And his 2010 book, *Strategy in Information and Influence Campaigns*, a comprehensive analysis of strategic communication techniques, has been termed "authoritative," "elegant," "masterful," and "a classic." Manheim's research on strategic communication has appeared in the leading journals of political science, journalism and mass communication. He has held editorial or editorial board positions with *Journal of Politics*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, and *Political Communication*. His work has been translated into Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish.

## The Emerging Role of Worker Centers in Union Organizing

*The activism and big ideas that characterized the labor movement of the first half of the 20th century, was [sic] replaced in the second half by a lack of vision, small ideas, and overall complacency. Labor unions ceased to be a movement, becoming more like a service group for the small portion of the workforce lucky enough to be a part of a union. Under this philosophy, labor suffered a steep and precipitous decline. ... It is time to recall the social uprisings of the 1930's. ... Things will never get better unless we all realize ... we are going to have to take it, rather than to continue to wait for someone to give it to us.*

— Ryan Sean Heron, *The Progressive Press*, March 13, 2013<sup>1</sup>

*In recent months, we've seen the pressures of survival forcing unions to adopt organizing methods derived from the grassroots tradition in the labor movement — such as striking for demands before a union is even recognized. The prospect of a new militancy emerging with backing from institutional players is exciting. But history has also shown that unless workers are not only empowered on the job but also fully in control of their unions, the rebirth of labor as a social movement will remain elusive. Those of us who want to transform the workers' movement and society have to elaborate our own model for labor renewal, from the bottom up.*

— Erik Forman, *Labor Notes*, April 15, 2013<sup>2</sup>

It is easy enough to point out that organized labor in the US is in a state of existential crisis, and easy enough as well to speculate as to how matters came to this pass. For purposes of this essay, we'll take the former as a given — it is, in fact, undisputed on all sides — and on the latter we'll take a pass, or nearly so. After a brief recital of the relevant history, our focus here will be on the core strategic decisions that have characterized labor's response to the crisis, once it was recognized, on their evolution as they failed one after another to reverse the trend toward oblivion, and on the most recent shift in strategy: a renewed (some in the labor movement would say a brand new and long overdue) focus on organizing workers, per se, rather than on the institutional needs of the unions themselves. The central questions emerging today are whether organized labor is still, in any sense, an actual social movement, and one of sufficient potency to facilitate the increasingly heavy lift of its own revitalization, and if not, whether worker center-style organizing offers any greater hope of achieving this end.



## **NEED, OPPORTUNITY, SUCCESS, POWER, DECLINE, DESPAIR: A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN ORGANIZED LABOR**

To appreciate the significance of labor's recently renewed attentiveness to workers, and especially to new, young, entry-level workers, many of them immigrants and persons of color, one must begin by understanding the context within which it is occurring. That context is partly historical, partly cultural, partly political, and partly institutional. Let us begin with a brief interpretive history, then weave in the remaining contextual elements. Our history is divided into eight stages.

*Early Confrontations (1870-1910).* Taking the 1870s as a logical starting point, we find ourselves in a time when labor-management “relations” often meant open warfare. This was the era of the Great Railroad Strike (1877), the Haymarket Riots (1886), the Homestead Strike (1892), and more. Working conditions were harsh and dangerous, industrialists and governments were often closely allied, and management was unrelenting and unforgiving in its resistance to organizers, often hiring replacement workers to fill the jobs of strikers and “detectives” to protect their facilities. Violence and confrontation associated with these early organizing efforts was commonplace, often on an “industrial” scale, so to speak, but the frequent resort to anarchist language and actions that came to dominate the early labor organizations tended to undermine any claim they might make to moral authority. Unions were simply not accepted as legitimate actors.

*From Tragedy Comes Legitimacy (1911-1935).* As the 20<sup>th</sup> century opened, the violence continued in conflicts like Bloody Ludlow (1914) in Colorado, and the Battle of Blair Mountain (1921) in West Virginia, both of which pitted miners against strike-breakers from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency.<sup>3</sup> But the ground was shifting. Unions were becoming more firmly established, though they still lacked legitimacy in the eyes of many. And then, lightening struck. Or actually, fire. In 1911, a blaze destroyed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City, burning alive nearly 150 garment workers who, it turned out, were not only working in crowded conditions, more or less universal at the time, but were unable to escape because the owners had locked all of the exits in order to prevent theft and unauthorized breaks.<sup>4</sup> The images of the bodies of women and teenage girls lying in a row on the street outside the burnt-out factory were seared into the public consciousness in a way that battles in far-off mining camps or even city centers had never been. The moral argument turned on a dime, and unions found themselves gaining acceptance. This turn in events culminated with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935. Organized labor had a seat at the table.

*Acting From Strength (1936-1980).* There followed something of a golden age for the labor movement. For more than four decades, unions, and especially the centrally important industrial unions, flexed their muscles, demonstrating their power in the marketplace and

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gaining political influence. Particularly following the end of World War II, strikes were numerous, large, and generally highly effective. Labor was thus able to convert its new-found legitimacy into greatly improved working conditions, new rights and privileges for workers, and for a time, as both cause and effect, an ever-larger share of the private-sector workforce, known as union density. This was the period during which unions truly did, as they like to claim, “bring you the 40-hour week.” In 1955, with strong encouragement from the government during a period of Cold War red scares, the craft-based and socially conservative American Federation of Labor merged with, which is to say, took over, the more radical, industrial-based Congress of Industrial Organizations, as a means of gentrifying the movement. Thus was formed the AFL-CIO. Labor received a further boost in 1962 when President Kennedy, by executive order, granted federal workers the right to union representation.

But the public façade of an all-powerful labor movement masked a critical shift whose nature and significance were not immediately recognized. In 1954, union density peaked and began a decline that continues to this day. Students of the movement can disagree over the root cause of this turn in the data — whether it was a product of success, with the unions having achieved virtually all of the goals that had swelled their numbers; of lost militancy among workers who found themselves better off than ever before; of rising concerns about the sheer political power of the unions; of resentment at labor’s ability and demonstrated willingness to pursue its own interests even where doing so clearly harmed the public interest; of spreading union corruption; of the growing arrogance of union leaders; of the effectiveness of the Taft-Hartley Act, passed by Congress in 1947, which rebalanced the labor-management relationship, requiring unions and their leaders to file financial reports with the government and preparing the ground for state-level right to work laws, and the list goes on. Many such hypotheses have been advanced, but from our vantage point more than half a century later, which one(s) may have had the greatest impact and in which possible combinations matters little. What matters is that the downward trend in private sector union density begun in 1954 has reached a point where it presents an existential challenge to the labor movement.

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*The Overreach (1981).* Although President Kennedy had authorized possible union representation of federal workers in 1962, he had not granted to these unions the right to strike. To the contrary, strikes by federal workers were clearly and unambiguously illegal. But over two decades, as public sector unions grew rapidly — mainly at the local and state levels, but also at the federal level — they became very aggressive. In 1981, whether out of clear purpose or miscommunication among the leadership, and in a clear, personal confrontation with President Reagan, PATCO, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, whose members controlled all commercial



aviation traffic, went on strike and shut down the nation's air traffic control system.<sup>5</sup> There were some lesser precedents that apparently led the controllers to expect some quick concessions on their demands, but nothing on this scale had ever happened before, and Ronald Reagan had not been President before. Reagan, with broad public support, fired the strikers, then rebuilt the air traffic system bit by bit over the several months required to train new replacement controllers. The strikers were banned from federal employment for life. PATCO had badly misjudged its power.

*Compounding the Error (1982–1995).* Large-scale strikes had been commonplace to this point in the private sector, but the PATCO incident fundamentally altered the labor-management dynamic there as well, and cost the unions dearly in popular sympathy. The shift in sentiment and influence became clear almost instantly when, in 1982, the Steelworkers Union struck the Phelps Dodge mining facility in Morenci, Arizona. The company hired permanent replacement workers and, significantly, the courts backed up its right to do so.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly — and it was sudden — one of labor's most effective tools, the right to strike, became much more difficult and far riskier to deploy than at any time that century. Indeed, from that point forward, the frequency of such strikes has declined almost exponentially.<sup>7</sup>

Organize employers, not employees.  
... Employees are complex and  
unpredictable. Employers are simple  
and predictable.

— Joe Crump, UFCW Local 951, 1991<sup>8</sup>

Then, in 1985, Local P-9 of the United Food and Commercial Workers went on strike against Hormel Foods in Austin, Minnesota, over the heated objections of the international union. P-9, assisted by a rising and aggressive young labor consultant named Ray Rogers, was focused on its local concerns, while the international leaders took a broader, industry-

wide perspective that led them to oppose the strike.<sup>9</sup> The split within the UFCW came to symbolize the divide between bottom up unionism focused on the interests of the workers, and what came to be called “business unionism”, or that which focused on the interests of the union as an organization. That same struggle, writ large across the labor movement, is at the center of the contemporary shift of labor strategy we will address below.

*The Slippery Slope (1995–2005).* By 1995, after 40 years of declining density, organized labor got serious about reversing the trend. In a watershed election, the AFL-CIO replaced its hide-bound, very traditional senior leadership with a new, more aggressive and more innovative cadre headed by John Sweeney of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Sweeney and his team came to power preaching the virtues of a relatively new style of organizing, the corporate campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly given the need to rebuild the movement's numbers and market share, these



campaigns were the very epitome of business unionism and organizing to build organization per se more than to represent workers. The basic idea, sometimes termed wholesale organizing, was to pressure employers at the corporate level to facilitate unionization of their workers by simplifying and streamlining the process. This was accomplished by a variety of strategies, ranging from shareholder activism through regulatory barrages to personal attacks on officers and directors, all designed to generate enough pressure from key stakeholders to cause management to cooperate with, or at the very least not to oppose, the organizing efforts.

Many of these techniques were initially developed by Ray Rogers, who often saw them, as at Hormel, as grassroots tactics, but they were implemented elsewhere primarily to facilitate the acquisition of large clusters of workers, company by company and industry by industry. In the end, or at least to date, corporate campaigns did not reverse the decline in union density. But they did spawn a large number of confrontational tactics that are in broad use today.

Through this period public sector unions, which represent just over a third of government workers at all levels combined, have continued to prosper at a fairly steady pace. This, in combination with the continued private sector shrinkage, has produced a fundamental change in the labor movement itself. Once, private sector union workers outnumbered those in the public sector by more than 15 to 1. But in 2009, the trend lines actually crossed, and since then the labor movement has been comprised of a majority of public sector workers.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that these two groups have differing agendas — and such differences are apparent on issues like the XL Pipeline, privatization of government services, and levels of taxation — a potential wedge may develop in the movement over time.

*Disunity with Impunity (2005–2010).* In 2005, reflecting the very pressures we have been describing, the labor movement literally split in two. Seven unions, led by Andy Stern of the SEIU, broke away from the AFL-CIO to form the Change to Win Federation (CTW). At the time, the principal rationale offered was that the AFL-CIO devoted too much money and effort to doing politics, and the breakaway unions said they intended to devote themselves almost entirely to organizing. Stern was especially well-schooled in the arsenal of tactics associated with corporate campaigns, and for a time seemed poised to deploy them effectively. But Stern was an absolute devotee of business unionism, and during this period his own union, SEIU, pushed this approach to the limits, even to the point of making secret agreements with employers that it then imposed on its locals. This practice broke into public view in California, where it occasioned a rebellion in the ranks. When SEIU purged the local leadership, they responded by forming a rival union and challenging SEIU directly.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime, the CTW unions began cannibalizing themselves. Arguably, the UFCW had joined CTW primarily to preserve its turf, most notably in its long-running and long unsuccessful campaign against Walmart, which Stern and SEIU threatened to overwhelm with an independent effort of their own. Those tensions continued. Then the hotel workers union, which had merged with the remnants



of the garment workers union some years earlier to form UNITE HERE, was torn by an internal leadership struggle. A breakaway faction affiliated with SEIU, which welcomed the newcomers and then set out to capture their one real asset — Amalgamated Bank. In the end, CTW was forced to reorganize around somewhat reduced ambitions, Mr. Stern was replaced at the top of SEIU, and a dance between the remnant CTW unions and the AFL-CIO was begun. Several of the CTW unions have since rejoined the original federation, most recently the UFCW in 2013.<sup>14</sup>

We will use old fashioned mass demonstrations, as well as sophisticated corporate campaigns, to make worker rights the civil rights issue of the 1990s.

