

Clean and Green Co-op

By Margi Clarke

In the current wave of community action for immigrant rights, a wider public is learning about the realities of life for immigrant workers in the U.S., undocumented and documented. Since the passage of in 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the number of immigrants from Mexico has increased dramatically. Hundreds of thousands of displaced rural Mexicans could no longer support themselves in an agricultural economy distorted by an unrestricted flood of subsidized, bio-engineered U.S. grain.

While most immigrants work for large corporations (growers, meat processors, construction firms and hotel chains), there are many examples of alternative employment for immigrant workers – even opportunities for “green” business ownership at the grassroots. These alternatives seek economic returns while also pursuing environmentally-sustainable business practices. In California’s Central Valley, Oregon, and Washington State, for example, the fastest growing sector in farming operations is Latino immigrants who purchase or lease land, and many of whom use sustainable methods that reflect generations of indigenous knowledge as well as the newest techniques in organic agriculture.

In the Bay Area, immigrant women have taken control of their work life by creating worker-owned green cooperatives that provide non-toxic house-cleaning services. For the past ten years, WAGES (Women’s Action to Gain Economic Security) has been incubating Latina-owned cooperatives by providing training and start up funds to help the women learn the skills to sustain a viable business over the long-term. WAGES also recently helped the Spanish Speaking Unity Council incubate an environmentally-friendly landscaping cooperative in Oakland, and is training members of an immigrant advocacy group from Los Angeles to open their eco-friendly cleaning cooperative.

So, what does it take to build these green jobs at the grassroots? WAGES has found that it takes a

vision of the power of worker-ownership, a commitment to high-quality products and services, and a lot of slow deliberate work on team building and communication skills. It also takes an investment of start-up funding, which can be hard to raise in the current climate. WAGES gets support from private foundations and individual donors who are convinced that the WAGES model is worth supporting because of the high-quality of the jobs.

This investment compares favorably with many other job creation programs: welfare-to-work programs and micro-enterprise business training programs cost from \$5,000-25,000 per person, but usually only lead to part-time, minimum wage employment. The advantage of the WAGES model is that the jobs are full-time; coop members earn \$11-13 an hour and have health care, disability insurance and other benefits – in fact family incomes go up by about 40 percent within two years; and they have greater control over coop management and working conditions. Plus, the eco-friendly cleaning techniques (EFC™) prevent about 4,000 pounds of toxic chemicals from entering the environment each year, and improve worker and client health conditions.

Profile of Cooperative Business Creation

A WAGES cooperative begins with a market study to identify the most promising location for eco-friendly cleaning services. WAGES then starts community outreach through grassroots organiza-



tions, churches, adult schools, and the ethnic media, to recruit women who are interested in the long-term commitment of building a cooperative business. For every 100 women that come to an orientation, a third will enter the training program, during which they receive a \$150 training stipend and free child care. Of those that enter the training, about 85 percent actually decide to put up the \$400 equity stake and become cooperative worker-owners. The founding coop members choose a name, and collectively sign on to a start-up loan provided by Lenders for Community Development, an economic development agency in the South Bay.

Over the first three to four years, WAGES accompanies the cooperative as it matures, constantly improving the eco-friendly cleaning techniques to keep the cooperative competitive in the cleaning market; providing ongoing training to the gover-

nance board; and funding the General Manager position until the cooperative builds its business to a level that can sustain the personnel costs of a full-time manager, typically when it reaches about 20 cooperative members. When the coop “graduates” from WAGES, it joins a network of other cooperatives for mutual support, joint marketing, and ongoing technical assistance.

Hundreds of women have worked for WAGES cooperatives around the Bay Area over the last 10 years, and about 50 women are currently owners, with good jobs and business equity that grows over time. The WAGES model has the potential to be replicated across the country, combining the community ties built from grassroots empowerment with the prospect for economic stability for immigrant families.

For more information on WAGES visit: www.wagescooperatives.org or call (510) 532-5465. Margi Clarke is a community activist and non-profit consultant. Contact her at margiclarke@gmail.com.

Ana Lila (left)
Ana Maria Alvarez
(right)

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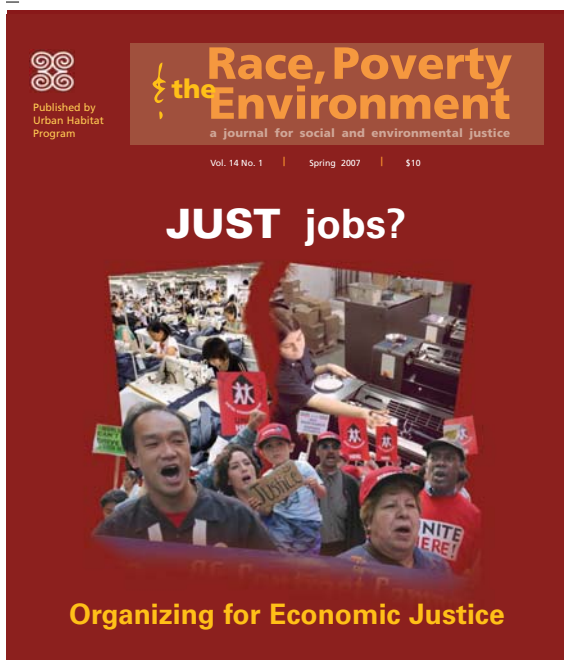
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