

COALITION BUILDING AND COOPERATION BETWEEN ORGANIZED LABOR  
AND IMMIGRANT DAY LABORERS IN PORTLAND, OR

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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This project explores the factors contributing to and hindering coalition building and cooperation between immigrant day laborers and the building trade unions in Portland, Oregon. The research is based on interviews with local labor and worker center leaders and an examination of public records and media discourse. It draws from a theoretical framework informed by Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and their work on identity politics in new social movements. The research concludes that the lack of full success in this case was the result of a conflicting message that conveyed to workers that they shared a similar identity, while at the same time that they labored in separate industries. As a result, no shared identity was ever established and organized labor continued to view immigrant workers as outsiders.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Political cooperation and coalitions can lead to strange bedfellows when two or more groups with different general interests nonetheless come together on a particular issue or set of issues (Fine and Tichenor 111). One prevalent example of this tendency lies in the work recently undertaken by a combination of labor interests, immigrant workers and immigrant rights advocates. When looking at the history of organized labor in the United States and contemporary efforts to reassert and reinvigorate the labor movement, this form of cooperation plays a vital role in the process. The decline of organized labor's influence in the United States since its high water mark in the 1950s is well documented. Currently there is an ongoing debate on how labor might regain some or all of the influence it once had (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 49).

Simultaneously, any serious discussion of the future of organized labor in the U.S. must give at least some attention to immigration. For decades, immigration has been at the center of debates both within its own policy area and within several others such as labor policy, national security and welfare policy, among others. The intersection of labor and immigration is inevitable as the vast majority of those immigrants arriving in the U.S. every year immigrate due to economic pressures. The need for and attempts at a cooperative plan between organized labor and immigrant workers is the focus of this research. While the concept of political cooperation is nothing new, analyzing such cooperation within the contemporary labor movement and immigration rights movements is likely to yield unique and important conclusions.

When we think of the realm of the political what often comes to mind are images of bickering partisan politicians, hotly contested policy issues, mass demonstrations of dissent and the like. However, a large and important aspect of the American political process involves political cooperation and coalition. While the argument could certainly be made that the two-party system in U.S. politics inhibits coalition between parties more so than the multi-party coalition governments of many European states this only focuses on one area of political cooperation and coalition. A richer and, in my view, more interesting space in which political cooperation occurs in American politics is between non-party political groups.

Organized labor and groups advocating for immigrant rights have formed some interesting and important alliances throughout each of their respective histories (Fine and Tichenor 104). Though the history of interaction between labor and immigrant groups has been complex and often openly hostile, currently these groups form a strong if seemingly unconventional alliance that promises benefits for both parties. Specifically, I examine under what conditions coalition and the bonds of solidarity between organized labor and immigrant workers can be strengthened by creating mutual identifications between members of the VOZ, the Worker's Rights Education Project, and workers in the building trade unions in Portland, Oregon.

Before we can fully address the question at hand a clearer understanding of the contentious history between organized labor and immigrant workers needs to be provided as well as some of the factors influencing this history. Additionally, a brief discussion of the nature of coalitions, especially with regard to these specific groups will be helpful in later analysis. This chapter will proceed with an overview of day labor in the United

States, a look at the recent and continuing worker center movement, the nature of the contemporary relationship between immigrant workers and organized labor as well as a brief discussion of the building trade unions.

This research takes a look at a particular case of labor-immigrant rights cooperation and its path toward establishing some common interests in the Portland labor community. Specifically, VOZ, the Worker’s Rights Education Project provides an important example of an attempt to bring labor and concern for immigrant rights together. However, in order to understand how these attempts at cooperation and coalition have progressed over the past several months and years we first need to take a look at both the history of VOZ and the larger organized labor community in Portland. The following provides some useful background information on both of these areas central to this study.

VOZ began in 1996 as the Worker’s Organizing Campaign as a “response to repressive tactics by immigration agents and local police that discouraged day laborers from seeking work on the corners of two major intersections in Portland, OR” (VOZ). In 2000 the Worker’s Rights Education Project was founded and a year later VOZ joined with 11 other organization to form the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON). Over time the organization sought to establish a hire site in Portland where day laborers could gather to seek work. When the Portland City Council issued a request for grant proposals from groups willing to open and run the hire site, VOZ was the only applicant. After some public debate the Portland City Council awarded VOZ a \$200,000 two-year grant to open a day labor hire center in Portland’s eastside business district.

(Figure 1)

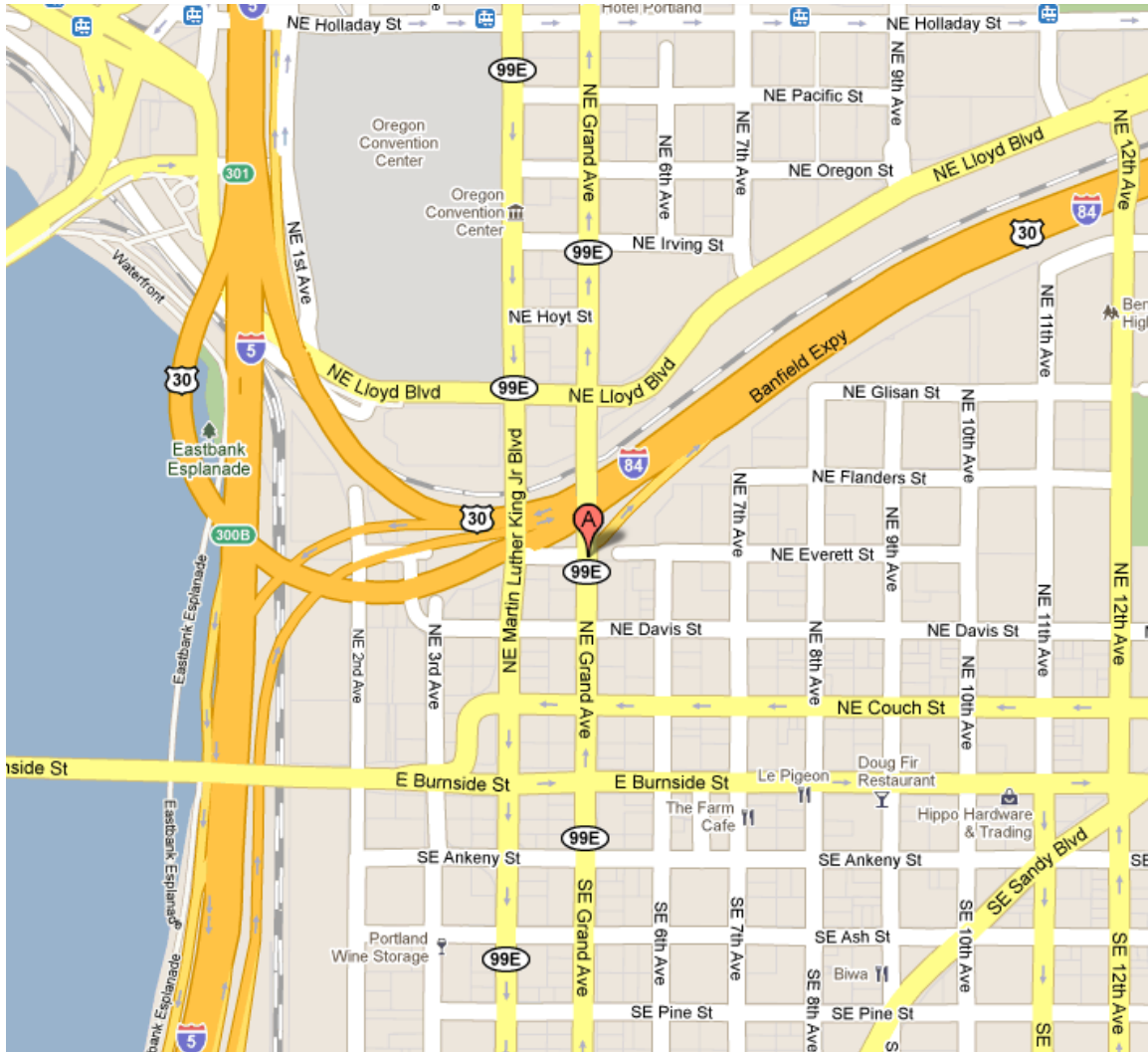


Figure 1: VOZ Worker Center, 240 NE Martin Luther King Jr Blvd. Portland, Oregon  
Map courtesy of Google Maps

The hire center is intended to provide workers a place to gather to seek jobs where they can be safe from traffic, weather, and abusive employers. Many hire centers also set a minimum wage for the workers so employers cannot undercut wages. Indeed, Portland was not the first city in the U.S. to boast this type of center, and in fact there is a growing national movement to create more worker centers where immigrant workers and day laborers can seek out legal advice, advocacy, and general education about their rights as workers.

VOZ is part of NDLON which is comprised of 38 member organizations. This movement has also been well-documented and well-researched in the past several years and I now draw on some of that work in order to more clearly understand and evaluate the VOZ worker center and its efforts, among others, to build stronger and more stable alliances in the organized labor community (Fine, *Worker Centers* 33).