— John Sweeney, October 25, 1995<sup>11</sup>

In 2008 President Obama was elected with substantial support from both sets of unions, which, by then had accumulated a lengthy laundry list of policy wants. Primary among these was the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would, among other things, have enshrined card check, a union-friendly

measure of worker preference, as coequal in law to the secret ballot election, and would have generated great pressure on employers to negotiate first contracts. Mr. Obama and the Democrats did not move this legislation during the period when they controlled both the executive and legislative branches of government, and EFCA, along with a number of other labor initiatives, was left to languish during these years. A few changes, such as limiting the reporting requirements administered by the Labor Department, were implemented, but the unions correctly saw these as small potatoes. The President did, shortly after this period in 2012, use recess appointments to stack the National Labor Relations Board with union-friendly commissioners, but these appointments were overturned by the courts on the basis that the Senate, which had the power of advice and consent, was not actually in recess at the time.<sup>15</sup> At this writing, the Supreme Court is considering an appeal of that decision. This deconstruction of the Obama-era NLRB was later extended to invalidate the appointment of the NLRB's Acting General Counsel, though on different grounds.<sup>16</sup> As a result, and with the subsequent restoration of a full board, a wave of NLRB decisions favoring the unions faces a long process of re-litigation.

In 2009, the AFL-CIO at last underwent the generational change in leadership that had been presaged in 1995 with the election of Richard Trumka, originally of the United Mine Workers and more recently Sweeney's Number 2, as president.

*Seeking a Lifeline (2010–).* To summarize our timeline to date, organized labor garnered sympathy and eventual legitimacy through a protracted series of conflicts with management, turning the corner when the Triangle fire fundamentally altered the public's views of unions. Once this legitimacy was institutionalized through the NLRA, labor built a political and economic juggernaut, the momentum of which carried it for nearly

half a century, even as its base in the workforce was eroding. About 30 years ago, some aggressive union leaders overplayed their hand at, as it happened, the precise moment when the political winds were shifting. Suddenly, the underlying weaknesses of the movement were apparent to all. The ensuing decades have seen pressures mount within the labor movement, some cracks develop in the façade of organizational unity, and a shifting of the balance within labor between the two principal sectors of the workforce — public and private — with their somewhat divergent agendas. Labor’s response has taken such forms as changes in leadership, sometimes normal and sometimes not; reorganizations, mergers and jurisdictional disputes; political, legislative, and regulatory initiatives designed to facilitate organizing and wall off labor organizations; and, significantly for us, a somewhat systematic exploration and development of strategies to rebuild the movement.

## SHIFTING CIRCUMSTANCES

While all of this was going on, two other, and much broader, changes were occurring. First, beginning in earnest sometime in the 1980s, the US economy transitioned from one grounded in manufacturing industries to one centered primarily in service industries. This change was a product of technological developments such as robotics and high-speed data communications, transportation advances as in the rise of large-scale air freight systems and containerized shipping, new and smaller economies of scale, the reduction of barriers to entry in the global economy, and the growth of a cluster of emerging economies providing companies with access to low-cost labor markets with rising skill levels, all leading to an increasing reliance on outsourcing and off-shoring by US manufacturers. Entire industries — shoes, electronics — moved abroad, while those that remained — aircraft, heavy equipment, automobiles — faced new and intense competition. Added to this was the fact that organized labor’s strength at the outset of this period was grounded in these very manufacturing industries. These were the high-paying, high-benefit jobs that sustained the Autoworkers, the Steelworkers, and many others. Ironically, by their success in raising wages and benefits in unionized industries and companies to such high levels, the unions had raised the costs of production to the point that they were unsustainable in the new economic reality. Confronted with rigid and uncompetitive labor costs, and

To be blunt, our basic system of workplace representation is failing to meet the needs of America’s workers by every critical measure. The numbers give us all the proof we need. ... Last year, the American labor movement lost another 400,000 members — 400,000. Our job as leaders of the American labor movement is not to tidy up the offices, lock the doors and turn out the lights. The AFL-CIO’s door has to be — and will be — open to any worker or group of workers who wants to organize and build power in the workplace.

— Richard Trumka, March 7, 2013



presented with the opportunity to produce goods abroad and ship them into the domestic market at a net lower cost, many companies took the obvious step. And this put still more pressure on the labor movement and on union density.

The second societal change was demographic. Over these same decades, the US workforce has become younger and more diverse.<sup>17</sup> This is a shift that mirrors trends in society at large. There are, as well, a large number of immigrants in this population. Portions of this particular workforce demographic may lack strong language skills, and in some instances, may not have had the opportunity to receive a quality education. These last factors have tended to lead to employment in the growing service sector.

Put another way, by demographics, by economics, by politics, by culture, by education, and by other factors, the unions now face a situation where a very different workforce from that of the past may offer the last and best hope for organized labor to turn the tide of decline. The SEIU was perhaps the first to recognize and move to exploit this opportunity, but other unions, and the AFL-CIO itself, are now scrambling to follow suit. The difficulty is that they are not especially well-positioned to do that, and they are not sure how best to accomplish it. Enter the worker center.

## **THE WORKER CENTER: ORGANIZED LABOR MEETS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING**

From the 1930s through the 1980s, the dominant model of labor union activity was organizing through the customary NLRB-administered election, followed, when successful, by collective bargaining. From the 1980s to today, the dominant model has increasingly been organizing outside the customary channels through pressure campaigns, and in some instances by bargaining to organize. But throughout these years there has been a third model operating, usually out of sight within some union halls. This model, which surfaces in the pages of *Labor Notes*, through the union democracy movements in such unions as the Teamsters, and through more generic organizations like the Association for Union Democracy, can best be characterized as a service model. Its platform includes such planks as frequent contested leadership elections, secret ballot voting for shop stewards and other representatives, informed votes on contracts, and regular open local meetings. Rather than viewing organizing primarily as a means to build the labor movement, this model treats organizing primarily as a means to serve the needs of those who join.<sup>18</sup>

There are legitimate grounds to debate the merits of these competing propositions, but that debate lies beyond the scope of the present analysis. For the present, let us simply recognize it for what it is — a difference of opinion over movement building through what we have termed business unionism, which emphasizes the institutional needs of the labor movement, or through grassroots unionism, which emphasizes the personal and

collective needs of workers. The corollary debate is that between advocates of wholesale, top-down organizing in the style of the corporate campaign, and advocates of retail, bottom up organizing that is, in some ways, a throwback to an earlier era. By depending on the top-down model for so long, it may well be that organized labor has not only lost touch with the new-economy workforce, but simply does not know how to organize it. Organized labor needs help. Worker centers may be positioned to provide it.

Janice Fine, who studies the phenomenon, has defined worker centers as “community-based and community-led organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy,

and organizing to provide support to low-wage workers.”<sup>20</sup> They represent a relatively new approach to organizing workers in low-skill and entry-level jobs, and one that is particularly attuned to immigrant and minority communities because of its roots, not in the labor movement, but in community organizing. A critical question that has emerged in recent years, as these centers have proliferated and grown, and as their ties to organized labor have expanded or become better recognized, is that of precisely where the boundary lies between a worker center and a union.<sup>21</sup> The answer has implications for labor and management alike, for it will determine the limits and extent of activities in which these centers can legitimately participate, and the ways and extent to which the laws and regulations governing labor-management relations in the US apply to them. It is the purpose of the remainder of this essay, not to address that issue per se, but only to develop a profile of worker centers and their relationship to efforts to rebuild the labor movement that may help to cast light on the underlying issues.

Worker centers, or workers’ advocacy organizations as they are termed by some, stand at the confluence of a number of social and historic developments. *Primary among these, and the key to understanding the relationship between worker centers and the labor establishment, is the idea of outsourcing the customary core functions of labor unions.* In the 1980s and 1990s, many employers concluded that their core business activity, the production of goods, could be more efficiently and more effectively achieved by moving work outside the traditional boundaries of their businesses. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century opens, labor unions seem to be concluding, similarly, that some of their functions might also be best accomplished, at least in some circumstances, by moving the work beyond the traditional boundaries of the union.

The labor movement is definitely in a period of change. We’re no longer going to allow employers to decide who our members are. We’re going to open up our arms to people who want to join our movement. ... Instead of saying to our community partners and the civil rights movement or the Latino movement, ‘That’s your issue and this is my issue,’ they’re going to be our issues, and we’re going to work together.

— Richard Trumka, March 31, 2013<sup>19</sup>



This is not a new idea. The Carpenters union, for example, has in recent years routinely outsourced its picketing function across the country, typically hiring the homeless or unemployed workers, none of whom is a union member, to carry signs, bang drums, shout slogans, and otherwise disrupt their targets.<sup>22</sup> This practice dates to at least 2004.<sup>23</sup> But more fundamental still has been the outsourcing of the most central function of organized labor ... actual organizing.

A significant early experiment in what we might term “generic organizing,” which is to say, union organizing outside the official framework of a union itself, was embodied in the Prewitt Organizing Fund. Named for an organizer with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union and founded and led primarily by several alumni of that union and its successors, Prewitt was established by Duane Stillwell in 1999 as a sort of contract clearinghouse for organizers.<sup>24</sup> Prewitt was a nonprofit organization supported by grants from foundations and contracts from labor unions. Though careful to describe itself as not being a union, Prewitt’s model was to act in concert with, or on behalf of, one or another union in efforts to organize nonunion employers. It was variously described as a self-funded nonprofit,<sup>25</sup> a fee-for-service operation,<sup>26</sup> “venture labor,”<sup>27</sup> and “an independent union-recruiting group.”<sup>28</sup> As a nonprofit nonunion, Prewitt was positioned to receive funding from tax exempt foundations pursuing “educational” and related missions, and to channel this money into union organizing. By 2002, the fund had worked with such unions as SEIU, UNITE! (the garment workers before their merger with the hotel and restaurant workers), AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees), the Laborers, the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers) through its affiliate RWDSU (Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union), the Mine Workers, and the California Nurses Association, as well as the AFL-CIO.<sup>29</sup> One particular focus was on healthcare organizing.<sup>30</sup> But in 2006, the same year it received contracts valued at \$935,000 from SEIU and \$70,000 from Change to Win,<sup>31</sup> Prewitt came under fire within the labor movement for resisting unionization efforts by its own employees, some of whom were fired.<sup>32</sup> Sometime afterward, Prewitt appears to have ceased operations. The contractor model that it developed, however, serves as one conceptual basis for the organizing portfolio of today’s worker centers.

A second point of grounding for worker centers has been the development of local-level partnerships between unions and progressive community organizations describing themselves as “regional power-building organizations.” A federation of such groups, The Partnership for Working Families, formed in 2006, today has members in 16 communities around the country, among them Atlanta, Boston, Denver, Hartford, Oakland, Phoenix and Seattle.<sup>33</sup> The Partnership was co-founded by one of the earliest and most influential of these groups, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), which dates to 1993. Founded by attorney Madeline Janis and two leaders of UNITE HERE, Miguel Contreras and his wife, Maria Elena Durazo, who succeeded Contreras as head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and continues to serve on the LAANE board of directors, LAANE



has been involved in the living wage campaign, efforts to limit market entry by Walmart, and a clean truck program for the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach that has paralleled efforts by the Teamsters to organize independent truck drivers, among others. Harold Meyerson has described it as “the think tank, policy arm, and, on occasion, political organizer of the Los Angeles labor movement.”<sup>34</sup> The organization is skilled at community organizing, coalition building, and message development, and active in training and research. Essentially, it wages comprehensive campaigns that mirror the strategies and tactics of the more customary union corporate campaigns, but with an emphasis on issues of equity and community.<sup>35</sup>

Over the years, LAANE has become something of a magnet for grant money from progressive foundations, among them the Marguerite Casey Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Ford Foundation, William and Flora Hewlitt Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Surdna Foundation, Tides Foundation, and others.<sup>37</sup> As we will see, several of these foundations are active supporters of the worker centers and related organizations.

It's also a strategy — organizing workers in their communities — that unions had long rejected. When Samuel Gompers founded the American Federation of Labor in 1886, he took pains to distinguish it from its rival, the Knights of Labor, which welcomed everyone into its ranks regardless of whether they had a union in their workplace. Gompers, by contrast, insisted that it was union representation on the job that gave employees whatever power they wielded, and for the next 120 years, the workplace remained the focus of union-organizing campaigns.

