

Day Labor Program Unites Politics and Services

By Preeti Shekar

I push a partially shattered glass door of an incongruous looking office and walk past a group of Latino and African American men into the offices of the San Francisco Day Labor Program (SF-DLP) in the Mission district. It is a slightly chilly morning but that doesn't deter the workers awaiting a job assignment from taking a break outdoors. Inside, rows of half-occupied chairs—like those seen in hospital waiting rooms—accost my eyes. The workers mill about, chat, read the newspaper, and one of them, Leon, reads the popular Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita*. The spiritual detachment propounded in the *Gita* helps him overcome the despair of waiting, he claims. It is a long wait alright—barely 10 per cent of the waiting work force will work that day.

Meanwhile, an animated English class is in progress in one of the rooms. Victor Ruiz is busy breaking down the annoying grammatical inconsistencies of the English language to a group of six men. Further inside is the modestly furnished but functional administrative office of the SF-DLP where a polite but busy Hector Valdez, a program coordinator, ushers me in. While he continues to work away, filing, answering phone calls, and responding to requests, he tells me the story of the SF-DLP, the largest of its kind, attracting more than a 100 workers, including new immigrants, to its unassuming offices everyday.

The SF-DLP, a project of the La Raza Centro Legal in San Francisco (www.lrcf.org), is an essential service center for the marginalized worker combing the city's streets for a job. Combining comprehensive services, organizing, and leadership development, the program empowers the day laborer community, making it more economically and politically self-sufficient. Renee Saucado, a senior organizer at La Raza, notes that in an environment of extreme hostility to immigrant rights, a lot of the organizing is prioritized around oppressive bills and the current wave of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids against undocumented workers.

"The working class immigrant community is in a situation of extreme vulnerability," notes Saucado.

"Trauma, addiction, high stress aggravated by the problems they face—like homelessness and extreme poverty—additionally complicate their organizing. We see ourselves as providers of vital tools to the workers so that they can then go on and fight for what they essentially should have had in the first place."

The Women's Wing of the SF-DLP

Jill Shenker is an organizer with the women's collective of the SF-DLP, which was founded a few years ago to explicitly address the needs and issues of women workers. "We realized the need for an exclusive women's collective to address the additional issues of abuse and exploitation that women as workers face," notes Shenker. "The collective today serves as an invaluable model for bringing together labor, civil rights, and community-based organizations"—all vital in today's disturbing vacuum for political organizing.

The women's collective also serves as a forum to build leadership among women workers, several of them domestic workers. Today, the collective is a 70-member strong group of women who meet weekly to strategize support and prioritize women's access to environmentally safe jobs. English and computer classes provide the additional boost that immigrant women need in order to resist and call attention to



routine exploitation and abuse. While improving job skills and access to better pay is the immediate goal of the collective, they make no bones about the fact that they wish to be an active feminist forum for women's leadership and perspectives in the larger labor movement. "We ultimately exist to build women's leadership and their presence at the negotiating table," says Shenker.

The collective meets weekly to provide support, make organizational decisions, and share work strategies. Collective members also get to undergo free worker safety trainings and English classes. The communal core of the collective ensures a level of professionalism on par with industry standards and also ensures the accountability that the job market demands.

Shenker explains that the center is just beginning to create a written curriculum for the workshops where the women workers are trained in the different aspects of safety related to domestic work. They have undertaken the project with the Data Center to put together information on toxic substances in cleaning products, safer alternatives, healthy workplace ergonomics, and other safety and health issues. The workshops are peer led and limited to seven to nine members at a time to make them participatory, while also enabling the members to take charge.

"We use a lot of popular education tools and strategies to inform and educate our worker-members," says Shenker. "This means that the meetings themselves are a source of information sharing and presenting. The orally shared curricula are also

empowering for women as they are many-times experts based on their experience, and this is available to new members."

Other population education tools like agit prop theater and basic hands-on workshops help break down more complex information, especially legalese, in ways that relate to the workers' situations and experience in the current atmosphere of hostility towards worker rights.