### **Day Labor**

In order to more clearly understand and assess the work that VOZ is undertaking in Portland a more thorough look at both the rise of worker centers and the broader phenomenon of day labor is necessary. For this purpose a few sources prove helpful. In a major 2006 report on day labor, Valenzuela et al. analyze data from the National Day Labor Survey to provide a comprehensive look at the characteristics and concentrations of day labor throughout the United States. According to the authors, 42 percent of day laborers reside in the West, the largest percentage out of the five major regions (Valenzuela et al. 5). The work done by day laborers ranges from construction to farm work and house cleaning and day laborers are mainly employed by private individuals such as homeowners and renters (49 percent) and contractors (43 percent) (9). Also according to the report, the hourly and monthly earnings of day laborers vary widely with some earning as much as \$12 or more an hour (25 percent) and some (7 percent) earning less than \$7 an hour (11). Finally, the majority of day laborers come from Mexico (59 percent) and Central American (28 percent) and have been in the United States for more than one year (81 percent) (18).

Certainly these descriptors are important for identifying the demographics of day laborers but they do not get at all the information worker centers often seek to address.



Primarily, worker centers deal with issues of employer abuse in its many forms – unpaid wages, injuries suffered on the job that do not receive proper attention, etc. For this Valenzuela, et al. also provides much-needed data. The report claims that 73 percent of all day laborers surveyed consider the jobs they do dangerous and 20 percent have suffered a work-related injury. Of those that have suffered a work-related injury 67 percent missed work because of the injury missing an average of 33 days. It is also important to note that many day laborers continue to work even while injured working an average of 20 days while in pain (13). There is no doubt that traditional workers also suffer workplace injuries, miss work, and sometimes work while in pain, however since day laborers are almost always considered temporary employees they are seldom covered by employer health plans or workers compensation. Also, because the work that day laborers do is of such a temporary nature, the incentive to work, even while in pain, is strong because the uncertainty of finding the next job is so great.

The report further documents instances of abuse from several sources including employers, merchants, police, and security guards. By far, the most common abuse day laborers suffer from employers is nonpayment of wages with among those who have reported at least one instance of employer abuse 49 percent have experienced nonpayment. Additionally, 48 percent have experienced underpayment of wages and 44 percent experienced a lack of food or breaks. Day laborers are also subject to abuse from merchants such as being insulted (19 percent). Perhaps most tellingly, 70 percent of day laborers who have experienced at least one instance of workplace abuse do not know where to report the abuses (16). This final statistic is illustrative of one of the primary functions worker centers hope to serve. As the following will more thoroughly

demonstrate, worker centers aim to fill a wide range of needs and encompass a broad spectrum of missions and organizational tactics, but they nonetheless provide some essential characteristics that help define and identify worker centers nationally.

### **Worker Centers**

Janice Fine has written one of the most definitive books on worker centers where she takes a comprehensive look at the growth of worker centers in the United States and draws out some essential information regarding these centers' characteristics, organizing strategies, and goals. Several of these observations prove crucial to any research that seeks to understand the undertakings and motivations behind the worker center movement. Fine argues that emergence of worker centers in the United States – there are currently about 140 centers nationwide – can be attributed to two main factors. First, “immigrant worker centers have arisen in part because of an absence of preexisting institutions to integrate low-wage immigrants into American civil society and provide them with pathways to economic stability through service, self-help, and self-organization” (Fine, *Worker Centers* 33). Secondly, she goes on to illustrate that while unions do play a role in organizing immigrant workers many of the industries typically staffed by immigrant workers, such as hospitality, construction and agriculture, have been historically difficult to organize under the traditional union model. This difficulty, coupled with the increasingly hostile environment for unionization of any kind, has left immigrant workers with few options in terms of seeking assistance in addressing the numerous labor violations workers face including underpayment of wages, unsafe working conditions and harassment.

Fine continues by summarizing some of the main roles of worker centers. Some

of these functions are central to this research such as coalition building and “thinking globally.” It is in these major functions of worker centers that we can begin to see problematic elements in the centers’ relationships with unions and the desire to address working conditions and broader social justice issues on an international scale. Fine claims that worker centers often have the intention of encouraging both workers and the larger community in which they work to “think globally” by which Fine means, “centers demonstrate a deep sense of solidarity with workers in other countries, have an ongoing programmatic focus on the global impact of labor and trade policies, and participate in campaigns that bring organizations together to take action transnationally” (13). In some senses this can be seen as an attempt to make connections between the conditions facing the average low-wage immigrant worker to the broader social and international context of globalization. Fine provides several examples throughout her work of centers making a specific and concerted effort to encourage their membership to engage in discussions about the effects of globalization on themselves, their families, and the labor market. She writes, “most (centers) are motivated by an ideology or worldview that seeks to tame or master the market for the benefit of all society. Put another way, they are fighting not just for better wages for their own constituents, but for a societal ‘social wage’” (41). This characteristic of looking beyond just the immediate or obvious needs of the workers involved in the center is also common among labor unions. Often unions and worker centers will lend their support – either in member volunteers or financial donations – to political issues that may not necessarily affect the workers involved directly, but they nonetheless seek solutions to broader social justice issues such as gender equality and human rights. As a result, different worker centers dedicated to different industries

encourage their members to address these issues in a variety of ways.

Fine points to the Garment Worker Center of Los Angeles that has a membership base made up mostly of women as an example of the individualized approach that each center can take in addressing broader social and political concerns, “within the larger worker leadership team of the GWC efforts are made to have women learn about each other’s countries and cultures as well as discuss common issues like the impact of globalization” (65). The impact of some aspects of globalization is a common theme among immigrant workers for several reasons. First, on a purely financial basis, more open trade barriers are often responsible for driving down wages in the home countries of migrant workers, thus leading some to the decision to seek better pay elsewhere. Additionally, these financial pressures causing workers to seek out better employment opportunities obviously affect other aspects of their lives as well. As workers migrate families are often fractured and the need for social support grows. In some cases worker centers can serve this social function as well.

### **Challenges for Worker Centers**

It is important to note that despite the active role many worker centers take in working to advance the rights of all workers, both members of the center and others, this also leads to a major tension for many centers. Fine points out that most centers are born out of a need for workers to seek redress for injustices suffered at the hands of employers, law enforcement, or other merchants. However, they often promote a broader mission for social justice as discussed earlier. This can become problematic especially when there are not adequate mechanisms to encourage those who are served by worker centers to maintain their involvement after labor issues have been settled. Fine argues, “this is the

central tension that most centers confront: providing needed services to people who often have no other means of accessing them versus engaging in advocacy and organizing to have the potential of impacting larger numbers” (82). Worker centers deal with this issue in a number of ways. Many centers often start out by offering free legal advice to workers who have a wage claim against their employer; however, the frequent problem of this form of service is that once the claim is resolved the worker’s involvement with the center is over. Fine provides examples of the methods some centers use to encourage greater involvement in the center. Some worker centers will require that those day laborers seeking help to resolve wage or other workplace claims devote a designated amount of time to service for the center. Other centers ask workers to take classes on labor education in the hopes that once laborers are aware of all of their workplace rights they will not only be able to resolve or avoid future disputes, but will also spread the word among fellow workers about their rights and how to protect and defend them against abusive employers.

### **Worker Centers and Unions**

As worker centers have grown and achieved several of their goals, unions have begun to take notice. In a recent show of the growing national partnership between organized labor and immigrant workers the New York Times reported on August 10, 2006 that the AFL-CIO and NDLON joined together in an effort to push for better labor laws, bring public awareness to the issue of employer abuse of day laborers and to lobby for immigration reform (Street Corner Solidarity). In this brief piece one can see some of the elements discussed in previous scholarship such as the focus on applying political rather than economic pressure as well as the reference to common goals and the stated

belief that helping immigrant workers end their exploitation will also benefit unions.

As with many of the other characteristics that have been discussed so far, worker centers are not uniform in their approach to working with unions. Fine affirms this stating,

in terms of organizing, worker centers have related to unions in a variety of ways. When approached by a group of workers who were interested in joining a union, some centers have followed the practice of helping them to find one that is interested in bringing the two parties together and then essentially handing the workers off to them. Other centers have tried to maintain some level of involvement over the course of the organizing drive, although it is largely being run by the labor union. A smaller number of centers have participated in joint organizing campaigns with unions. In many instances, however, especially in cases of smaller workplaces, worker centers have struggled to identify a union that is willing to organize the workers. (Fine, *Worker Centers* 120)

This struggle to identify a willing union to work with in an organizing campaign really comes as no surprise for two reasons. First when considering the long and often contentious history of the relationship between unions and immigrant workers the fact remains that there still exists significant resistance to the organization of immigrant labor either from within the union leadership or among the rank and file members. Secondly, as several scholars have observed, immigrant workers are often employed in low-wage industries that have been historically difficult to organize, such as hospitality, restaurant, and agricultural work (102). The difficulty in organizing these industries lies in the shared characteristics of subcontracting, the temporary nature of employment, and small profit margins. (147)

Nonetheless, several successful campaigns to unionize immigrant workers have been undertaken such as the work to organize immigrant meatpacking workers in South Omaha by the combined efforts of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union