— Harold Meyerson<sup>36</sup>

A third development, while not exactly new, is a tactic that has taken new form and captured renewed public attention of late, the sit-down strike. Within the labor movement, this tactic may best be remembered in the context of the United Auto Workers' (UAW) occupation of the Flint, Michigan, manufacturing complex of General Motors in 1936–37, just a year after the UAW had been formed. Fast forward to 2008, when workers at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago, represented by the United Electrical Workers (UE), found themselves locked out of a plant which the owners, without notice, had decided to close after Bank of America, at the time a recent recipient of a federal bailout, cut off the company's line of credit. The workers occupied the plant, convinced the bank to reopen the line of credit so that they could receive severance pay, and even backed the sale of the company to a new owner, which maintained production for another three years. When the new owner once again closed the doors without notice in 2012, the workers repeated their tactic, this time with support from the Chicago arm of the then-active Occupy movement. The synergy between the union and Occupy was evident in the words of Andy Manos, a member of the Labor Outreach Committee of Occupy Chicago, who noted at the time, “The tactic of occupation is inspired from these kinds of factory occupations.”<sup>38</sup>



Indeed, the synergy went far deeper. This was true in part because the underlying thematic of the Occupy movement, a class-based appeal to the so-called 99% with the implication that they were victims of exploitation by the remaining 1%, accorded perfectly with the demographic shift in labor's prime recruiting cohort and with themes that were already in use within the labor movement, notably among such unions as the SEIU and the National Nurses Union, for example, in the form of a campaign for a so-called "Robin Hood Tax" to be imposed on banks and other financial institutions as a means of redistributing wealth.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it was the Republic workers who invented one of the key Occupy slogans of the period, "Banks got bailed out — we got sold out."<sup>40</sup> In the words of one observer, "Occupy has returned a sense of 'them and us' to the American psyche."<sup>41</sup>

But it was also true in the sense that Occupy, though it may have had some independent origins, became over its brief lifetime increasingly a captive of the labor movement. There was, within labor, a great deal of early discomfort regarding Occupy, perhaps because of some bad experiences with a precursor, the anti-globalization movement as manifested in the 1999 Battle of Seattle, and perhaps because, unlike latter-day organized labor, Occupy clearly was an actual social movement, and thus not readily subject to self-discipline or real control. In starkest terms, Occupiers had nothing at risk, while unions had real skin in the game.

Nevertheless, Occupy did have needs. It needed clusters of local activists with whom to coordinate. This, according to one report, the SEIU was happy to provide through a series of surrogates, including the various "Good Jobs" groups that have since become

In return, Occupy gave organized labor a gift of its own, a sort of swagger and a sense of the possible that had long been missing from the movement.

prime movers of the living wage movement.<sup>42</sup> It needed legitimacy and visibility for its recruiting teach-ins. This the AFL-CIO was happy to provide.<sup>43</sup> It needed office space and infrastructure

support. This, the SEIU was happy to provide.<sup>44</sup> It needed storage space. This the United Federation of Teachers in New York City was happy to provide.<sup>45</sup> It needed a fiscal sponsor. This, the Alliance for Global Justice, was happy to provide, as it had for the earlier anti-globalization demonstrations and continues to do for United Students Against Sweatshops, a surrogate of UNITE HERE.<sup>46</sup> And it needed a bank in which to deposit the hundreds of thousands of dollars it received in contributions. This Amalgamated Bank, the SEIU's prize in the breakup of UNITE HERE, was happy to provide.<sup>47</sup>

In return, Occupy gave organized labor a gift of its own, a sort of swagger and a sense of the possible that had long been missing from the movement. Nowhere was this clearer than in the confrontational tactics adopted in 2012 by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in its jurisdictional confrontation with the electrical workers union (IBEW) over



the right to represent workers at the EGT grain terminal in Longview, Washington, during which it received direct assistance from Occupy.<sup>48</sup> (This dispute was later a key factor driving the 2013 disaffiliation of ILWU from the AFL-CIO.) And nowhere is the impact of Occupy better institutionalized than in the positioning and tactics of the worker center movement. In particular, the class-based thematic has thus far been an effective force multiplier in many campaigns that ostensibly advance the cause of low-wage workers, in part as an appeal to the public conscience, but also and importantly, as a basis for recruiting the non-employees who generally comprise the large majority of participants in such “strikes” and other actions.

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE WORKER CENTER MOVEMENT

By now it will be clear that none of this activity occurs, or at least has any effect, without the availability of one critical resource, money. It takes money to organize; it takes money to communicate effectively; it takes money to build and sustain even the smallest and most local of associations.<sup>49</sup> And it is here, in the area of finance, where worker centers benefit from yet another accelerating historical development, the expansion in the number, assertiveness, sophistication, and collective wealth of activist charitable foundations.

Charitable foundations, if they are to retain their tax-exempt status, are prohibited from engaging in political activity, but that is generally defined as partisan political activity, i.e., favoring one or another political party or candidate, or express issue advocacy. That leaves open and legitimate a wide range of other forms of inherently political activity, ranging from education to policy-related research to certain forms of support of advocacy. And foundations have long participated in such activities, perhaps most notably in the case of the Ford Foundation’s mid-twentieth century role in political development efforts in what was at the time termed the Third World. In the present context, however, a more relevant starting point for discussion might be the establishment, in 1976, of the Tides Foundation, followed by the publication, in 1993, of the first edition of Gregory Colvin’s monograph, *Fiscal Sponsorship: 6 Ways to Do It Right*.<sup>50</sup>

The Tides Foundation introduced a series of innovations that helped to expand both foundation activism, per se, and the pool of funds available to support it. Central to the Tides model was the combining of assets from individuals and smaller foundations into pools of funds that were large enough to have an impact. This had the effect of making such giving more attractive to progressive-minded donors, and, not coincidentally, of making Tides into a central clearinghouse, and thus a more effective controller of the agendas and viability of those organizations upon which it bestowed its favors. Even large foundations began directing sums to Tides for distribution, among them the Pew Charitable Trusts (more than \$100 million between 1990 and 2002), The Ford Foundation (\$26 million between 1989 and 2002), and the Open Society Institute (\$7 million between 1997 and 2002). At the other end of the pipeline, from 1998 through 2001, for example, Tides channeled more than three-quarters of a million



dollars to the Alliance for Justice, which became a sponsor, first, of the anti-World Bank and International Monetary Fund demonstrations of the late 1990s, and later of the Occupy movement, and \$125,000 to United for a Fair Economy, an organization that helped develop a class-oriented narrative for political activism and that, importantly, in 1997 created a subsidiary, Responsible Wealth, the function of which was to recruit and train a new generation of progressive activist philanthropists. And as early as 1998, Tides also began funding one of the earliest worker center-type organizations, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, and by 2001 had channeled \$100,000 to LAANE.<sup>51</sup>

The Tides Foundation also served as an incubator of sorts for progressive advocacy. In 1980, Norman Lear and others launched a new Tides-based project, People for the American Way, which later developed into an important voice of progressive politics. Later in that decade, the foundation expanded its fiscal sponsorship by taking on a portfolio of activities on behalf of institutional clients and beginning the build-out of a computer network to link advocacy groups through another project, the Institute for Global Communication. In 1989, Tides split its staff between grant-making and fiscal sponsorship activities, and in 1996 established a separate identity for the latter, now known as the Tides Center. It was in this context that, in 1993, the San Francisco Foundation and the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation called a meeting of Bay Area philanthropies, following which Mr. Colvin was tasked with writing his treatment of fiscal sponsorship.<sup>52</sup> Fiscal sponsorship is, in effect, a means of providing administrative infrastructure — office space, accounting services, computer support, grant-seeking and other fundraising, and the like in support of organizations that are too new, too small, too weak, or insufficiently funded to maintain their own, independent operations. Typically performed on a fee-for-service basis, it is a way of encouraging and subsidizing desired activities. In 2003, Tides conducted

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research and a strategic planning exercise regarding fiscal sponsorship. This led to a first meeting of organizations performing this role, and then to the establishment of the National Network of Fiscal Sponsors, itself a Tides project.<sup>53</sup>

Fast forward a decade, and we find that both elements of the Tides model are in play with respect to the development of worker centers. As we are about to detail, a number of these organizations receive substantial support from activist foundations; others receive support in the form of fiscal sponsorship, either directly or indirectly, or even serve as fiscal sponsors themselves. For example, in 2013 the Marguerite Casey Foundation provided a grant to the Florida New Majority Education Fund for issue-based organizing. The fiscal sponsor of the Fund: the Miami Workers Center.<sup>54</sup> And the Liberty Hill Foundation

awarded \$20,000 to the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) of Los Angeles, with fiscal sponsorship provided by the Restaurant Opportunities Center United, the national umbrella arm of ROC.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the Workers Interfaith Network in Memphis, acting as fiscal sponsor, gave rise to the Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha (CTUL), as well as organizing its own Memphis Workers Center.<sup>56</sup> And the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice serves as fiscal sponsor of the National Guestworker Alliance, one of the organizations targeting Walmart, among other companies.<sup>57</sup>

In some instances, a union has factored in establishing and sponsoring a worker center. UNITE HERE Local 100, for example, played the lead role in establishing the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY), and served as its fiscal sponsor. There was, in effect, a division of labor when it came to organizing, with the union focusing on “big, ‘tablecloth,’ restaurants” while ROC worked at organizing the remainder of establishments, many of them smaller. At least as of 2003, according to the Center’s organizer, Saru Jayaraman, the union was more intrusive than some fiscal sponsors. In her words, “HERE seems to have some trouble letting go. The union does not tell ROC what to do, but has not granted complete independence. Although the center is run by a worker board, the union acts as our fiscal sponsor, and thus that worker board is not the legal board.”<sup>58</sup> ROC-NY later evolved into ROC United, which, as we have seen, itself became a fiscal sponsor of local affiliates. Similarly, in the wake of its occupation of Republic Windows and Doors in 2008, the United Electrical Workers union (UE) founded Warehouse Workers for Justice. The UE Research and Education Fund serves as the organization’s fiscal sponsor.<sup>59</sup>

Following the precedent of the Tides model, other foundations are hardly passive or reactive in their grant-giving and fiscal sponsorships; they do not simply sit around and wait for developments, but on occasion move to shape them. A case in point is that of the Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation, which was the driving force behind the formation of the Food Chain Workers Alliance. In January 2008, a Noyes Foundation program officer convened a meeting of eight organizations — among them ROC United, the Chicago-based Center for New Community, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), el Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas (CATA), the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), and the Northwest Arkansas Workers’ Justice Center (NWAJJC) — as a first step toward coordinating their activities, which apply at different points along the supply chain. In 2009, with the support of a Ford Foundation grant, ROC United convened a follow-up meeting, with the participation of the United Food and Commercial Workers union, at which the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA) was formally established. Much of the meeting centered on research that had been conducted by The Data Center, a group established in 1977 to provide research in support of corporate and anti-corporate campaigns conducted by labor, environmental and other activists, analyzing the demographics of the membership of each participating group and identifying possible corporate targets against which they might productively unite.<sup>60</sup>



But the real power of foundation activism remains centered in the money — the millions of dollars these entities distribute to community organizations and worker centers to support labor organizing and other activities that contribute, directly or indirectly, to it. In 2012, for instance, total foundation giving topped \$50 billion.<sup>61</sup> The vast majority of this money went to support education, healthcare, and other traditional charitable causes. But a significant share was devoted to economic, political, and social activism; a significant and growing proportion of that is devoted to labor activism per se; and a significant number of foundations participate in this activity, either at the national or the local level. A few of the most prominent or most active regarding the issue at hand are listed below.<sup>62</sup> Included are awards to selected worker centers and like organizations, and to a few of the many organizations that provide a supportive infrastructure for organizing in the form of research, policy analysis, strategy development, communication, and other services.

But the real power of foundation activism remains centered in the money — the millions of dollars these entities distribute to community organizations and worker centers to support labor organizing and other activities that contribute, directly or indirectly, to it.

