

Worker Center of Eastern Maine: A New Form of Worker Power

BY MARTIN CHARTRAND

It is an oft-belabored point that, though our nation's labor laws ostensibly guarantee workers a democratic voice in the workplace, a majority of workers are not in unions. While we campaign to make these laws more effective through the Employee Free Choice Act legislation, "at will" employment continues to be the reality for many workers in Eastern Maine, including, in all likelihood, your friends, family members, or yourself. These workers can be fired at the will of their employer. Though some employers' wills might be benign and take into account the workers' need to make a livelihood, the recent firings of senior workers at Circuit City and the sudden layoffs at Smokey Bones illustrate that employers' wills can also be arbitrary and self-serving.

Food AND Medicine works on the principle that no worker's ability to access the basic necessities of life should be subject to an employer's arbitrary will. In the past, we have supported the efforts of Eastern Maine Medical Center workers to win a bargaining contract with their employer and coordinated aid to workers who have experienced lay-offs. Our current project to open a Worker Center carries the promise of new possibilities for both organized and unorganized workers to fight to bring the ideals of democracy, just cause, and due process to their working lives.

The term "Worker Center" is used to describe organized entities other than NLRB-sanctioned collective-bargaining units in which workers have come together to gain more power over their own lives and working conditions in a variety of ways. According to Janice Fine, whose book "Worker Centers" describes many of these organizations, "worker centers have sprung from a common desire for a local organization that would provide services, conduct advocacy, and encourage organizing on the part of low-wage workers." Many worker centers were started by immigrant workers whose employers were paying them wages below the minimum, or no wages at all. A lack of knowledge of English and of the laws of the US made it difficult for these workers to fight this injustice individually. Coming together in a worker center enabled them to fight it collectively. Workers who had made complaints to the Department of Labor and other government agencies that are supposed to prevent wage theft could then share their experience and knowledge with other workers. Banded together in large numbers, these workers could provide the persistent pressure necessary to ensure that these agencies fulfill their function. In the best of cases, such immigrant worker centers not only provide the service of recovering wages for individual workers, but also begin to remove the disempowerment and lack of knowledge that made these workers vulnerable to the greed of malicious employers in the first place. This is because the workers themselves participate in the process, learn the legal avenues available for confronting the injustice they have experienced, and, when their individual problem is fixed, continue to be a part of the worker center, adding to the collective resources of all workers in the area to respond to the power of employers.

While the disempowerment immigrant workers face is different from that faced by workers in Eastern Maine, we can learn and take inspiration from the way Worker Centers have successfully empowered these workers. For example, local employers such as The Gap and Tim Horton's ask job-seekers to sign a statement saying they "understand and agree"

that their employment can be terminated “at any time, for any reason.” How many of the working people who have signed these statements in the hopes of being enabled to earn a livelihood are aware that they cannot, in fact, legally be fired for speaking up about an experience of harassment in their workplace, for trying to obtain Worker’s Compensation if they are injured on the job, or for attempting to organize a union? Just as Worker Centers made up of recent immigrants to the US have enabled workers to realize their legal right to a fair wage, a Worker Center in Eastern Maine could enable more workers in our community to realize the right to individually or collectively confront oppressive workplace conditions without fear of losing their livelihood.

Though the Worker Center’s focus will be on enabling unorganized workers to gain control of their working lives, it has the potential to empower unionized workers as well. At a recent meeting of the Eastern Maine Labor Council, several union members explained why they would actively support a Worker Center in Eastern Maine. Besides acknowledging that the center could improve the lives of other worker and giving their support out of solidarity, they also recognized that, by providing a space in which unorganized workers could learn how and why unions are formed, it could enable unions to attract and recruit new members, and that, by also educating non-union workers on the political and economic forces affecting their working conditions, it could result in more widespread support for ideas and policies that aid unions and empower workers. Another reason for union members to participate in such an organization is that it could improve their bargaining power with employers. By successfully coming together in a Worker Center, nonunion workers would gain the strength to demand higher wages and better working conditions, taking away the option employers often have of cutting costs by hiring unorganized workers and giving unions’ demands for recognition more force.

Opening a Worker Center in Eastern Maine capable of achieving these goals will require member involvement. In order to create a space for workers to learn how and why they might organize, we will need to create an educational program in which those who have this knowledge can share it. In order to build a base of members who can demonstrate the Center’s collective strength to local employers, we will have to come to an agreement on what members can expect and what will be expected of them. Most of all, for the center to bring democratic control to more workplaces, we will need to reach out into the communities of Eastern Maine and find working people with an interest in participating in it, running it, and determining what fights it takes on. Food AND Medicine’s staff and interns have begun this outreach, but more help is needed. If you are interested in participating, call Food AND Medicine at 989-5860, or talk to myself, Jack McKay, Kylie Patterson, Maryam Moosa, or Heidi Zwicker.

1 Janice Fine, Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) p.14