(UFCW) and Omaha Together, One Community (OTOC). (Gabriel 68) In her case study, Jackie Gabriel notes that “it is not that immigrant workers are unorganizable, but rather a lack of union efforts to organize them and the industries in which they are concentrated, that accounts for the lack of contemporary immigrant unionization” (84). In this case Gabriel also notes that the most significant factor deterring unionization was employer opposition – a common threat to unionization in almost all industries. Gabriel continues by adding that the work done by other community organizations (in this case, Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church) is necessary to help overcome the fear most employees have of employer opposition (85). Fine also points to this almost necessary factor in the unionization of immigrant workers as she observes, “the challenge for unions, worker centers, and community organizations hoping to organize workers and improve conditions is finding leverage points within these employment relationships and identifying effective strategies for bringing pressure to bear” (Fine, *Worker Centers* 102). The use of intimidation tactics by employers to discourage worker organization is widely documented. These tactics can be especially damaging to efforts seeking to unionize immigrant workers due to several factors including: the temporary nature of the jobs many day laborers hold, their citizenship status, broader community opposition and the disparity in financial resources. When such intimidation tactics are employed the need for support for unionization must often come from outside the national union seeking to organize and the workers themselves. In the case of the meatpackers in Omaha, it came from the Catholic Church. In other cases it can come from worker centers, day laborer hire sites, and, in some cases, even local or city governments. These community organizations serve as an important link between immigrant labor and unions and provide

much needed support for workers who face threats from their employers. Nonetheless, even with these community organizations in place and working as intermediaries between immigrant workers and the organizing union problems still persist.

In some cases, once the desire to organize immigrant workers is present on both sides other issues and tensions can arise that limit the potential for effective organization. Several of these tensions are a result of the relative nature of the groups involved as well as a reluctance to alter common practices or to adjust goals and objectives in the face of limitations. Again, Fine offers an excellent summary of the problem

There is a dramatic culture clash between many unions and worker centers. Worker centers experience many local unions as top-down, undemocratic, and disconnected from the community, unions view many worker centers as undisciplined and unrealistic about what it takes to win. Unions have long-established patterns and routines for organizing and negotiating and set structures at every level of their organizations while worker centers are much more experimental and ad hoc....The union, because it is unable to step outside its own culture, is often not even aware that it is doing anything problematic. On the other hand, worker centers have their own entrenched norms. (124)

In cases like this where worker centers serve as an important advocate for workers as they seek to unionize, this may not even be enough. Some scholars have more recently suggested that this disconnect between the way in which unions tend to carry out the business of organizing and the response from workers points to the need for unions to reevaluate organizing techniques and practices. (Sherman and Voss 88) Some proposed changes to the organizing model are as simple as adding staff that speaks the primary language of the workers seeking to be organized. In other cases more militant methods have been employed such as striking or informational picketing against an employer. This is a change because rarely does striking or picketing occur before a union even exists, but in many cases creating public awareness of labor violations brings pressure to



bear on employers and opens up more possibilities for unionization than were present before greater public awareness of the problem (Clawson 101).

Fine also notes the lack of common understanding between unions and worker centers on the issue of hot shops. Hot shops are essentially labor sites where working conditions are so poor that workers have already begun organizing efforts and have subsequently been reprimanded by their employer. This is fairly common in industries where immigrant workers are often employed. Unions are frequently reluctant to begin organizing drives in such places because they are quite difficult to win. Fine contends, “the two institutions become understandably frustrated with each other: the worker center wants the union to agree to help organize the workers, and the union wants the worker center to understand that not every ‘hot shop’ is a good target for a union drive” (Fine, *Worker Centers* 148). This points to a need for more common understanding between long established unions and worker centers and their members. Fine continues, “unions need, and can learn much from, immigrant worker centers too. Centers are mobilizing and organizing constituencies that much of the labor movement is currently unwilling or unable to organize, evolving new strategies, structures, and practices in the process” (150). Such cooperation will likely lead to the development of more effective strategies for organizing immigrant workers as well as educating workers both about their rights and the benefits of unionization, collective bargaining, and greater representation in the workplace.

As the previous section has demonstrated there are several challenges facing attempts to foster greater cooperation between organized labor and immigrant workers, but there is no doubt that worker centers play a pivotal role in these efforts. They help

initiate and foster bonds of solidarity amongst workers that are essential for unionization efforts. They also provide support for workers seeking to address broader labor concerns against habitually abusive employers in an effort to reform the entire structure of power in the employer-employee relationship. Finally, they serve as an agent between immigrant workers who have been historically pushed into the shadows in almost every aspect of society – work, housing, and education – and society at large. They make the abuse of workers public in order that consumers might make more informed spending decisions and thus put financial pressure on employers. And while there are numerous tales of success in these efforts, from the garment industry in Los Angeles to meatpacking in Nebraska and taxi drivers in New York and New Jersey, Fine notes one important exception as she writes, “some construction locals have demonstrated anti-immigrant biases that found expression in opposition to the opening of day laborer centers” (153). This is the industry that VOZ has found itself seeking to work with and continues to struggle with this issue to this day.

### **Unique Challenges of the Building Trades**

As Fine has pointed out, the building trades have been a historically difficult place to make progress with regard to immigrant workers. There are several reasons for this that have been explored by other scholars and a brief discussion of these explanations will prove helpful when examining the work undertaken by VOZ.

According to Bruce Nissen in his analysis of the South Florida Regional Council of the Carpenters Union the shift toward organizing and incorporating more immigrant workers into unions faced some complex challenges in the building trades. Nissen claims that three key factors impact the union’s relationship with immigrant workers: traditional

member and employer characteristics, union structure, and union leadership and internal cultural factors (Nissen 122). He then asserts that “building trades unions were at a disadvantage in virtually all of these respects” (122). Membership is mostly white and male, union contractors do not bring in immigrant workers as willingly as nonunion contractors and perhaps most importantly, “structurally, the building trades craft unions had been built around exclusionary boundaries, with racial and nationality (and familial) boundaries coinciding with those of the union” (122). In Nissen’s study he concludes that the solution for overcoming these divisions and attitudes toward immigrant workers is often education. We will revisit this later, but for the time being it is important to note the challenges faced by the particular conditions surrounding membership in the building trades.

Mike Rabourn provides some important historical background to the building trades in his article *Organized Labor in Residential Construction*. According to Rabourn, “the history of labor in residential construction shows that the disappearance of unions in the sector resulted in part from a lack of interest from the building trades. The difficult relationships between unions and homebuilders together with the success of unions in the generally more desirable commercial, public, and industrial sectors of construction, made residential work seem relatively unimportant to union staff and members” (Rabourn 10). He goes on to specifically point out that the usual culprits of union decline (foreign competition, technological change and an influx of immigrant workers, etc.) cannot shoulder the blame for union withdrawal from residential construction (11). Additionally, the building trades typically sought to limit membership in order to avoid labor surpluses which could put downward pressure on wages (14). Rabourn does point

to some more recent attempts by building trades unions such as the national Laborers Union that has formed an alliance with NDLON and the Carpenters in the Pacific Northwest, South Florida and Atlanta who have hired, organized and advocated on behalf of migrant workers(18). Finally, Rabourn also ties worker centers and the building trades together by writing “if a workers center could effectively bring together nonunion workers, they could, through concerted activities begin raising standards and wages, bringing the cost of nonunion labor closer to the cost of union labor and thereby increasing the competitiveness of unionized firms and easing the process of organizing” (25).

A final note on the building trades in particular, and the construction industry in general is needed. In her work on race and gender in the building trades Kris Paap offers some necessary points to consider. She begins by illustrating that despite affirmative action and equal opportunity programs “unionized construction work, like nonunion construction work, continues to be highly segregated by race and gender” (Paap 371). Paap is most concerned with how white male workers typically justify inequality in unionized construction and she puts forth three main justifications workers often rely on to excuse racism and sexism. First, the stereotype that such behavior should be expected from construction workers whom are “rougher sorts of men” often meaning that such racist or sexist behavior is to be expected (387). Secondly, since policies require that no violations be tolerated this is often turned around and used as evidence that it simply does not exist. Finally, the widely held belief that antidiscrimination policies unfairly favor men of color and women is used to justify discriminatory behavior. (388) Aside from the obvious problems of discrimination in the workplace Paap views the issues of racism and

sexism as fundamentally restricting the growth and power of the labor movement. She writes, “on a most basic level, these divisions clearly prevent the class-based solidarity that will be essential to reviving the American labor movement. White women, white men, and men and women of color must see their interests as unified through the union if they are going to work for the union” (389). Though Paap is focusing her study on women and African Americans in construction the implications for immigrant workers also fall in line with her final point that workers, as individuals, and the labor movement on a broad scale must ground themselves in a common vision in order to achieve success. Even though the building trades have been historically exclusionary in order to protect their small market share, the reality of current social and economic conditions points to the need for broader acceptance and cooperation.