The **BEN & JERRY'S FOUNDATION** was created in 1985 with a grant of stock and a commitment of a portion of the ice cream company's annual profits as its resource base. Today it is sustained by an annual contribution from Unilever, which purchased the company in 2000. In 2009, that contribution amounted to \$2 million. The foundation supports grassroots organizing and movement building for social change, in addition to various Vermont-centered programs.<sup>63</sup> Among the foundation's grantees during the period 2009–2012 were the Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA), a campus-based activity allied with CIW (\$30,000), Just Harvest (\$15,000), ROC-DC (\$15,000), CTUL (\$15,000), Los Angeles Taxi Workers Alliance (\$15,000), Southwest Workers Union (SWU) (\$15,000), Warehouse Workers for Justice (WWJ) (\$15,000), Brandworkers International (\$10,000), the Street Vendor Project (\$15,000), NWAJJC (\$15,000), FCWA (\$25,000 in support of the Food Worker Survey Project), and the Media Mobilizing Project (\$45,000).<sup>64</sup>

The **MARGUERITE CASEY FOUNDATION**, founded in 2001 and based in Washington state, focuses its grant-making on movement-building initiatives, and since 2007 has centered its activity around two questions — what a nationwide movement of poor and working class families would look like and what it would take to “spark” such a movement.<sup>65</sup> Between 2009 and 2012, its grantees included among their numbers the SWU (\$300,000), CIW (\$300,000), Miami Workers Center (\$450,000), Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights (MWCHR) (\$350,000), SWU (\$100,000), Labor/Community Strategy Center (\$1,000,000), LAANE (\$750,000), and National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) (\$200,000).<sup>66</sup>

The **DISCOUNT FOUNDATION** was established in 1977 to support community organizing for empowerment and economic opportunity. In 2009, the foundation focused its attention on a new project, Organizing for Worker Justice, which was intended to support collective action through community and faith based coalitions that coordinate with unions and other worker organizations.<sup>67</sup> This includes an emphasis on supply-chain organizing, and in that context, a focus on Walmart. In particular, the foundation supported production of a special report highly critical of the company by The American Prospect in May 2011.<sup>68</sup> In 2009–2012, among the foundation’s grantees were the National Employment Law Project (NELP) (\$100,000), the Tides Foundation (\$40,000 to support organizations in Arkansas and Pennsylvania that educate the public about the rights of workers to organize), New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ) (\$40,000 through the National Immigration Law Center), ROC-United (\$60,000), New York Communities for Change (NYCC) (\$25,000), and WWJ (\$75,000). In all, between 2009 and 2012, the Discount Foundation issued grants totaling \$1,995,000 for activities related to “independent worker organizing.”<sup>69</sup>

The **FORD FOUNDATION** is, as noted, one of the largest and most influential of activist philanthropic institutions, with a long track record of influencing policy and public life through its grant-giving. Between 2009–2012, the foundation’s giving in the general area of workers and organizing included, among other recipients, The Data Center (\$150,000, awarded in 2009 to provide the research underlying establishment of the Food Chain Workers Alliance), the Labor/Community Strategy Center (\$600,000), Jobs with Justice Education Fund (\$2,725,000), and NELP (\$10,860,000) — all, in a sense, devoted to infrastructure development — and several worker centers and allied organizations including Good Jobs First (\$510,000), LAANE (\$290,000), ROC-NY (\$650,000), ROC United (\$1,775,000), Miami Workers Center (\$600,000), NDWA (\$717,000), and NOWCRJ (\$1,150,000). In addition, in 2010 Ford awarded \$200,000 to the SEIU for a demonstration program promoting next-generation workforce strategies.<sup>70</sup>

The **GENERAL SERVICE FOUNDATION** is an Illinois-based philanthropy founded in 1946 by Clifton and Margaret Musser, whose descendants constitute a majority of the foundation’s board to this day.<sup>71</sup> Through its Human Rights and Economic Justice Program, during the period 2009–2012 the foundation awarded funds to The Data Center (\$36,000), FCWA (\$20,000), Jobs with Justice Education Fund (\$120,000), NELP (\$160,000), NOWCRJ (\$123,000), ROC United (\$125,000), NDWA (\$100,000), WWJ (\$15,000), UE Research and Education Fund (\$60,000), and the ILRF (\$30,000).<sup>72</sup>

The **HILL-SNOWDEN FOUNDATION** was founded by Arthur Hill in 1959 with funds from stock options in Johnson & Johnson, where he rose to the level of vice president and director. In 2002 the foundation initiated a program in “economic justice organizing,” and in 2012 refocused this effort on supporting community-based organizations in the south or



southwest that employ community organizing to support low-wage workers. Consideration for funding is by invitation only.<sup>73</sup> In 2009–2011, Hill-Snowden grants included, among others, \$60,000 to CIW, \$60,000 to the Miami Workers Center, \$75,000 to NOWCRJ, \$15,000 to ROC-NY, \$40,000 to ROC-DC, \$40,000 to ROC United, and \$80,000 to the SWU.<sup>74</sup>

Founded by W.K. Kellogg in 1930 with a core mission aimed at assisting and supporting children, the **KELLOGG FOUNDATION** today has assets in excess of \$8 billion and a reinterpretation of its mission as establishing strong and secure communities in which children may prosper.<sup>75</sup> In the general area of workers and organizing, between 2009 and 2012 it supported such organizations as the Miami Workers Center (\$400,000), LAANE (\$1,150,000), CIW (\$1,260,000), SWU (\$400,000), ROC United (\$500,000), and ROC-NY (\$400,000).<sup>76</sup>

The **KRESGE FOUNDATION**, with assets of \$3 billion, is located in Detroit. As a point of reference, in 2012 it paid out approximately \$150 million to grantees. In recent years it has redefined its mission to center in significant measure on institutional transformation to promote human progress.<sup>77</sup> In 2010–2012 the foundation provided support to CIW in the amount of \$2,570,000, and to ROC United in the amount of \$400,000.<sup>78</sup>

The **MERTZ-GILMORE FOUNDATION** is a New York-based philanthropy with assets of approximately \$100 million. Among its grants during the period 2009–2012 were awards to ROC-NY (\$130,000), NYCC (\$150,000), and Brandworkers International (\$40,000).<sup>79</sup>

The **MORIAH FUND** was established in 1985 to promote human rights and social justice. Among its foci are advancing economic justice and empowering low income families in Washington, DC, and nationally. The Fund emphasizes community organizing, and does not accept unsolicited proposals. Between 2009 and 2012 its grantees included, among others, ROC-United (\$160,000), ILRF (\$80,000), NELP (\$80,000), and the Movement Strategy Center (\$50,000).<sup>80</sup>

The **NATHAN CUMMINGS FOUNDATION**, established through the estate of the eponymous founder of Sara Lee Corporation, focuses on advancing social justice through empowering communities.<sup>81</sup> In the area of labor-related grants, recipients during the period 2009–2012 included the Jobs with Justice Educational Foundation (\$150,000), LAANE (\$305,000), MWCHR (\$10,000), NDWA (\$225,000), ROC United (\$100,000) and ROC-NY (\$75,000).<sup>82</sup>

The **NEEDMOR FUND** is a family foundation established in 1956 by the Stranahan family, which plays a central role in the fund to this day. The fund supports organizing to achieve social justice, and was once a major contributor to ACORN chapters in several communities. Between 2009 and 2011, its grantees included, among others, the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Association (KIWA) (\$90,000), Labor/Community Strategy Center (\$30,000), Miami Workers Center (\$100,000), MWCHR (\$60,000), and LAANE (\$70,000).<sup>83</sup>



## THE EMERGING ROLE OF WORKER CENTERS IN UNION ORGANIZING

The **NEW YORK FOUNDATION**, established in 1909 with a gift of \$1 million from Alfred M. Heinsheimer, describes itself as “a steadfast supporter of community organizing and advocacy in New York City.”<sup>84</sup> Among its 2009–2012 grantees of interest in the context of worker centers were Brandworkers International (\$175,000), Domestic Workers United (an affiliate of the NDWA) (\$87,000), NELP (\$95,000), NYCC (\$87,000), New York Taxi Workers Alliance (\$85,000), ROC-NY (\$87,000), and the Retail Action Project (\$42,000).<sup>85</sup>

The **NORMAN FOUNDATION** is a family foundation based in New York state, and, through a series of reorganizations, has remained in the hands of descendants of Aaron E. Norman for some four generations. Priorities are set by members of the family.<sup>86</sup> In general, it supports economic justice and development through projects emphasizing community organizing and coalition building. Among its grantees between 2010 and 2012 were the FCWA (\$70,000), ILRF (\$50,000), NOWCRJ (\$75,000), NWAJJC (\$70,000), Workers Interfaith Network (\$60,000), The Data Center (\$55,000), SWU (\$20,000), and WWJ (\$20,000).<sup>87</sup>

The **NORTH STAR FUND** is a New York-based community foundation providing support for grassroots organizing for equality and economic justice. Since its founding in 1979, it has distributed more than \$40 million to some 1750 grantees.<sup>88</sup> During the period 2009–2012, among its awardees were the Retail Action Project (\$50,000), Brandworkers International (\$95,000), the Street Vendor Project (\$50,000), and Domestic Workers United (\$65,000).<sup>89</sup>

The **JESSIE SMITH NOYES FOUNDATION** was established in 1947 by real estate developer Charles F. Noyes. Its primary areas of interest are the environment and sustainable agriculture and food programs. Among its grantees between 2009 and 2012 were CIW Fair Food Standards Council (\$20,000), FCWA (\$75,000), Just Harvest USA (\$55,000), ROC-NY (\$50,000), SWU (\$100,000), and The Data Center (\$20,000).<sup>90</sup>

The **OPEN SOCIETY INSTITUTE**, which administers philanthropic activity for George Soros and related interests, provided support for some worker center projects during the period 2009–2011, among them the SWU (\$250,000), NDWA (\$695,000), NELP (\$90,000), NOWCRJ (\$200,000), and CIW (\$41,000).<sup>91</sup>

With an endowment of \$450 million, the **PUBLIC WELFARE FOUNDATION** has distributed some half billion dollars in grants to 4600 recipients since its inception in 1948. Workers rights represent one of three core foci of its grant-giving.<sup>92</sup> During 2009–2011, its grantees included CIW’s Alliance for Fair Food (\$1,170,000), ROC United (\$775,000), NELP (\$1,315,000), LAANE (\$2,000,000), Just Harvest (\$50,000), KIWA (for the CLEAN Car Wash Campaign, \$225,000), and the magazines *In These Times* (\$160,000), to establish a blog with original news coverage and commentary on workers’ rights issues, and *The American Prospect* (\$75,000), for a series of feature articles on workers’ rights.<sup>93</sup>



Like the Ford Foundation, the **ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION** has a long history of activism and the substantial resources to make it impactful. Worker related grant activity here during the period 2009–2012 included grants to NELP (\$2,110,000), ROC United (\$300,000), and ROC-NY (\$225,000), and to Freedman Consulting LLC (\$330,000) to provide technical assistance to selected grantees of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Campaign for American Workers initiative.<sup>94</sup>

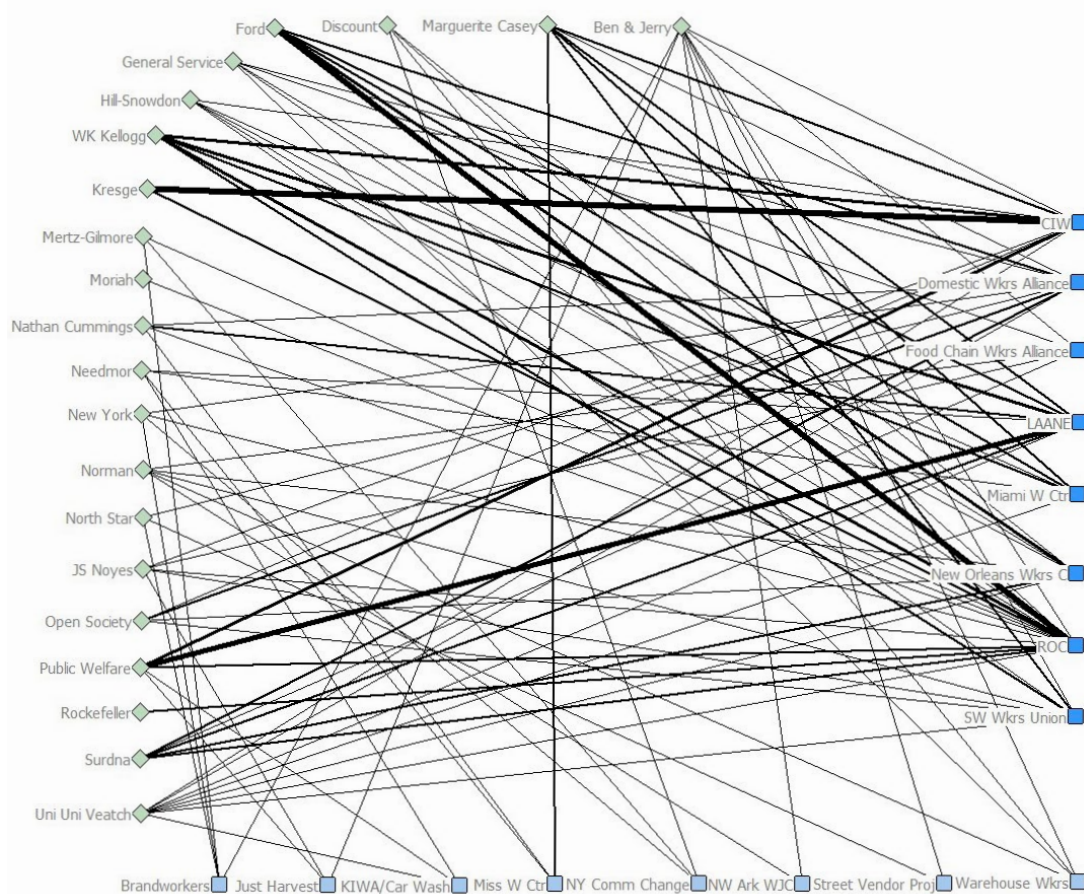
The **SURDNA FOUNDATION** was founded in 1917 by John Emory Andrus, who obviously liked word games and whose descendents continue to participate in its decision-making. The mission of the foundation, like others here, focuses on social justice, in this instance with an emphasis on strengthening local economies. It also seeks “to dismantle the structural barriers that limit opportunity...” In 2009–2012, Surdna grantees included the Alliance for Justice (\$75,000), FCWA (\$93,000), the Labor/Community Strategy Center (\$465,000), Movement Strategy Center (\$600,000), The Data Center (\$180,000), LAANE (\$500,000), NOWCRJ (\$450,000), ROC United (\$500,000), and NDWA (\$400,000), among others.<sup>95</sup>