Connecting with Resources

With my broken Spanish and a smile, I weave my way past some of the lounging workers and introduce myself to Alex from El Salvador who has been a regular at the center for a year and a half. "We function like an informal support group. The access to basic health and legal services that we get here is crucial. Without it, we would be in a dire situation," he states nonchalantly. More than the services the program provides, it is the informal connections and support that ensures a steady stream of members who share information and the little resources they have access to. "We get access to some computer training but we are yet to explore it fully," says Alex. "But the center is like a home for us. Especially those of us who are homeless," he adds, with a beaming smile.

While waiting, the workers also advertise the availability of cheap, accessible, and efficient labor. Fliers and posters are regularly distributed and posted, just like the cheap cigarettes and coffee happily shared among strangers. But the SF-DLP is more than just a hub of activity, networking, and



training. It is also a crucial place for bonding, as members lookout for each other, even as they compete for the few jobs available each day.

The member meetings are informal but informational and highly interactive. Open to diverse progressive groups involved with labor, education, or immigrant rights, they seek

to provide as much information as possible in the brief few hours that they meet each week. “We invite all kinds of folks committed to immigrant and worker rights to address our meetings because we believe that’s the best way to learn and use resources effectively” notes Hector.

The Day Labor Program is affiliated with a network of immigrant rights groups in the San Francisco Bay Area, *Deporten La Migra*, that includes the SF Living Wage Coalition and *Mujeres Unidas Activas*, and is also a part of the emerging Bay Area Immigrant Rights Coalition (BAIRC).

Worker Centers—Gateways to the Movement

Worker centers have emerged as pivotal components of immigrant working class communities consolidating their rights. Through the triad of tools these centers provide: service delivery, advocacy, and organizing, they are playing a crucial role in helping immigrants navigate somewhat steadily through the rough seas of work and legal rights in the United States. Labor expert Janice Fine calls labor centers the gateway organizations that are meeting immigrant workers where they are, while also providing them with a wealth of information and training.¹

The SF-DLP, like other worker centers, provides a wide range of day-to-day work services: from one-on-one assistance to individuals who walk in the door with employment-related problems to mounting collective action cam-

paigns to change employer, industry, or government policies and practices. The SF-DLP has helped secure back wages for a number of its workers and constantly educates its workers on their rights through their fliers and curriculum materials.

Through the trio of umbilical services they provide, worker centers like the SF-DLP are mobilizing immigrant workers to defend their rights and make their voices heard. By providing a broad political context in which to practice skills and mutual aid, the program enables participants to join the fight against regressive immigration laws and to organize their workplaces. The DLP is proving that the politics and need for labor unionizing is alive and well in the heartland of capitalist America. ■

SF-DLP is a non-profit that connects homeowners and businesses with experienced laborers for temporary or on-going jobs, such as moving, house cleaning, painting, gardening, and more. Call Monday-Friday 7 a.m.-1 p.m. and Saturday 7 a.m.-12 noon, to hire workers for anytime. (415) 252-5375 or (415) 252-5376.

1. Fine, Janice, “Worker Centers,” *Race, Poverty and the Environment*, Vol. 14, No. 1 Spring, 2007.

the Race, Poverty Environment



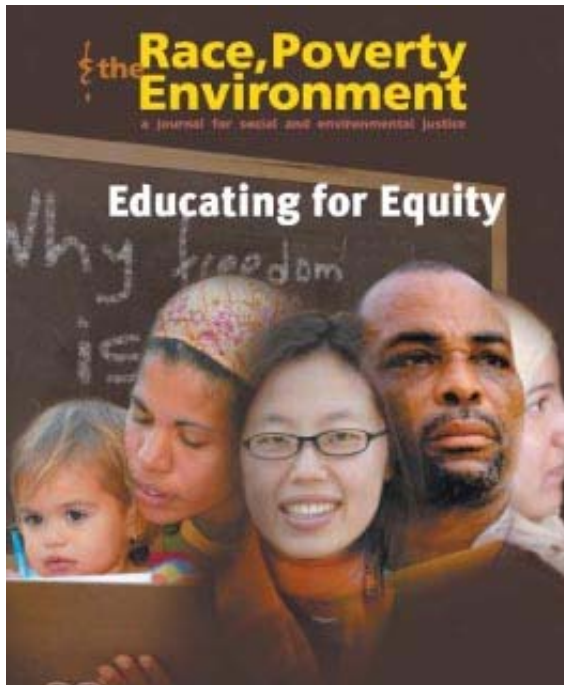
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