Additionally, Trevor Griffey, in his exploration of affirmative action and the construction trades, describes some historically racist features of the trades. Though his focus falls primarily on racism directed at African Americans in the building trades during the 1970s and 1980s it is nonetheless important to account for these historical tensions in the trades because of the obvious racial divides currently in the industry. Importantly, Griffey also points to the role of identity politics in the debate and struggle for the implementation of affirmative action policies in the construction trades. Griffey details labor’s response to the various affirmative action plans imposed on unions. The plans sought to bring more African Americans and women into the building trades through greater access to apprenticeship and training programs. The unions responded with large and well-coordinated protests. As a result, according to Griffey, “some conservative labor leaders, rather than being the victims of identity politics, cultivated

and benefited from a class consciousness that was exclusively white and male” (Griffey 137). In this way, we can see how the building trades have maintained their conservative nature overtime, often as a result of the unwillingness to expand the ranks of workers outside of the white male crowd. Griffey also quotes a memo from the Nixon administration that “described the U.S. labor movement as ‘one of the strongest bulwarks against communism...were it not for the Building Trades it is safe to assume that American Labor would be on the extreme left and highly politically oriented’” (155). These white and male political identities fostered by the building trades also had lasting effects beyond the 1970s as Griffey elaborates on this specific kind of working class identity

Although not leading in any simplistic way to the creation of the Reagan Democrats or the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, hard hat politics provided a language for expressing the trauma of economic dislocation, blaming affirmative action instead of neoliberalism or deindustrialization for the decline of the middle class in the 1970s. (160)

The implications for the modern racial relations in organized labor and the building trades are made clearer by Griffey’s discussion of the trades during the 1970s. Though, one final observation of note outlines the lasting implication these racial divides had on the building trades on an even larger scale

Perhaps one of the most bitter ironies of the new, post-civil rights cultural politics was how paltry its ‘wages of whiteness’ were, how little the conservative unions and their members benefitted from their defection from the Democratic Party. Workers who felt common cause with the Republican Party on the ‘social issue’ were hardly prepared for the antiunion campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s...The long, bitter campaigns against affirmative action drew the resources and the energy of the building trades unions away from effective responses to those challenges...The building trades unions have never recovered from these defeats, nor have they fully reckoned with the costs they incurred as defenders of a narrow vision of craft unionism.” (160)

Not only does this final observation aid in explaining the decline in power of the building trades, but of the broader labor movement itself. Recently, it has then become necessary to foster a contemporary identity of the worker. Labor can no longer afford to exclude workers based on race, gender, citizenship status, etc. Many different sectors of organized labor have made this realization in the last decade and the work being undertaken to chip away at the older conception of the identity of the union worker seeks to construct a new identity. This is not to say that race, gender and citizenship status are no longer issues deserving of our attention when looking at the current state of organized labor. Rather, citizenship status and national origin remain an ever-present problem. What this research seeks to explain is how factors such as those discussed above can be negotiated by those seeking to promote both the rights of immigrant workers along with those of all workers.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORY, LITERATURE, AND METHODS

To reiterate my research question, I seek to understand under what conditions the bonds of solidarity between organized labor and immigrant workers can be formed and sustained with specific regard to coalition building between the VOZ day labor hire site and the building trade unions in Portland, Oregon. While a good deal of literature has addressed several aspects of this and related questions, the answers are somewhat unsatisfactory. First, the answers that have been offered to this point are still contested as the proceeding discussion will demonstrate. The goal of my own research is not to definitively settle the ongoing debates regarding the causes and evaluations of cooperation between labor and immigration groups once and for all, but rather to offer a new perspective by applying a theoretical element to the issue that will serve to frame this particular instance of political cooperation in a broader context. On a related note, there also exists a significant gap in the current literature regarding political cooperation between such groups as organized labor and immigration advocates in relation to broader theoretical arguments. The cooperation that will be explored in this research will serve as a concrete example of some more abstract notions of political cooperation and alliances.

The following will provide a theoretical framework with which to guide later analysis of the evidence I have collected. Additionally, I critically examine some of the scholarship related to organized labor and immigrant day laborers in an effort to ground my own within the field as well as to provide some examples and counterexamples of what I witnessed in Portland. Finally, a brief discussion of the research conducted will conclude this chapter.



## Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this research a few theorists provide the much-needed substance to ground a viable theoretical framework. There is a need to foster a shared desire for cooperation, but because of the divisiveness that can arise when organized labor and immigrant workers cross paths such cooperation must be framed in deliberate and specific ways. Antonio Gramsci, and more specifically to this case, Stuart Hall offer a concise and workable approach to both Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and ideology. Hall points out that Gramsci was increasingly wary of "economism" which Hall claims is "a specific theoretical approach which tends to read the economic foundations of society as the *only* determining structure" (Hall 287). Hall points out that the danger here is both reductionism and determinism and claims that this is an unsatisfactory way to read more complex social relations, including alliances and cooperation. Hall also highlights an important point regarding class-consciousness. He claims that despite sharing "common conditions of existence" classes are also composed of "conflicting interests" and thus any semblance of class unity is necessarily produced (293).

The connection between this point and the current research is found in the fact that whatever commonalities are found between organized labor and pro-immigration groups must be articulated in specific ways in order to allow for the possibility of cooperation. Thus, one could argue that these unique alliances are in fact produced in order to offer a response to the hegemonic force of neoliberalism. As Hall states "classes, while sharing certain common conditions of existence, are also cross-cut by conflicting interests, historically segmented and fragmented in this actual course of historical formation" (293). Finally, on a related point, Hall offers a distinctive view of

Gramsci's conception of hegemony. According to Hall, hegemony "becomes, not a *thing* to be seized, overthrown or 'smashed' with a single blow, but a complex *formation* in modern societies which must become the forces of a number of different strategies and struggles because it is an arena of different social contestations" (298). Again, the implications of this point for the research at hand are immense. If we view cooperative action between organized labor and immigrant workers and their advocates as one of many political alliances that set their sights on confronting and challenging the exploitative effects of globalization, then the various methods employed by these groups take on a more consistent and noticeably progressive quality. In turn, the shift from the historically restrictionist stance of labor to a more open immigration view can be better understood. Rather than unions blaming immigrant workers for driving down wages and working conditions, directing action toward abusive employers is more likely to not only positively affect the actual working conditions all workers encounter, but also bring in support from outside of the labor movement. For example, Jobs with Justice attempts to bring together labor, workers, faith organizations and other community groups around a common cause. This could be anything from rallying to support legislation favorable to unions to drawing public attention to living wage campaigns. In such instances, numerous forces employ various strategies to contest social conditions.

In addition to Hall's representation of hegemony another important work from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe provides similar assertions, as well as adds new dimensions to our understanding of political cooperation between people working, on some level, to counteract some of the potentially destructive forces that hegemonic forces exact upon foreign and native born workers. Like Hall, Laclau and Mouffe do not

recognize any form of unity and they even go so far as to state that the assumption of class unity or any type of unity only serves to gloss over ambiguities and particular characteristics of the groups or individuals lumped into a “class” (Laclau and Mouffe 105). This lack of unity is a familiar echo in both empirically based literature and theory. For Laclau and Mouffe, though, there exists another important component to their argument: articulation. On this subject the authors identify the complexity of the concept of articulation writing,

we have seen the difficulties of the working class in constituting itself as a historical subject, the dispersion and fragmentation of its personalities, the emergence of forms of social and political reaggregation – ‘historical bloc,’ ‘collective will,’ ‘masses,’ ‘popular sectors,’ – which define new objects and new logics of their conformation. Thus, we are in the field of the overdetermination of some entities by others, and the relegation of any form of paradigmatic fixity to the ultimate horizon of theory. It is this specific logic of articulation that we must now attempt to determine. (105)

Laclau and Mouffe identify articulation as a practice whereby the relation between elements is modified by the practice of articulation itself. (105) In this sense we can view political cooperation in a number of ways. First, the relationship between cooperating parties necessarily entails a fundamental change in all groups involved as the act of articulation, defined by Laclau and Mouffe, inherently alters the identities of the participating groups. Also, once a coalition or alliance is formed by two or more groups they enter a new realm of articulation involving the alliance and the body which this alliance is confronting. For example, in the case at hand, it had been argued that the labor-immigrant alliance could be viewed as presenting a counter to some of the more negative aspects of globalization such as trade agreements that depress wages and tax incentives that encourage industry relocation. The articulation of each side impacts the other. This also squares with Hall’s reading of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as not

necessarily something to be confronted and overcome, but rather something to be contested and possibly modified. Thus, we can define coalition as an act of articulation in that it requires the construction of an identity, however temporary. In this case the identity is that of “worker.” In addition, once these identities are produced through articulation, the second step comes in contesting, as a collective group of identified workers, the abuses suffered.

Taking Hall, Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe together we gain a sense of a theoretical framework that can be applied in order to sort through some of the relationships at work in this particular instance of political cooperation. Based on the literature reviewed in this proposal, such an exploration has not yet been attempted even though a good portion of the literature on the relationship between organized labor and pro-immigration groups certainly points to the possibility. Three key elements of this framework must be kept in mind while exploring political cooperation. First, the notion of class unity is not a material reality, but rather a construction of a hegemonic social force that seeks to ignore particulars and reduce interests to one form. Second, neoliberal globalization, as a dominating social force is not some hegemonic entity to be overthrown, but rather a reality to be contested. Finally, the method by which this contestation occurs must be rooted in a process of ongoing articulation.

