

Low-Wage Immigrant Workers Protecting Rights, Promoting Opportunities

Low-wage workers are both everywhere and nowhere. From factories to restaurant kitchens, they play a vital role in the American economy but toil largely underpaid and unnoticed. Through nearly 50 programs, learning tours, and publications, GCIR has illuminated the plight of these workers:

- The intersection of immigration, welfare, and labor laws; the impact of globalization; and how these factors compromise the well-being of all low-wage workers.
- Strategies to address immigration enforcement, improve workplace conditions, and secure stolen wages and overtime pay—from multi-ethnic worker organizing in Los Angeles to day labor organizing in Long Island.
- Best practices and promising innovations—from vocational ESL instruction to union-employer job training partnerships—to help low-wage workers secure better jobs and move their families out of poverty.
- The immigrant-labor alliances that reshaped urban politics and paved the way for living-wage ordinances and community-benefit agreements in urban redevelopment.

“Having an underclass of vulnerable low-wage immigrant workers, undermines labor rights and conditions for all workers. Our broken immigration system encourages pervasive exploitation of immigrant workers, which has made it harder for all American workers and their families to get ahead. This has shaped the labor force and kept wages down for everyone.”

Ellen Widess
Senior Program Officer
Rosenberg Foundation



The Rosenberg Foundation: Supporting Organizing, Policy Advocacy, and Litigation

From the beginning, the Rosenberg Foundation has a history of believing in Davids overcoming Goliaths. It helped nurture Farmworker Justice into a key labor policy player and supported a garment workers’ lawsuit that led to a California law establishing liability in the supply chain.

Rosenberg’s long-term funding to support organizing of day laborers in Los Angeles culminated in a crucial victory in 2000. A federal district court upheld the laborers’ right to seek work on Los Angeles streets, opening the way to subsequent triumphs in courts across the country. Discriminatory ordinances had to be repealed or modified.

As the movement spread, other foundations were galvanized, and the network of day laborers and advocates strengthened. Worker centers were established, giving laborers not only a place to file grievances but to build political power. Governments and unions began to see day laborers not as problems, but as partners on issues of workforce development as well as immigration reform.

With sustained support from allies, the day laborers have moved from the street corner to the policy table, changing not only their own circumstances but those of other low-wage workers.

“Worker centers are the often the first line of defense for low-wage immigrant workers. They are critical in terms of trying to end exploitation and protect workers’ rights. They also provide a kind of civic education, as the workers understand what it means to develop this political power and to affect change that can improve their lives. It’s similar to what happens to union workers and one reason that low-wage worker organizations and unions are working together.”

Henry Allen, Executive Director, Discount Foundation



FAST FACTS

1 in 5

Although one in eight U.S. residents in 2006 was an immigrant, one in seven workers and one in five low-wage workers were immigrants.¹

19.74 million

The number of employed foreign-born wage and salary workers stood at 19.74 million in 2006, a 66 percent increase over 1996.²

12%

One in ten immigrant workers was a union member in 2006, constituting about 12 percent of all union members.³

140

As of 2006, there were more than 140 worker centers working with immigrants to organize and advocate on their own behalf.⁴

¹ Fan, Chuncui Velma, and Jeanne Batalova. 2007. *Foreign-Born Wage and Salary Workers in the U.S. Labor Force and Unions*. Washington, D.C.: Migration Policy Institute. Data taken from 2006 Current Population Survey.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fine, Janice. 2005. *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream*. Neighborhood Funders Group. In 2006, the report was updated and became part of a book by the same title, published by EPI/Cornell University Press.