An additional source of foundation-like funding is the series of **UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST VEATCH PROGRAM GRANTS**, which, during the period 2009–2012, included, among others, awards to the NOWCRJ (\$150,000), SWU (\$180,000), Clean Carwash Campaign (\$140,000), CIW (\$200,000), Making Change at Walmart Campaign Fund (UFCW) (\$40,000), ROC United (\$80,000), Miami Workers Center (\$160,000), ROC-NY (\$160,000), LAANE (\$135,000), NDWA (\$120,000), as well as the Progressive Technology Project (\$265,000), Good Jobs First (\$120,000), a special fund to enhance grantees’ ability to use media and communication strategies (\$276,000), and numerous other infrastructure activities.<sup>96</sup>

Figure 1 summarizes the flow of funds between the foundations listed above and a selection of worker centers and similar organizations. The green icons at the top and left denote the various foundations, while the darker blue icons at the right-hand side denote the most prominent or most actively supported of the worker centers and the lighter blue boxes at the bottom represent some of the other such organizations supported by these particular foundations. The relative thickness of the lines connecting sources of funds with their recipients represent the relative scale of the funds that are exchanged, ranging from as little as \$10,000 over four years to \$2 million or more. Please see footnote 62 for a summary and discussion of the sources and limitations of the underlying data.



**FIGURE 1. SELECTED WORKER CENTER FUNDING BY SELECTED FOUNDATIONS, 2009–2012**



It is worth noting in passing that some worker centers also receive financial support from the federal government, typically in the form of grants to provide services to their members or communities. For example, in 2013, the Department of Labor awarded grants for capacity building, government-speak for training, to CASA de Maryland (\$181,000), Casa Latina (\$144,000), Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas (\$61,000), the Farmworker Association of Florida (\$122,000), Make the Road New York (\$159,000), the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (\$185,000), the Worker Justice Center of New York (\$133,000), and the Workers Defense Project (\$134,000) — all worker centers in one form or another — as well as to such established unions as the AFT, LIUNA, SEIU, the Steelworkers, the UAW, and the UFCW. In 2009, DOL awarded ROC United



a \$275,000 grant to train restaurant employers and workers in ergonomics.<sup>97</sup> Between 2005 and 2008, ROC-NY received four separate grants totaling more than \$940,000 from the Department of Health and Human Services for its “Health and Safety Project”.<sup>98</sup>

While some foundation support goes to general, administrative, or other broad objectives or activities, most foundations prefer to fund focused activities. An example is the support provided by the Ben & Jerry’s Foundation to the Food Chain Workers Alliance in 2010, the purpose of which, according to the foundation, was to fund:

a research project to produce a report on the state of workers in the food system in the U.S. The research will be conducted by members of the Alliance in each of the following industries where current members are organizing: agriculture, meatpacking/poultry processing, food processing, warehouses, grocery stores, and restaurants. The surveys will serve as an organizing and member recruitment tool, and the resulting report will be used not only to inform Alliance initiatives but also to educate policy makers, consumers, and potential allies, as well as establish the Alliance as the national expert on Food Chain Worker issues.<sup>99</sup>

In effect, then, just as the Noyes Foundation had suggested formation of the Alliance and the Ford Foundation funded the Data Center research that served as its catalyst, the Ben & Jerry’s Foundation funded the research it would use to establish its bona fides and

**Foundations also provide long-term systematic support — and sometimes quite a lot of it — to organizations that are not themselves worker centers or other centers of social activism, but that provide information services, data, legal support, or other types of infrastructure or sustenance to these movement groups.**

extend its influence. In that sense, the Alliance is in some significant measure a creature of the foundations themselves. And some of its members even rely on foundations for their own internal development. The Rosenberg Foundation, for example, awarded \$35,000 to ROC United for the purpose of launching its Bay Area affiliate.<sup>100</sup>

Foundations also provide long-term systematic support — and sometimes quite a lot of it — to organizations that are not themselves worker centers or other centers of social activism, but that provide information services, data, legal support, or other types of infrastructure or sustenance to these movement groups. One example of this is the National Employment Law Project, which works with advocacy networks, including unions and worker centers, to provide legal and policy analysis, empirical research, legal advice and technical assistance, strategic coalition leadership, communications and messaging, and education and training to support policies and activities that advance workers rights and opportunities.<sup>101</sup> NELP has supported living wage campaigns across the country, as

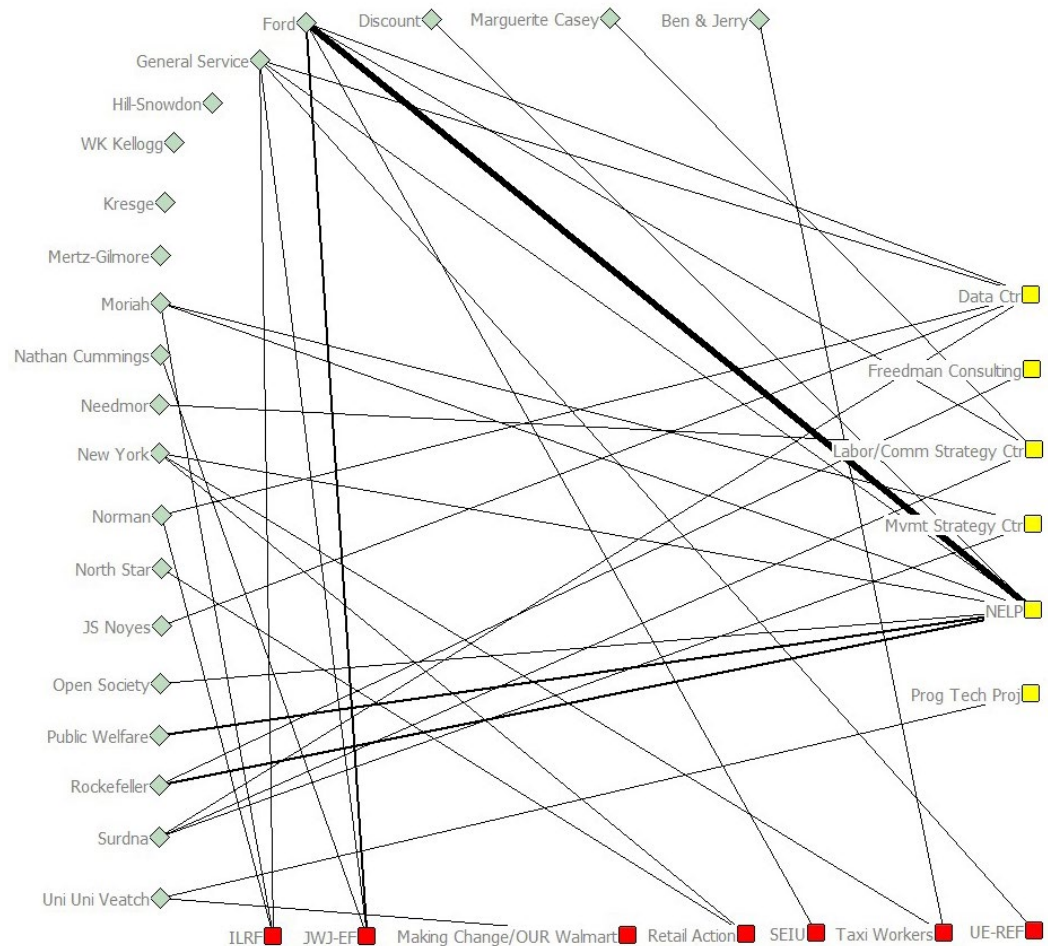
well as efforts in Chicago, New York, and California to use government partnerships to leverage worker center efforts in organizing such industries as day labor, construction, and restaurants.<sup>102</sup> In 2009, NELP conducted a major national study of low-wage workers and workplaces that helped establish the foundations for some of these efforts. That report was funded by the Ford Foundation, the John and Dora Haynes Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the Russell Sage Foundation. Represented on its advisory boards were, among others, the Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance, LAANE, National Day Laborer Organizing Network, National Immigration Law Center, Domestic Workers United, New York City Taxi Workers Alliance, ROC-NY, and locals of the SEIU, Teamsters, and UNITE HERE. Publicity associated with the report was handled by the Berlin Rosen public relations firm.<sup>103</sup> Among the organization's donors in 2012, as an example, were the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Discount Foundation, Ford Foundation, Moriah Fund, Open Society Institute, Public Welfare Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Surdna Foundation, while its supporters included, among others, several state-level AFL-CIO central committees, AFSCME, Amalgamated Bank, Brandworkers International, NDWA, National Immigration Law Center, SEIU and the Teamsters.<sup>104</sup> During the 2009–2012 period, the Ford Foundation alone provided funds totaling more than \$10 million to NELP.

A somewhat different infrastructure enterprise, but one that also garners the support of several of the listed foundations, is the Labor/Community Strategy Center, based in Los Angeles. In the words of the Center's website, "Linking mass struggles to the need for radical, structural change, we develop campaigns and demands that help build a revitalized world united front that can stop the rising tides of war, racism and imperialism, the ecological crisis and the growing police state. ... We fight to win." Among other activities, the Center operates an intensive 6-to-12-month training course for organizers and manages a number of transportation-related campaigns.<sup>105</sup> During 2009–2012, the Center received grants totaling \$465,000 from the Surdna Foundation, \$600,000 from the Ford Foundation, and \$1 million from the Marguerite Casey Foundation, among others.

Figure 2 summarizes the flow of funds from the same 20 foundations and the Veatch Grants on which we have focused (the green boxes in the figure) to several of these infrastructure/service providers (the yellow boxes at right), as well as to several union related and other establishment labor organizations that are active in worker center development (the red boxes at the bottom). Some of these — OURWalmart, Retail Action Project, National Taxi Workers Union — have functioned, or appear to have functioned, as worker centers at one time or another, but unlike the centers included in Figure 1, these entities have ties to specific unions that vary from close to indistinguishable. We will address this issue momentarily. As in Figure 1, the lines linking foundations to recipients capture the flow of funds, with heavier lines indicating greater funding. In this instance, however, the upper limit is established by the Ford Foundation transfer of \$10,860,000 to NELP during the period under analysis.