These three elements of this theoretical framework can be seen in the work of Paul Apostolidis on a similar topic to this research. Apostolidis hypothesizes that migration narratives can be an effective way of democratizing the workplace and globalization processes more broadly as he states “migration processes can aid in the formation of counter-hegemonic subjectivities, developing these workers’ practical

orientations toward resisting mistreatment both individually and in solidarity with others” (Apostolidis 647). This claim contains several of the elements outlined in the theoretical framework including the need to construct a narrative of migration in order to produce some semblance of solidarity among workers in a diverse workplace. Workers forced to migrate in the face of declining wages and opportunities in their home country can frame this decision in response to the effects of neoliberal trade policies. Thus, the belief that immigrants have a choice when it comes to immigration is eroded. As a result, native-born and immigrant workers, as Apostolidis puts it, form “counter-hegemonic subjectivities” in which, though their individual identities are not subsumed under another, they nonetheless form a shared subjectivity as one effected, generally negatively, by such neoliberal policies. Additionally, Apostolidis pushes this further by implicating the need for this type of solidarity building to expand outside of issues faced in the workplace and into the broader debate surrounding issues of globalization. He asserts, “they do...contain intimations of solidaristic values and practices that progressive leaders could thematize and develop in the interest of building a more transnational, social-democratic approach to regulating immigration and capitalist production alike” (648). It is here that Apostolidis also sides with Gramsci and the idea that “a successful counter-hegemonic politics thus hinges on the relocation of these experiences within critical reformulations of these narratives, or within new, alternative narratives” (653). In this sense we can see that Laclau and Mouffe are correct in asserting that this working-class identity needs to be produced in opposition to the dominant migration narrative.

## **Literature Review**

The scholarship addressed in this section is divided into four main categories. Each provides essential components of both the history and the contemporary nature of the relationships between organized labor and immigrant workers. The first section deals briefly with some literature addressing this relationship through a broad historical lens. The next section details some common challenges – legislative, practical, and unforeseen – in establishing and fostering such relationships. Briefly, the next section outlines some successful attempts at either organizing workers into existing unions or the successful advocacy of workers by worker centers. Finally, the literature draws on some sources that provide strategies for continued work. It is my aim that the scholarship discussed below, coupled with the theoretical framework outlined above, will ground my own research in the field and provide an opportunity to add to this already substantial scholarship.

### *Historical Perspective*

In the United States immigration policy stands as both a particularly unique and significant issue area while being equally controversial and divisive. Additionally, immigration policy is certainly not a self-contained issue as it seeps into numerous other policy fields including economic policy, defense, healthcare, and security among others. Though immigration in the U.S. has most recently been framed as a matter of security more than anything else, historically immigration policy was usually constructed in relation to labor. Here, some interesting and complex dynamics formed as the American labor movement also started taking shape.

In *Immigration and American Unionism* Vernon Briggs chronicles the interplay

between waves of mass immigration and union strength. Briggs contends that there is an inverse relation between unionization rates and immigration to the United States. He reaches this conclusion by accounting for waves of mass immigration to the United States and comparing this to union membership. Briggs also points out that throughout its history, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) maintained a restrictionist stance on immigration with the goal of protecting jobs for native-born workers. Briggs maintains that, while racial aspects of immigration were present they were not the only factors behind restrictionist views and policies as he writes, “the fact that the labor movement fought in the 1880s for the passage of the Alien Contract Law, which represented the first broad legislation to apply restrictions on European immigrants, supports the conclusion that labor’s restrictive concerns cannot be dismissed as being motivated by racial bias” (Briggs 47). Based on this contention, Briggs argues that organized labor appropriately and effectively sought to protect the interests of unionized workers by opposing the use of contract labor and foreign-born workers used as strikebreakers. However, Briggs fails to account for an important division between the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). While he does provide some account of the emergence and eventual merger of the CIO with the AFL, he does not place this once major division in the context of the differing views on immigration policy. In order to obtain a better account of this division we must turn to another source.

Daniel Tichenor’s work on immigration policy in both his book *Dividing Lines*, which chronicles the history and development of immigration policy in the United States from the Gilded Age to the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act, and his coauthored article with Janice Fine provide an essential

history of the relationship – sometimes tenuous – between labor and those in favor of immigration policies that would expand access. According to Tichenor and Fine there has been a fundamental shift in the approach labor has taken to immigration policy in recent years and this shift is largely the result of internal divisions in organized labor that date back to the establishment of the CIO. The division between the AFL and CIO stemmed from different goals for organization. According to Fine and Tichenor, “despite professing an interest in organizing the mass production industries, the AFL unions were unbending on issues of exclusive jurisdiction and trade autonomy and unwilling to invest in the requisite resources to organize large-scale industrial unions. Faced with this conflict, the CIO institutionalized itself as a separate national labor federation” (Fine and Tichenor 98). As a result of this divide, differing approaches and stances on immigration would eventually ensue. As Fine and Tichenor claim:

The rise in industrial unionism reflected a new relationship with the national states and a new orientation toward unskilled workers...within this exceptional environment, the CIO’s approach to immigration and refugee policy provided a foundation for strikingly expansive, solidaristic approaches toward Asian and Latin American newcomers in the decades that followed. (102)

This divide between the AFL and CIO marks an important trend that would result in a change of the position the AFL took on immigration. With the eventual merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 more recent attempts at immigration reform have yielded a more united voice though it is important to note that while the AFL-CIO represents a diverse body of unions not all organized labor groups were united on various facets of immigration reform. In general, however, the immigration waves of the 1990s were met with the view that “unskilled immigrant workers were now viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat by several of the nation’s largest labor unions” (106). It is from this



period on that is the focus of this research, but having the historical background is essential to understanding the current climate of relations between organized labor and pro-immigration groups.

Another counter to Briggs comes from Leah Haus and her examination of the position organized labor has occupied in relation to US immigration policy and where she contends that “the societal groups that influence the formation of US immigration policy contain a transnational component, which contributes to the maintenance of relatively open legislation” (Haus 286) and with more specific respect to unions,

The transnationalization of the labor market, albeit incomplete, blurs the boundaries between foreign and domestic constituents for unions, causing unions to resist those restrictionist immigration measures that impede organization of foreign-born workers. Hence, the pressures for restrictionism are weaker than anticipated by the conventional wisdom that expects labor to lobby for closure. (287)

Haus argues that while historically labor did tend to favor restrictionism to protect the labor market from a surplus of workers there are two possible explanations for why this stance has changed. First, realizing that there was no effective way to curb immigration, labor chose the next option of organizing foreign-born workers (292). Second, because unions representing unskilled workers – often those first affected by increased immigration – lack power they are left with no other option than to organize those workers to increase the ranks. In either case, Haus argues, “unions support open immigration legislation when such measures facilitate organization of foreign-born workers. One important exception to this general trend that Haus highlights is the case of construction unions. Because these unions have more control over the allocation of jobs through job placement and they bargain hiring practices into contracts they have some incentives to exclude immigrants especially from the benefits that skilled workers enjoy

(304-305). This final point from Haus is of particular importance for my research as both the immigrant workers and the unions involved in my case study are mainly employed in the construction industry.

These accounts of the historical development of the relationships between organized labor and immigrant workers help to inform further scholarship on the current state of these relationships. Scholars have expressed a great deal of interest in the recent historical shift labor has made in regard to both immigration policy and the relationships between immigrant worker and unions. Though there is growing support behind efforts to organize immigrant workers, the task still entails a number of challenges, which is the focus of the next section.

#### *Challenges Faced While Organizing Immigrant Workers*

In a study on the current face and composition of organized labor in the United States Roger Waldinger and Claudia Der-Martirosian point to some of the challenges and opportunities unions face when organizing immigrant workers. In this largely quantitative analysis the authors demonstrate that several factors contribute to the likelihood that immigrant workers will seek union jobs and that immigrant workers will be successful in obtaining these jobs. Among these factors Waldinger and Der-Martirosian include whether the worker earns a wage or salary, the worker's age, location in the U.S., education, race, the industry where the worker is employed, the period of immigration and the worker's citizenship status. Based on statistics controlling for these factors the authors reach the conclusion that "over time, unionization rates rise among immigrants, so that among the more settled of the arrivals, unionization rates are somewhat higher than among their native-born counterparts" (Waldinger & Der-

Martirosian, 73). Though the authors never claim to be interested in the organization patterns of immigrants; there still exists a distinctive gap in their work. Despite controlling for a wide range of factors, Waldinger and Der-Martirosian make no mention of the efforts to organize long-established *and* recently arrived immigrants. This is a major oversight given the fact that both authors are preoccupied with the effect of location on the propensity of immigrant workers to find union jobs especially in California. In other words, it is widely known that much of the work being done to organize immigrant workers and assert their rights not only as workers, but as immigrants is being done in California. By ignoring ongoing organization and only focusing on the rare instances where immigrants gain employment in sectors with established unions Waldinger and Der-Martirosian are neglecting a substantial portion of immigrant labor organization.