**FIGURE 2. SELECTED INFRASTRUCTURE AND LABOR ORGANIZATION FUNDING BY SELECTED FOUNDATIONS, 2009–2012**



As the discussion above should make clear, activist foundations are providing a great deal of money to fund a variety of actors in the worker center space — the centers themselves, related community organizations, traditional unions and center-like structures within or closely affiliated with them, and a wide array of research, communication, policy development, capacity building, and other infrastructure providers who serve these organizations. The present analysis has only begun to capture this flow of funds, but even in this limited sampling of grantees over a limited number of years, the dollar totals are impressive. They are summarized in Table 1, which reports grants by the listed foundations during the period 2009–2012 (or a subset of that period when full data are not available) awarded only to those

# THE EMERGING ROLE OF WORKER CENTERS IN UNION ORGANIZING

organizations listed under each foundation in our earlier analysis. For this subset of funding activity during this four-year period, total awards exceeded \$57,000,000. Again, please see footnote 62 for a summary and discussion of the sources and limitations of the underlying data.

**TABLE 1. TOTAL AWARDS TO SELECTED RECIPIENTS BY SELECTED FOUNDATIONS, 2009–2012**

FOUNDATION OR GRANTOR	TOTAL AWARDS 2009–2012
Ben & Jerry's Foundation	\$230,000
Marguerite Casey Foundation	\$3,450,000
Discount Foundation	\$340,000 <sup>1</sup>
Ford Foundation	\$26,127,000
General Service Foundation	\$789,000
Hill-Snowdon Foundation	\$370,000 <sup>2</sup>
WK Kellogg Foundation	\$4,110,000
Kresge Foundation	\$2,970,000 <sup>3</sup>
Mertz-Gilmore Foundation	\$320,000
Moriah Fund	\$370,000
Nathan Cummings Foundation	\$865,000
Needmor Fund	\$350,000 <sup>2</sup>
New York Foundation	\$658,000
Norman Foundation	\$420,000 <sup>3</sup>
North Star Fund	\$260,000
Jesse Smith Noyes Foundation	\$320,000
Open Society Institute	\$1,276,000 <sup>2</sup>
Public Welfare Foundation	\$5,535,000 <sup>2,4</sup>
Rockefeller Foundation	\$2,965,000
Surdna Foundation	\$3,263,000
Unitarian Universalist Veatch Grants	\$2,026,000

<sup>1</sup> The reported figure is for grants to the organizations listed in this report. The Foundation reported that overall, between 2009 and 2012, it awarded grants totaling \$1,195,000 for activities related to “independent worker organizing.”

<sup>2</sup> Data cover 2009–2011. No data available for 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Data cover 2010–2012. No data available for 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Excludes grants to *In These Times* and *The American Prospect* totaling \$235,000 to encourage news coverage and commentary.



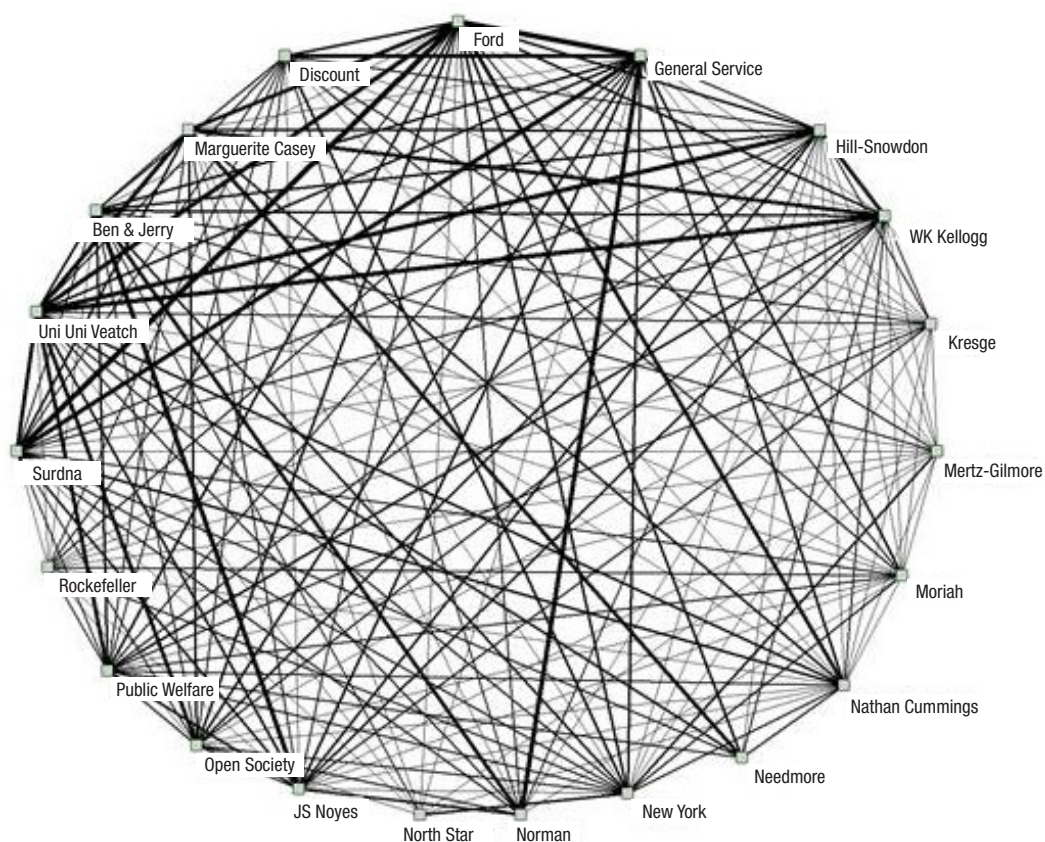


Before concluding our discussion of the financial role played by foundations in the establishment and operations of worker centers and related organizations, let us make explicit a point that has been left implicit to this point. As in other areas of activism, whether on purpose or inadvertently, and there is at least some reason to believe that it is in some measure purposeful, like-minded foundations tend to act in clusters. This is apparent in Figure 3, which summarizes the number of instances of co-funding the same worker center or related organization between each pairing of our 21 funding sources, i.e., the overlap of funding activity between each pair of foundations, only for the recipients included in Figures 1 and 2. In the figure, the foundations of interest are arrayed around the perimeter. If each foundation had its own portfolio of grantees, and none of these entities received additional support from another foundation, the space in the center of the figure would be empty of any intersecting activity. This is illustrated in Condition 1 below. If there was some overlap of support for grantees, but only in a few instances (A with C, B with E, for example), there would be a few lines connecting the partnered foundations across the intervening space, but the center of the figure would be nearly empty. This is illustrated in Condition 2 below.



Now, suppose that there was a high degree of overlap among foundations in the grantees that they chose to support. The open space in the center of the diagram would begin to fill with more and more lines, depending on the number of de facto foundation partners and the number of co-funded grantees. At higher and higher densities of effective coordination of effort, or at least of common grant-making outcomes, the diagram would come to resemble nothing so much as a ball of yarn, with less and less visible white space. And that is precisely what we find in Figure 3. The range of overlaps for any pair of foundations in their respective selection of grantees in the 2009–2012 period was between 0 and 6; as before, this variation is captured by the thickness of each connecting line. So heavier lines connecting a given pair of foundations represent a higher degree of co-funding, lighter lines a lesser degree, and where no line connects two foundations, the two had no grantees in common. Were we to include additional worker center-related recipients, of which there are a great many of which we have not spoken here, the density of the intertwining would only be greater.

**FIGURE 3. OVERLAPS IN FUNDING OF WORKER CENTER-RELATED PROJECTS AMONG SELECTED FOUNDATIONS, 2009–2012**



## PROTOTYPICAL WORKER CENTERS

In a sense, that section header is misleading, for there are no two worker centers that are precisely alike, and hence, there is no true prototype. There are, however, some dimensions we can use to distinguish among them. Though we will not attempt to do that systematically here, we will consider some potentially significant variations that may be of strategic importance.<sup>106</sup>

Between 1992 and 2007, the number of worker centers in the United States increased from 5 to an estimated 160. Driven principally by rapid increases in the immigrant workforce, these centers filled a niche that was at once geographic, demographic, and functional. There were few traditional unions in place to advocate for workers in the South and Southwest, two of the



regions where growth occurred earliest, and few that were particularly interested in representing, or able to attract a stable membership among, highly mobile low-wage workers.<sup>107</sup> Today these organizations number more than 200,<sup>108</sup> and vary widely in size, resources, capabilities, form, structure, and purpose. One particularly interesting dimension along which they vary is in their degree of closeness to, or separation from, established traditional labor unions.

One form of organization — and the one closest to the labor establishment — is that of the worker center that evolves into a more traditional union, with full membership and representation functions. This evolution is a rare event, occurring for the first time in 2011 when the National Taxi Workers' Alliance became the first nontraditional workers' organization to join the AFL-CIO *as a union*.<sup>109</sup> Though a potential model for implementing a key initiative adopted by the labor federation at its quadrennial convention in 2013, the broadening of its membership beyond traditional boundaries, this example remains enough of an outlier at this time that we will not focus on it here.

Next in closeness to the traditional union are those worker centers that are self-evidently surrogates of particular unions. Perhaps the best example of this is OURWalmart, formed in June 2011, which seeks members among past and present Walmart employees and is an acknowledged subsidiary of the UFCW. The UFCW has been trying without success to organize Walmart workers for at least two decades. According to the 2012 Form LM-2 filed by the union, financial transactions involving OURWalmart are integrated with the UFCW's own annual filing.<sup>110</sup> Dan Schlademan, the group's leading strategist,<sup>111</sup> who also heads up Making Change at Walmart, a division of the union, is listed by the UFCW as a Campaign Director.<sup>112</sup> The UFCW provided a large, but unspecified, sum of money to get the group started, and also paid hundreds of its members to canvas door-to-door urging Walmart workers to sign on. Additional start-up assistance reportedly came from ASGK Public Strategies, a consulting firm closely tied to Obama strategist David Axelrod. OURWalmart represents at least the fourth attempt to use surrogates to organize the company's workers. Earlier, the UFCW maintained one such group, Walmart Watch, while the SEIU competed through another, Wake Up Walmart. A third group, the Wal-Mart Workers Association, was backed by activist foundations and operated briefly in Florida. At its founding, UFCW officials told the *New York Times* that OURWalmart would be bigger and more effective than these earlier surrogates. Mr. Schlademan noted that, "The best thing the U.F.C.W. can be is a catalyst to help associates build an organization."<sup>113</sup>

From a strategic perspective, the function of OURWalmart appears to be three-fold: to give some semblance of credibility to a claim of actually representing Walmart employees, albeit based on far smaller numbers than would a union selected through the customary NLRB-defined process, even to the point of calling so-called "strikes"; to suggest to the public the presence of broad-based dissatisfaction among the company's workforce without the perceptual baggage associated with a traditional union; and to provide a mechanism for



outreach to progressive activist groups in selected localities. As an example, in September 2013 OURWalmart contacted CBS News to alert reporters to a planned action against the company. When CBS contacted Berlin Rosen, the public relations company that distributed the information in behalf of OURWalmart, to ask if these actions were not in fact organized by a union, the firm responded that the activity was initiated by a group called Making Change at Walmart, which it described as “a coalition of labor unions, community groups and Walmart workers.”<sup>114</sup> If Berlin Rosen went on to mention that Making Change at Walmart and OURWalmart are both integrated functions of the UFCW headed by a staff campaign director, the CBS reporter neglected to mention this in his report. This was the same public relations firm, incidentally, that managed release of the 2009 NELP study of low-wage workers.