Though this research does not take a deep look into labor policy, there is nonetheless some important information to be gleaned from looking at the ways in which policy can either help or hinder the growth of unions, specifically with regard to organizing immigrant workers into unions. Maria Ontiveros examines policy roadblocks to organizing immigrant workers and how unions have attempted to work around them. According to Ontiveros “labor laws systematically excluded immigrant workers from their protections in several ways” (Ontiveros 157). These exclusions include exempting agricultural and domestic work from federal statutory protections as well as some small businesses, all of which are industries where many immigrants work. Also, many labor laws exclude temporary and contingent workers usually classified as “independent contractors” (158). Additionally, Ontiveros cites the 2002 Hoffman Plastic Compounds

v. NLRB decision which held that undocumented workers are not able to seek the same remedies as documented workers for anti-union employer conduct (159). Despite these major obstacles, Ontiveros also points to the fact that some unions, like the UFCW after the December 2006 ICE raids of several meatpacking plants, argued in a suit representing all workers – documented and undocumented – that the raids violated the First, Fourth and Fifth Amendments. Also, she argues that because guest worker programs essentially create “a caste of noncitizen, primarily nonwhite, labor working without adequate labor protection and without any opportunity to improve their conditions” their Thirteenth Amendment rights were also violated. Finally, she uses this last point to signal to organized labor that they have the opportunity to stand for the rights of all immigrant workers, both documented and undocumented in an effort to not just build a movement, but make a bigger and more powerful statement about all workers’ rights.

So far, no piece of literature has offered a substantial answer to the question I have previously posed. While Laura Pulido’s piece “A Day Without Immigrants: The Racial and Class Politics of Immigration Exclusion” does not provide a complete answer either, it does furnish an important next step while underscoring some necessary points about cooperation. Pulido discusses the massive demonstrations of 2006 that came as a result of proposed anti-immigration legislation that “would further militarize the US/Mexico border and make undocumented persons felons” (Pulido 1). Pulido documents the diversity in approach to this dissent claiming that leadership was divided on how best to draw attention to demonstrators’ concerns; she argues that this division occurred around class lines asserting “as often happens the middle-class leadership...are repackaging the demands of the working class into a form that they feel will be

acceptable to the establishment – and in the process, selling out the people” (2). This notion of class division is essential to understanding the historical lack of cooperation between predominantly white organized labor groups and immigrant workers. According to Pulido several features unique to the U.S. result in an absence of considerable cooperative action. She claims, “there is a direct link between the weak class consciousness of the US, its history of anti-Mexican racism, and the strident nationalism which propels the current anti-immigrant frenzy” (4). This final remark from Pulido has broad implications for the current research. It not only ties together the interconnected issues of class and race and the role they play in current immigration policy debates, it also points to a need for greater class alliance and coalition and this is a key for those attempting to simultaneously organize immigrant workers, assert rights for immigrants in the U.S., and revitalize the American labor movement. There are also parallels that can be drawn between Pulido’s claims and the theoretical framework driving this research. The “selling out” of the people that Pulido describes and the lack of a class-consciousness echo Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of articulation in that Pulido is accounting for a failure of articulation. In this case, class differences were not successfully overcome and the movement was diluted in order to make it more suitable for mass support. Still, these challenges are not always insurmountable. As the following few researchers demonstrate, under the correct conditions and with the right strategies, success can be achieved.

#### *Successful Organizing of Immigrant Workers*

One successful example of coalition work leading to eventual union organizing of a worksite largely dominated by immigrant workers was in the seemingly unlikely

location of Omaha, Nebraska. Jackie Gabriel documented the events surrounding this success and offers several important points to take away from it. In this case a community organization representing more than 40 member organizations called Omaha Together, One Community (OTOC) arranged for the Governor of Nebraska to meet with 40 meatpacking plant workers. The meeting resulted in the Nebraska Meatpacking Industry Workers' Bill of Rights which, among other provisions, included the right to organize. (Gabriel 76) This is yet another case that the author claims disproves the myth of immigrant workers being unorganizable as she states it is "rather a lack of union efforts to organize them and the industries in which they are concentrated, that accounts for the lack of contemporary immigrant unionization" (84). Finally, what is most striking about this case is that previous attempts by the United Food and Commercial Workers to organize these workers were largely unsuccessful. It was not until the UFCW, the workers and OTOC all entered into the project together that success was attained. This case clearly points to the need for coalition building between established unions, community organizations and immigrant workers.

While Gabriel's study details the successful organization of immigrant workers into unions, Fine provides a different account of success. In her article on community unionism Fine makes the case that workers in low-wage jobs often have more success gaining workplace rights and wage increases through public policy rather than direct economic action as typically engaged in by traditional unions. Fine presents the story of the Workplace Project in Long Island. According to Fine,

since 1992 the Project has targeted employers and secured hundreds of thousands of dollars in back wages for its members. It has transformed the way that immigrant workers are portrayed in the media and perceived by elected officials and the general public, and has lead a successful

campaign in the state legislature to pass the strongest unpaid wages legislation in the United States. (Fine, “Community Unions” 163)

Though the goal of the Workplace Project was not to organize immigrant workers into unions, they nonetheless sought and obtained many of the rights usually reserved for those workers officially represented by a union. More on the strategies employed to achieve this will be discussed in the next section.

### *Strategies for Organizing Immigrant Workers*

Rachel Sherman and Kim Voss’ focus falls heavily on the other side of this movement; they are describing and analyzing union tactics used to organize immigrant worker populations in a variety of industries. They argue that new and aggressive tactics are needed in order to organize immigrant workers in the face of strong employer resistance. In order for these tactics to be utilized, the authors argue, unions must rely on strong organization and innovative changes to traditional organizing methods. They write, “the impetus for such innovation typically arises from a combination of three factors: crisis within the local union, support from the International union, and the presence of innovative staff from outside the labor movement in the local” (Sherman and Voss 82). The presence (or lack) of these three factors, in turn, results in what the authors label as three kinds of “innovators.” Full innovators “are more likely than others to organize immigrant workers and to develop multidimensional campaigns for doing so. Yet these locals are not engaged in drives to organize immigrants per se,” (92) but instead, are organizing shops for strategic reasons and adapting their strategies to the workers’ needs. For example, organizers will hire union staff members with language skills and cultural backgrounds that are reflected in the workers to be organized. Sherman and Voss also point to an increasing tendency for local unions – usually under

the suggestion or guidance of the International – to shift funds from services (strike funds and paid grievance officers) to organizing. While this has at times been a controversial move, the authors argue that it is essential in order for unions to grow their membership base and reassert themselves in the broader political context. They point to successful applications of new tactics and conclude that “though crisis in local unions was often accompanied by an influx of immigrants into union jurisdictions, our research indicates that successful organizing of *all* types of workers depends on the union’s ability both to take workers’ specific needs into account and to design strategic organizing campaigns” (105).

Janice Fine also contends that current attempts at establishing and enforcing rights for immigrant workers have taken a different approach when compared to traditional labor organizing. She points to several examples where community unions, a term she uses to describe “modest-sized community-based organizations of low-wage workers that focus on issues of work and wages in their community” (Fine, “Community Unions” 154), tend to apply political, rather than economic pressure in order to advance their issues. This distinction is an essential one to keep in mind especially due to the fact that traditional union organizing has not always met the needs of low-wage workers. As Fine contends, “community unions have so far had greater success at raising wages and improving working conditions via public policy than direct labor market intervention” (155) which she attributes to the very fundamental fact that political issues, while certainly swayed and influenced by money, boil down to actual votes all with equal weight. Whereas economic pressure from unions typically requires large numbers of workers usually in the same industry or even the same worksite taking collective action,



Fine claims that the right to organize and political pressure applied by community unions is often and ought to be “cast in moral terms” (189) in order to appeal to voters.

Dan Clawson takes a close look at the collective action spawned by cooperation between labor and other new social movements. He begins by making an essential distinction between unions and the broader labor movement and, for purposes of clarity, this distinction is maintained in my research as well. Clawson writes that while unions are “legally constituted collective bargaining agent[s]” the broader labor movement “is a more fluid formation whose very existence depends on high-risk activism, mass solidarity, and collective experiences with transformational possibilities” (Clawson 24). Though one could critique Clawson’s distinction for being a bit too idealistic about these “transformational possibilities” it is most important to note the role of solidarity in this explanation. In this regard, Clawson is later able to make the claim that while traditional unionism is mostly concerned with wages and working conditions, the labor movement expands its focus to include not only economic but also social justice issues. On the key issue of solidarity, Clawson writes,

If labor wanted to reverse our nation’s political direction, create a more just and equitable world, and help workers win at least a voice at work, and if the labor movement were prepared to take some risks, its strategy – as opposed to business’s – would need to rely not on material resources but on people. Solidarity by large numbers of people – not just leaders, not just staff – is the most powerful force labor has available. If workers, family members, and community alliances develop solidarity and are prepared to take risks and make commitments, there is no limit to what they can accomplish. (48)

With this in mind Clawson goes on to analyze some cooperative action undertaken by industries largely dominated by immigrant workers and their efforts to assert their rights as both workers and immigrants. In some cases these workers operated within the

context of an organized union, while at other times some groups undertook more militant collective action such as striking, even though they were not formally organized within a union. Like Pulido's observation about the need for class consciousness, Clawson claims that "no force in our society has more democratic potential (or radical possibility) than the labor movement. Its base and focus is the large working-class majority underrepresented, or outright neglected, by many other social movements" (196). However, Clawson also acknowledges that this shift can often lead to uneasy coalitions and points to the almost routine example of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle that involved everyone from environmentalists, anarchists, religious organizations and Teamsters (151). Despite the often tenuous nature of these alliances, Clawson nonetheless continues to underscore their importance. As with Pulido, this focus on working-class consciousness as a possible tool for the further expansion and influence of organized labor is fundamental to the scope of the research being discussed here. And while Clawson does take his move further than any authors discussed thus far, Rick Fantasia and Kim Voss take it one step further still.

*Hard Work: Remaking the American Labor Movement* by Fantasia and Voss explores the possibilities of what the authors term "social movement unionism." Like Clawson, Fantasia and Voss are concerned with the need for attempts to organize previously "unorganizable" groups such as immigrants, women, and the youth. The authors also agree that organizing these groups requires greater involvement in social issues typically categorized outside of labor issues and they claim that this, in turn, will build greater solidarity among working class individuals in all social and cultural realms. They maintain, "a successful labor movement must have the capacity to rise above its

corporeal or institutional form through a kind of sacred narrative, or myth, and solidarity has been a cornerstone of this foundational myth of labor movements everywhere” (Fantasia and Voss 107). In this discussion of the myth of solidarity we can see further echoes of Laclau and Mouffe’s articulation as well as Hall’s contention that this class identity needs to be created, not discovered. Once again, solidarity plays a fundamental role in the effort to restructure and refocus organized labor into the wider scope of social movements in general and the labor movement in particular. The authors also, like Clawson, acknowledge the uneasy alliances between some union leaders who they claim are distrustful of these more leftist social movements and leaders of these movements. Fantasia and Voss then make a move that Clawson was not as willing to take when they assert that local unions, far more than national unions, embraced a “more critical stance toward neoliberalism” (127). This is a point articulated several times by Fantasia and Voss and also leads to what they term a “new labor metaphysic” in which labor takes social justice issues into account and provides more than just a place at the bargaining table. The authors view this as a necessary counter to the growing corporatization and globalization of the American economy which has not only resulted in threats and substantial roadblocks to the further organizing action of labor but also has led to greater exploitation of all workers. However, unlike Clawson, Fantasia and Voss are a bit more pragmatic in their assertions concluding, “however weak its relational position may be, ‘labor’ has begun to conjure up an entirely different vision, as a constellation of groups, institutions, and movements that are viewed as dealing in a central way with matters of social justice” (174). This book underscores one of the most important aspects of the cooperation between organized labor and immigrant workers seeking greater political

influence and social equality. It is absolutely essential to note that the indictment of neoliberal globalization serves a central role in combining the issues of fair labor practices, social justice, and immigrant rights. This trend appears in several cases in which those seeking to organize immigrant workers into unions with the goal of collective bargaining often cannot begin with membership drives. Instead, more immediate needs have to be met including adequate housing and security in immigrant worker communities. (Stephen, *The Story of PCUN*)

As the literature suggests, there are numerous approaches to understanding cooperation between labor and pro-immigration groups. The historical political development approach offers an in-depth and comprehensive picture of the evolution of the relationship between labor and immigrant workers especially in their responses to policy. In this case Briggs' answer remains somewhat unsatisfactory as he argues that organized labor ought to continue its restrictionist stance without even taking into account the fact that many unions are currently seeking to organize these workers that were once perceived as threats. For this reason the work of Voss in both of her collaborative efforts with Sherman and Fantasia provides a more comprehensive and dynamic framework for evaluating the cooperative relationship at hand. Additionally, Fantasia and Voss' work especially represents a new direction in the literature, one that takes this particular form of cooperation and expands it into a larger context. In this move we come back to the idea that working-class consciousness and solidarity are essential elements in effective alliance building especially when one considers the dominant force that global capitalism wields in shaping the material reality of the labor market, current immigration policy, and social conditions.

## **Evidence**

The focus of my research is on VOZ, a workers' rights education project in Portland that was recently awarded a grant from the Portland City Council to open a day laborer hire site. Along with support from the city of Portland VOZ has also actively sought to build coalitions with various groups including building trade unions. It is here where the focus of my project can best be explored by researching VOZ, its history, its attempts to build solidarity networks among other unions and its relationship to the city of Portland. I chose VOZ and the building trade unions as a case study for a few reasons. First, proximity to Portland and potential interview subjects was not only convenient, but also allowed me to become more familiar with the broader Oregon labor community. Additionally, while worker centers in Los Angeles and other cities with large immigrant communities have been given a good deal of attention in the literature, not much had been written about similar centers in the Pacific Northwest despite the growing demand and availability of day labor. Finally, though I had originally attempted to contact another organization in Woodburn, Oregon for this project, VOZ was more able and available to respond to my inquiries.

The primary source of information comes from ten guided interviews conducted with labor and community leaders in Portland and surrounding areas who have dealt in some capacity with the relationship between organized labor and immigrant workers. These interviews focus on questions of coalition building, its potential benefits and drawbacks and how these coalitions can and have been fostered. Though each interview began with similar questions, the topics range from matter-of-fact accounts of the relationship between VOZ and the building trade unions over the past few years, to

opinions about broader strategies for worker centers and organized labor (please see appendix A for a list of sample interview questions). Because of the diversity of interview subjects from the leadership of VOZ, members of their ally organizations and organizers in the building trade unions, responses to the same or similar questions were often drastically different from subject to subject.

I also use minutes from the Portland City Council which decided to award VOZ a grant to open their day laborer hire site. These sources can provide both a brief history of the relationships VOZ has attempted to foster with the broader labor community as well as a critical evaluation of the effectiveness of these relationships in building solidaristic bonds between native born and immigrant workers.

With respect to the interviews it should be noted that often one person I interviewed would also suggest more people for me to contact. As a result there exists a clustering effect and naturally, some selection bias. However, as the nature of the relationship between VOZ and various groups representing organized labor naturally leads to such clustering effects this could not be avoided (Kasinitz, 12).

### CHAPTER III

#### RESPONSES AND DISCUSSION

As stated earlier, this research focuses on the relationship between immigrant workers and organized labor in Portland, Oregon specifically the VOZ Workers' Rights Education Project and the building trade unions. Having dealt with some of intricacies of both worker centers and the building trades in Chapter I and previous scholarship in Chapter II, we can now launch into the research and uncover some common themes among the interview responses. These themes generally center on issues of the relationship between VOZ and the building trade unions and the challenges of coalitions on the one hand, to worker identity, solidarity and education on the other. This chapter will proceed by first discussing the early interactions between VOZ and the building trades unions. Then the focus will shift to some strategies for greater contact and work between the two groups and will finally conclude with some future challenges to continuing this work.

When I first began this research, especially the interviews, I quickly learned that the distance between the missions of each group were further apart than I had originally assumed. VOZ was originally born from the Worker's Organizing Committee which was formed in 1996 in response to tactics employed by business owners and police to discourage day laborers from gathering on street corners to seek employment (VOZ). However, it was not until 2008 when the City of Portland sought to award a grant to an organization willing to open and run a day labor hire site in order to get day laborers off street corners and into a place where they could be safe from traffic, the weather and abusive employer practices (Portland City Council). VOZ was the only organization to

apply for the grant and was awarded it on March 8, 2008. The two-year, \$200,000 grant was awarded as seed money to open the site with the stipulation that after two years VOZ would be responsible for all operation costs (Killen). Three months after VOZ was awarded the grant, the day labor hire site opened on June 16, 2008.

It should be noted that this is a somewhat unique situation in that the initial drive to open a day labor hire site came from the City Council rather than an already established organization for day laborers. Despite the support for a center already existing on the official government side, the process of the Portland City Council approving the grant for VOZ was not necessarily a smooth one. In addition to opposition from the building trade unions there was also some strong opposition from individual citizens regarding everything from the location of the site to the legal status of the day laborers who would be gathering there. This initial opposition from the building trade unions and the Columbia Pacific Build Trades Council, as we will see later on in this chapter, eventually gave rise to opportunities for both VOZ and the building trades to build a more amicable relationship through increased communication about their core issues. These two factors of the Portland City Council's support and the initial opposition of the building trades are essential components to the story of coalition building and cooperation in Portland.