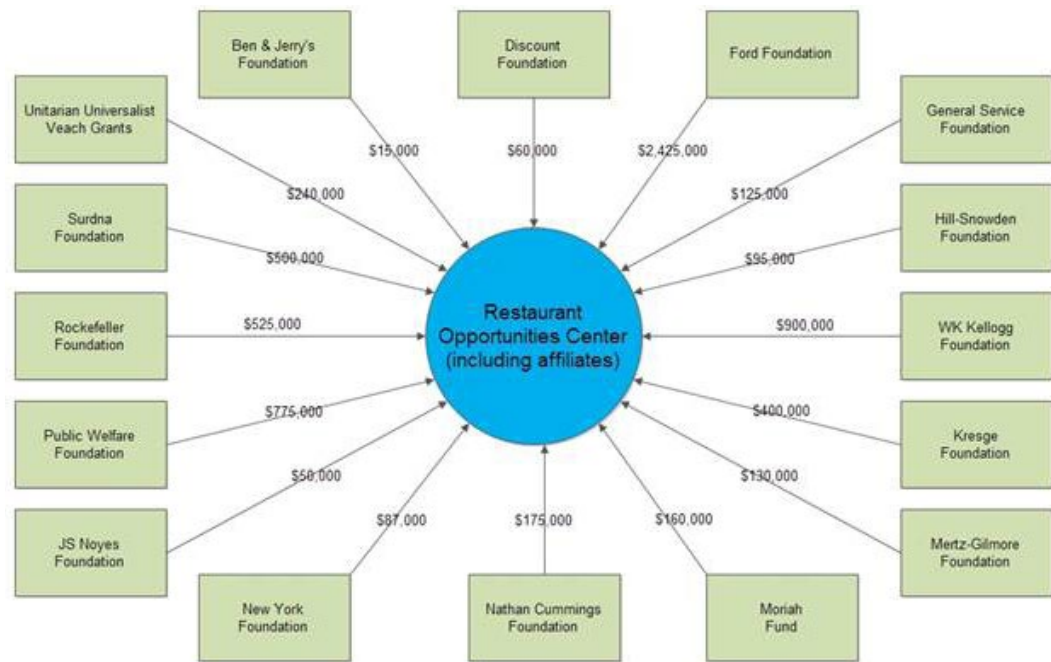
In its focus on a single employer rather than an industry or industry segment, OURWalmart is

**From a strategic perspective, the function of OURWalmart appears to be three-fold: to give some semblance of credibility to a claim of actually representing Walmart employees ... to suggest to the public the presence of broad-based dissatisfaction among the company's workforce without the perceptual baggage associated with a traditional union; and to provide a mechanism for outreach to progressive activist groups in selected localities.**

relatively unique. But in its dependence on the UFCW for its origins, leadership and funding, this group is part of a small class of worker centers that includes as well the Retail Action Project (through RWDSU, also tied to the UFCW), Warehouse Workers United (together with Making Change at Walmart, identified as a project of the Change to Win Strategic Organizing Center, of which the UFCW is one of four remaining union affiliates, and sharing with it a particular focus on Walmart<sup>115</sup>) and, along slightly different lines, Warehouse Workers for Justice (UE).

Other worker centers are hybrids of one type or another, maintaining more or less close ties to an existing union, while also maintaining a significant degree of independence, particularly in their sources of funds. A good example of this model is provided by the Restaurant Opportunities Center United, or ROC United. ROC United grew out of ROC New York, a small organization begun after September 11, 2001, to assist the wait staff and other employees of Windows on the World, a restaurant that had been located atop the World Trade Center. As we saw earlier, UNITE HERE Local 100 played a central role in this startup process, and preserved its relationship with ROC through fiscal sponsorship. But that is where the ROC story diverges from that of OURWalmart. While the latter remains captive to the UFCW, ROC has developed an impressive capability to attract financial support from activist foundations. From those foundations listed earlier alone, the organization and its various affiliates received grants totaling \$6.215 million during the period 2009–2012. This funding is summarized in Figure 4. Today the group claims branches in ten locations — the Bay Area, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, Michigan, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC.<sup>116</sup>

**FIGURE 4. SOURCES AND AMOUNTS OF SELECTED FUNDING OF RESTAURANT OPPORTUNITIES CENTER AND AFFILIATES, 2009–2012**



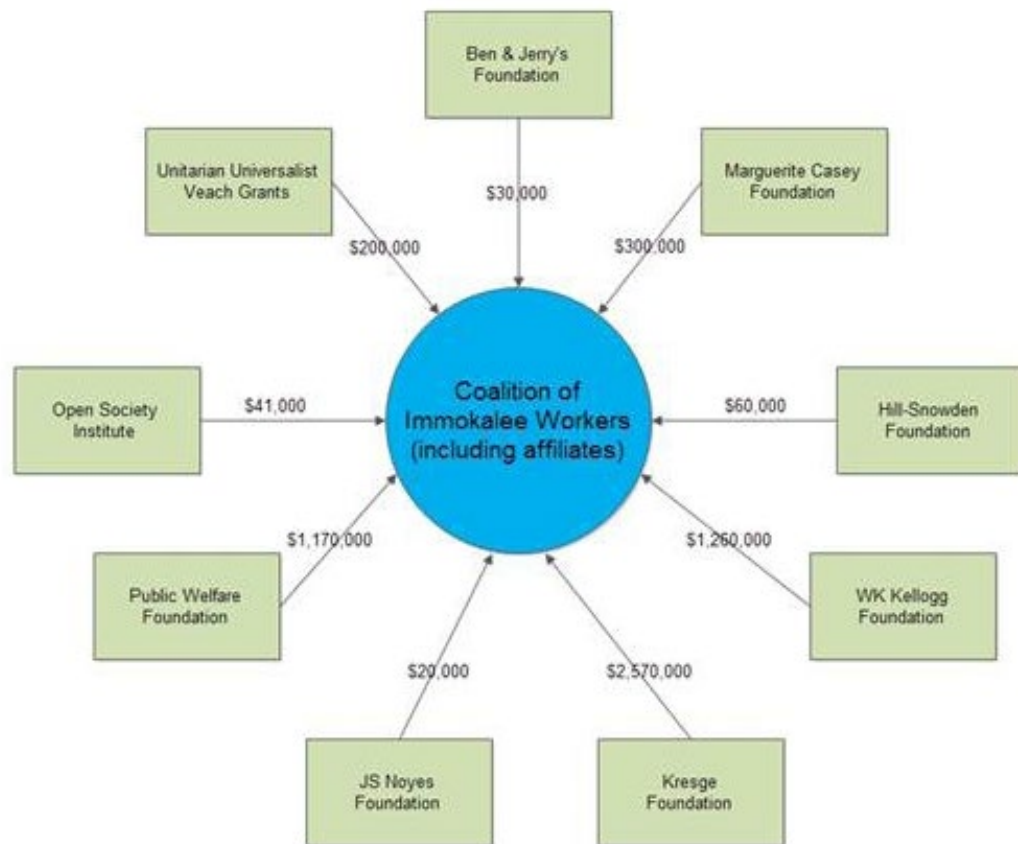
At one step further removed from established unions, but nonetheless tied to them, is another worker-center style group, New York Communities for Change (NYCC). Formed in 2010 by leaders of the then-discredited and defunct New York chapter of ACORN, and backed by union support reportedly in the hundreds of thousands of dollars,<sup>117</sup> NYCC is a social justice-style organization that claims a far broader portfolio than simply representing or serving workers, but that also occupies a portion of the worker center space. As its name implies, NYCC is New York based, with nine chapters distributed across the five boroughs. During the period 2009–2012, the group received grants from the Discount Foundation (\$25,000), Mertz-Gilmore Foundation (\$150,000), and the New York Foundation (\$87,000), among those on which we are focusing here. However, because it is not always evident how these funds were allocated between worker center activities and the remainder of the organization's agenda, we have not included it in our more detailed analysis of funding patterns. It is worth noting, however, that in 2012 the SEIU gave \$2.5 million to NYCC. In 2013, the very next year, NYCC initiated a series of one-day strikes by fast food workers at multiple restaurant chains and in multiple cities. Demands included a base wage of \$15 per hour and a "fair process" to join a union.<sup>118</sup> The latter is an established SEIU code phrase for card check. Similarly,

an organizing drive at New York City car washes grew out of a collaboration with the RWDSU, an affiliate of the UFCW, and was planned at a 2011 meeting. NYCC's assigned role was to build community support for the organizing campaign, while the union's was to file for elections through the NLRB.<sup>119</sup> Today NYCC serves as the campaign lead of the coalition called Fast Food Forward, which has spearheaded much of the action against fast food restaurant chains, especially in New York.<sup>120</sup> In NYCC, then we have an inherently political organization with a broad agenda, arising from the wreckage of ACORN with the support of that organization's close union allies, that has cooperated with at least two unions and has engaged in labor organizing, but that is unlikely to affiliate formally with any union in the manner of OURWalmart or ROC.

Finally, there are worker centers that may cooperate with established unions in some instances, but that retain both their independence and a primary focus on serving the needs of their members broadly defined. Examples of this model are found in The Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights, the Northwest Arkansas Workers' Justice Center (affiliated with Interfaith Worker Justice, which has established its own network of such groups), and, most significantly, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a membership organization that does negotiate in behalf of workers (beyond its own members), but that also provides health, educational and other services to members, even including a food co-op. 2013 marked the twentieth anniversary of CIW, which came into existence following a meeting of eight farm workers at a Catholic church in the town of Immokalee, Florida.<sup>121</sup> Many of these South Florida farm workers trace their origins to Guatemala and Southern Mexico, including Chiapas, the area where the Zapatista rebellion of the 1990s was centered. That agrarian rebellion, more or less contemporaneous with the origins of CIW, was noteworthy for its sophisticated use of NGO networks for support, legitimacy, and visibility. That same strategy also characterizes CIW, and at least one organization that was active in Chiapas, the Mexico Solidarity Network, has worked closely with CIW, helping to coordinate its first successful fast food campaign by organizing speaking tours and workshops as well as assisting in the group's 2002 nationwide "Truth Tour."<sup>122</sup>

CIW is variously estimated to have between 2500 and 3500 members, mainly young males, of whom perhaps 80 to 100 constitute the active core. In 2007, CIW maintained an office staffed primarily by college-educated young women who belonged to the Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA), a partner organization that was formed during CIW's initial attention-garnering march across Florida in 2000 and which shared the office space.<sup>123</sup> By 2010, however, it was operating on an annual budget estimated at half a million dollars from a newly opened million-dollar building, and in 2011 it reported income for the year in excess of \$3 million, of which it spent \$110,000 on its Fair Food Campaign. The organization is heavily dependent on foundation support for its survival.<sup>124</sup> Figure 5 summarizes the funding of CIW during the period 2009–2012 by a subset of the foundations on which we focused earlier.

**FIGURE 5. SOURCES AND AMOUNTS OF SELECTED FUNDING OF COALITION OF IMMOKALEE WORKERS AND AFFILIATES, 2009–2012**



CIW has been a strategic innovator among worker centers in its membership education efforts, its coalition-building approach, and its targeting. In the first instance, for example, because many of the attendees at its meetings lack reading skills, training sessions typically rely heavily on play-acting, drawings and video. In the second instance, from the outset, the group has relied on allies, including the SFA and foundations as well as other activist groups, to multiply its influence. And in the third instance, it has employed a consistent line of attack: pick a clear target, emphasize workers rights and human rights (as through its use of the sweatshop thematic and its “Fair Food Program”), appeal especially to college and high school students for support, and employ hunger strikes, boycotts and marches to draw attention.<sup>125</sup> Each, in its way, is an outgrowth of strategies developed in mainstream unions’ corporate campaigns over the past three decades. After hitting resistance in its initial efforts to bargain directly with growers, CIW shifted

to a focus on fast food restaurant and supermarket chains — Taco Bell, McDonalds, Burger King, Subway, Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Publix — asking that they agree to pay a penny more per pound of tomatoes and to require growers to pass the additional revenue along to the farm workers. Several of these efforts were successful. Meanwhile its SFA partners launched successful efforts on college campuses in 2009 to pressure food service contractors Aramark and Sodexo to cooperate with CIW.<sup>126</sup> On the heels of the Aramark and Sodexo agreements, CIW was able to achieve an agreement with the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, which represents most of the state's growers.<sup>127</sup>

As it approached the achievement of its initial objectives, particularly among fast food restaurant chains, the group began to expand and redefine its mission. In 2009, for example, CIW received a grant from the Open Society Institute “to engage in grassroots organizing and legal education to remove employment barriers faced by Baltimore residents with criminal histories.”<sup>128</sup> More generally, CIW has begun to focus more and more of its communication strategy on the theme of ending what it terms “modern day slavery.”<sup>129</sup> The group has been granted a considerable degree of legitimacy in the form of special recognition. In 2003, three CIW members received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, and in 2010, CIW's Laura Germino was honored by the State Department for her efforts to end human trafficking.<sup>130</sup>

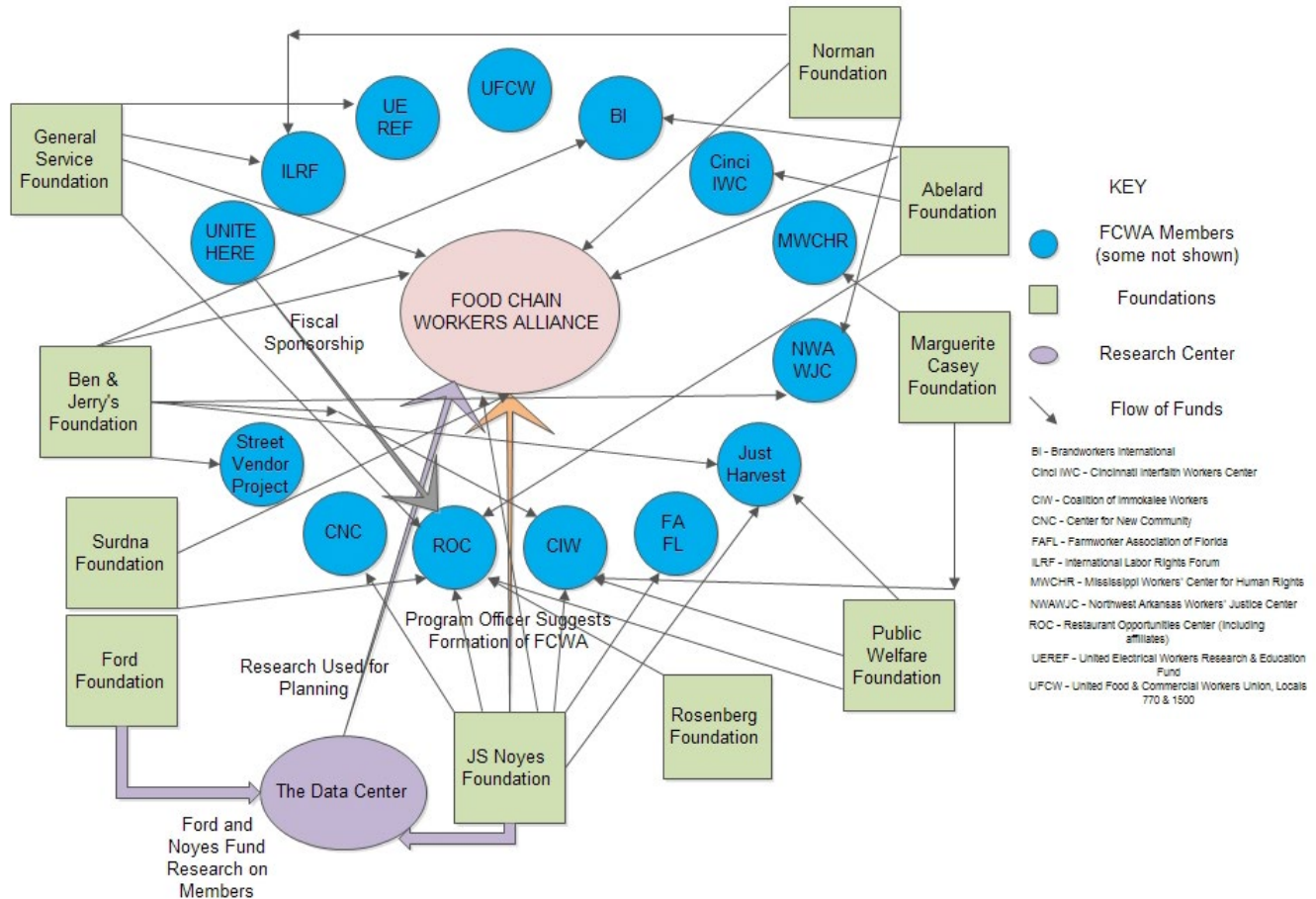
One of the issues confronting CIW and most worker centers, according to at least one observer, is that of assuring sustainable financing. The worker centers that are not directly affiliated with unions are almost all dependent on outside foundation support, but this support may be jeopardized to the extent that they espouse anti-capitalist ideas, which some appear to do. That may push CIW and other centers like it to form closer alliances with established unions, and that, in the long run, may move those unions themselves further to the left.<sup>131</sup> The supermarket campaign, in particular, is seen as providing a new type of opportunity for CIW to work cooperatively with established labor unions like the UFCW.<sup>132</sup> Still, CIW does not function under a constitution in the same way a union does. It does not hold regular elections, and power does not rotate. It is, in the words of one observer, “a tight-knit group that rewards people based on involvement and experience; when funding opens up for a new position, a qualified worker slides into the job and keeps it.”<sup>133</sup> While some wags may suggest that this is actually less different from the way some unions operate than it might appear, there is, nevertheless a difference in the operating styles of CIW and a union like the UFCW that constitutes something of a cultural chasm.

In 2005, one CIW volunteer in charge of coordinating union activity, writing in the “independent socialist” magazine *Monthly Review*, suggested that, to achieve their objectives, the Immokalee workers would need to shift from a horizontal strategy focused on the farms to a vertical strategy directed against the entire supply chain of the food system.<sup>134</sup> It was about three years later that a program officer at the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation made



essentially the same suggestion to ROC United. In this latter instance, as we noted above, the result was the Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA). The Alliance brings together a number of the worker centers and related organizations we have noted here — Brandworkers International, CIW, MWCHR, NAWJOC, ROC, and Warehouse Workers United, among others — established union organizations including UNITE HERE, two UFCW locals, and the UE Research and Education Fund, and a number of activist foundations, as well as other important players.<sup>135</sup> The result is a multi-layered network of activism that has initiated, shaped, supported, and sustained organizing and other activity at multiple points along the supply chain, though most notably at fast food restaurants. We can see some of these relationships mapped out in Figure 6. FCWA, in turn, supports a number of efforts by its members, including, at this writing, CIW's Fair Food campaign, ROC's Dignity at Darden campaign, and the UFCW's Making Change at Walmart campaign which, as we have seen, is tied to union-backed OURWalmart. The Food Chain Workers Alliance, then, is a nexus through which pass many of the forces we have described here.

**FIGURE 6. PARTIAL RELATIONAL MAP OF THE FOOD CHAIN WORKERS ALLIANCE**



## CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, worker centers vary widely in the nature of their relationships with established unions. Some, like OURWalmart, are so closely integrated into the structure of a parent union as to be virtually indistinguishable. In the purest sense, this type of organization may not be a worker center at all, but merely another in a series of secondary mechanisms for building alliance structures or appealing for public approbation while obscuring somewhat the union label, presumably because the union strategists find such limiting of transparency advantageous for some reason. At the other end of the spectrum are groups like CIW, for which union connections may be useful from time to time, but where the group itself is the center of organizing and other activities and sets its own agenda.

One rough way to conceptualize this dimensioning of the worker center space is to observe that unions constitute an economic movement in pursuit of political power, while worker centers constitute a political movement in pursuit of economic power. It is precisely because of this difference in their fundamental natures, overlaid with demographics, public perceptions, differences of language and culture, organizational imperatives, and the like, that worker centers have the potential to complement organizing efforts by traditional labor unions by extending them into new and otherwise inaccessible spaces *and*, importantly, that unions *need* them to do this if the labor movement is to find renewal through appeals to a new class of workers. In the term coined by Josh Eidelson, worker centers constitute “ALT-Labor,”<sup>137</sup> which is to say, an alternative way of organizing and representing workers, and they may be all that keeps traditional unions from extending their now perennial loss of density until they collapse into a sort of black hole. In that sense, outsourcing their most essential function, organizing, to such groups may be the most viable avenue open to the labor establishment as it struggles to survive.

But dependency relationships have a way of producing unintended consequences, and there may be factors built into this emergent dependency that are self-limiting and that entail potential risk for the labor establishment. Consider...

- The recent growth of worker centers is not so much an autonomous movement as it is a creation of progressive activist foundations and community organizations. That is true not only of the centers themselves, but of the network of supporting organizations that nurture and sustain them.

Community is the new density.

— Elizabeth Shuler, AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer,  
September 8, 2013<sup>136</sup>



- Where unions tend to have infrastructure endoskeletons, developed over time within the union and sustained through member dues, from which they derive their visible form, worker centers have infrastructure exoskeletons, organizations like NELP and The Data Center and the many progressive activist foundations that support them, that give them their visible form but exist outside the actual centers, serve additional stakeholders, and may have competing needs or loyalties.
- Proto-unionism, if that word captures the organizing and representational efforts of worker centers, is for many of these organizations but one activity among others, and it may well be subordinated to larger objectives.
- For some of these organizations, and perhaps a majority, politics is a substitute for workplace organizing.
- Community organizations masquerading as proto-unions, and worker centers for whom density is defined by community support rather than by the number of workers represented, employ a traditional labor lexicon but with different meanings and applied to different realities. So, for example, a “strike” against an employer may be less a real job action than a form of protest that is actually dominated by non-workers.
- The dominant role of genuinely oppressive employers of the early era of industrialization — the mine and factory owners and their Baldwin-Felts detectives — belongs to a different time. That is not the prevailing industrial structure today or even nearly so, and where employers are unduly exploitive of their workers, there are well established and widely accepted regulatory and legal mechanisms to address such problems which were unavailable in that earlier time. So, while much of the overheated rhetoric of organizing today is grounded in imagery and public sympathies established a hundred years ago, today it is often recognized as just what it is ... overheated rhetoric.
- While both can be considered “dealing with” an employer, there is a difference between representing workers in collective bargaining and servicing workers needs. Unions tend to emphasize the former, worker centers the latter.

When one takes into consideration all of these potentially limiting factors, it is not yet clear that outsourcing of their core functions will be the panacea that some in organized labor hope it will. The great risk is that the inherent dependency built into this new model may shift the locus of control over the labor movement from the unions to third parties — foundations, community organizations, and others — whose interests may overlap, but are more or less distinct from, those of the unions, and may shift the nature of the labor



movement from an economic to a political one. This issue is already at the center of a debate within the AFL-CIO.<sup>139</sup> Given the class-based political appeals of many of these agencies, that may actually move the labor movement closer to its historical origins. But the degree of polarization inherent in such appeals may also marginalize labor, even as it did in early days. Thus the impact of ALT-Labor on the future of traditional unions is still an open question.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFL-CIO .....	American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations
AFSCME .....	American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees
CATA.....	Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas
CIW.....	Council of Immokalee Workers
CTUL.....	Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha
CTW .....	Change to Win Federation
FCWA.....	Food Chain Workers Alliance
IBEW.....	International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
ILRF .....	International Labor Rights Forum
ILWU.....	International Longshore and Warehouse Union
KIWA .....	Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance
LAANE.....	Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy
MWHCR .....	Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights
NDWA .....	National Domestic Workers Alliance
NELP.....	National Employment Law Project
NWAWJC.....	Northwest Arkansas Worker Justice Center
NWOCRJ.....	New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice
NYCC.....	New York Communities for Change
PATCO.....	Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization
ROC .....	Restaurant Opportunities Center
RWDSU .....	Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Workers (UFCW)
SEIU .....	Service Employees International Union
SFA.....	Student Farmworker Alliance (CIW)
SWU.....	Southwest Workers Union
UAW.....	United Auto Workers
UE .....	United Electrical Workers
UFCW.....	United Food and Commercial Workers
UNITE HERE.....	Not an acronym, but the name of a union
WWJ .....	Warehouse Workers for Justice



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ryan Sean Heron, "It's Time for a Workers' Movement in USA," *The Progressive Press*, March 13, 2013, found online at <http://www.progressivepress.net/its-time-for-a-workers-movement-in-usa/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Erik Forman, "The 'Organizing Model' Goes Global," *Labor Notes*, April 15, 2013, found online at <http://www.labornotes.org/2013/04/organizing-model-goes-global>.
- <sup>3</sup> For an interesting treatment of this confrontation, see Robert Shogun, *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America's Largest Labor Uprising*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.
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- <sup>62</sup> The foundation awards detailed below and in the Figures to follow, cover the period 2009-2012 or, where available records are more limited, subsets of that period. As detailed in subsequent notes, data sources included online databases provided by the foundations themselves, foundation-published reports, IRS Form 990 filings available online through Guidestar.org or the foundations directly, news releases for periods for which no formal reports are yet available, and the like. Every effort has been made to exclude duplicate reporting, and only awards listed by the respective foundations directly or through third parties in one or another format have been included. However, it is not uncommon for foundations to grant identical amounts to a recipient in successive years, or to issue multiple grants to the same recipient in a given year. Every grant reported and combined here was listed separately in the available documentation, but it is not possible to guarantee that no duplication of data has occurred. In addition, the existence of fiscal sponsorship arrangements sometimes results in an obscuring of the ultimate recipient of a grant, which may have been awarded to the fiscal sponsor acting in the recipient's behalf. This might have the effect of masking the final destination of a portion of the flow of funds, and result in understating of foundation support for a given entity.
- <sup>63</sup> Found at <http://www.benandjerryfoundation.org/who-we-are.html> and <http://www>.

benandjerrysfoundation.org/what-we-do.html, September 19, 2013.

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