### **VOZ, Unions, Coalition and Challenges**

After nearly three years of the day labor hire site operating in Portland the numerous relationships VOZ and local unions have formed are at various stages of development. Romeo Sosa, the executive director of VOZ, described the current relationship with some of the building trade unions in Portland as a “work in progress,”



adding “we wanted to have their support before opening the center.” While VOZ received nearly twenty letters of support in the grant proposal to the city council from groups such as SEIU Local 503, the Oregon Law Center, the American Friends Service Committee and Jobs with Justice, among others, and vocal support at the city council meeting where the final funding decision was made, the building trades were not among those supporting VOZ. In fact, according to Ignacio Paramo, the director of the day labor hire site, the building trades council sent a letter of opposition to the Portland City Council. “At first we had opposition from the building trades. They wrote a letter to the mayor in opposition to the hire site.” This turned out to be an opportunity to open a dialogue between VOZ and the trades. “After that we met a few times and we explained what we do. We have similar goals and we face similar challenges and we’re fighting for the same things. After a few meetings they called the mayor and said it’s OK.” Also, according to Paramo, there was a need to emphasize that immigrant day laborers do not have an effect on the labor market for the types of jobs that the building trades usually work. “They didn’t know we focus mostly on jobs of homeowners and contractors, they don’t go to the union halls and hire union workers. That was one of the emphasis that we don’t compete for the same jobs.” This communication was effective in getting the building trades to withdraw their opposition. Sosa noted after the city council awarded VOZ the grant to open the day labor hire site, the building trade unions did not strongly oppose VOZ in any way.

VOZ has also made an effort, according to Sosa, to build more understanding between members and leadership in the building trades and immigrant day laborers, “we went to visit [and see] how they operate in the union hall and then they came to us to talk

to day laborers.” Though, Sosa explains, there was some agreement to support VOZ in discussions with the leadership of the Columbia Pacific Building Trades Council but, Sosa noted, the general membership was somewhat resistant to the idea. Sosa explains these differences between the views of the leadership and the general membership as a misconception of the issue, “the main issue that the union workers have is the legal status of workers and that ‘they are taking our jobs.’ We are not in competition with the unions because big companies do not hire day laborers. They have the wrong idea about who employs the day laborers. The leadership understands, but the membership is divided.” Finally, Sosa often reiterated the goal of VOZ and the hire site, “we want better wages for the workers and to end exploitation,” adding that VOZ is working to “improve working conditions for all workers.” According to Paramo, the hire site’s relationship with the building trades is a continuing effort even if it is not currently the primary focus of VOZ or the hire site. “We’re still meeting and talking – we’d like to have more of a relationship with them in the future” also pointing out that some building trade unions are working with VOZ on a union-by-union basis rather than through the building trades council.

The Laborers union is one that has engaged VOZ on an individual union basis and Ben Nelson of the Laborers International Union in Portland shares some of the same sentiments as Sosa with regard to ensuring that all workers have rights in the workplace. Nelson affirmed that members of the local Laborers Union in Portland took part in efforts to build a relationship between VOZ and the unions, “we’ve had folks from VOZ come over to our union hall and our membership meeting and some of our folks have gone to their monthly meeting.” Nelson also affirms Sosa’s claim that the building trades and

day laborers occupy different areas of the workforce in construction. Nelson cites this fact as a potential reason for a lack of cooperation or collaboration between VOZ and the building trade unions “in particular about the relationship with VOZ – the benefits to us – maybe we can organize some of their employers, but there isn’t a pressing need in private construction. If they were working in that (commercial) market it would be something we would hustle up and come to an agreement on.” This point is significant because, originally, the fact that day laborers and unionized construction workers were not seeking the same work allowed the building trades to, if not support, at least withdraw opposition to the hire site. However, Nelson notes that this can also be an obstacle to further organization of immigrant workers into the unions because they do not, in fact, work in the same industry. This claim is further confirmed by some of the scholarship discussed earlier regarding the general retreat of unions from the residential construction industry and is echoed by David Ramirez, a representative from a building trade union. “We’ve kind of gotten away from the residential work more and more.” He also points out the while his union has not taken a very active role in working with VOZ it is not because of a lack of support, but rather the nature of the construction industry right now. “It’s not because we don’t want to, but because we don’t know how we can help. I’ve got a pretty open-minded business manager. Most of the groups are looking for training and jobs. We cannot provide that right now. The construction industry took a big hit.” The ability of unions to work in coalition with other groups was often cited by several interview respondents as one of the major factors in a lack of collective work between the unions and VOZ. Sometimes, the lack of jobs is considered a factor, while at other times a simple lack of time contributes to the inability to forge lasting coalitions. According to

Steve Hughes, currently with the Working Families Party in Oregon and formerly with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, “the number one priority for most unions is getting a good contract. [As for] coalition building, there’s only so many hours in the day sometimes.” Ramirez echoes this fact regarding the priorities of unions as he points out that “we’re engaged in organizing contracts but not community organizing.”

### **Worker Identity, Solidarity and Education**

Though these obstacles can be difficult to overcome, Nelson also noted that political issues can bring diverse groups of people together around a similar issue. In this case, it was immigration reform, “we actively seek coalition work. We did a lot more coalition work a couple of years ago with the Sensenbrenner bill (H.R. 4437). We’re seeking all kinds of relationships with like-minded organizations. It’s so critical; we’re all fighting a very difficult battle.” This type of collaboration and cooperative action is quite common among groups with seemingly different missions whenever a policy is up for debate. Nelson also noted that the Laborers have received support from VOZ in demonstrations as part of a campaign with Jobs with Justice. Currently, VOZ is engaged in bringing together some coalition groups to raise awareness about the issue of wage theft. According to Michael Dale of the Northwest Workers’ Justice Project, an ally of VOZ and supporter of the day labor hire site, both AFSCME and the Oregon School Employees Association have already signed on to the project in support. In addition VOZ and NWJP are still seeking the support of some unions in the building trades. As pointed out by Janice Fine’s work on community unionism, sometimes informational campaigns like this are very effective ways for groups like VOZ to make an impact on

the community by bringing forth an issue such as wage theft with the support of numerous coalition groups. In this way, VOZ is using its political power to draw attention to a social issue affecting all workers rather than attempting to use the traditional economic power that unions typically rely on (Fine, “Community Unions” 155).

While the work that the Laborers have engaged in with VOZ or with mutual coalition partners, such as Jobs with Justice, point to some optimism for the future of such relationships, this is not always the case with other unions. Though they do not stand in opposition to groups like VOZ or the hire site, Jeff Brooke of the painters and drywall finishers Local 10 said that coalition building or collaboration with community groups is not one of the union’s main priorities. “As far as working with other groups, we really don’t. We don’t have a problem promoting them. It’s a matter of skill sets.” Despite the fact that Local 10 does not involve itself in many community partnerships, the need to organize workers is still apparent to Brooke. “We don’t reach out to a lot of groups because it’s already part of the way we operate” adding that “if the demographics of that membership is changing you have to change with it.” Brooke was referring to an earlier statement about the changes he has seen in the union membership noting in the last ten years Latino workers have made up “99-100 percent of the market.” Brooke also explained that along with the shift in worker demographics the union has had to change its organizing approach by hiring Spanish speaking staff and taking a family-oriented approach to organizing. In some cases, Brooke said, staff members go to weekend soccer games and jobs sites that are currently nonunion seeking to organize more workers. Finally, Brooke pointed out that his union also offers services to nonunion workers who

face worksite abuses. “If they’re not being paid correctly we hook them up with Spanish speaking lawyers, even for nonunion workers we do this...If they’re having a problem and being cheated we want them to contact us, that’s where the Latino organizers come in.” The potential for day laborers to be organized into the unions was also mentioned by Paramo as one of the potential benefits for day laborers at the hire site. “We are not at the level of seeing great benefits yet. Building a relationship to, in the future, get more of our workers into union jobs and implement more labor laws.” Paramo also noted that a few workers from the hire site have already been able to get into unions. Though it seems that coalitions are more likely to form around political or moral issues such as immigration or employer abuses rather than economic issues or organizing drives, there is still a widely held belief in the need for workers, regardless of citizenship or union/nonunion status, to work together to improve conditions for every worker.

Hughes echoed the fact that coalitions are generally more common around political issues rather than in a broader movement, but he also acknowledged the work being done to bring groups like VOZ and the building trade unions closer together. “There’s a lot of good work trying to be done on engaging the building trades locally on this issue. There’s a lot of education that needs to happen in the labor movement on this issue.” Hughes focused quite a bit on education throughout the interview citing the need to change the dominant narrative regarding immigrant workers and their effect on the labor market. “As soon as we start talking about what immigrants are doing or are not doing we’re already playing the right-wing’s game. Employers are doing this. Trade agreements, cheap labor demand, creating and incentivizing immigration. No one leaves their home willingly. It’s race to the bottom economics on a global scale.” He also

emphasized that it is essential that this shift in the discourse originate in the labor movement and he pointed to successful workshops that AFSCME has held to begin the dialogue. “It has to come from within the labor movement. Unions need to have this conversation internally, frame it in a working class perspective.” When considering how effective such workshops might be for the building trades Hughes was realistic about the possibility for change. “The most obvious (challenge) is how real it is for the building trades; it’s hard to say ‘see it this way.’ The private sector trades are already feeling it on a visceral level.” However, unlike Sosa, Hughes does not see either the leadership of a union or the membership, in particular as being a stumbling block to educating fellow unionists about the complex issues surrounding immigration. “A working class analysis of immigration, it needs to come from wherever. It’s a conversation that needs to happen. In some cases leadership is ahead of membership and in some membership is ahead of leadership. If it doesn’t happen, it’s at our own peril.” This need for education has been echoed in scholarship already conducted in this area and we will return to it later for a closer analysis of possible ways to bring education to the building trades.

Throughout the interviews conducted for this research solidarity was often discussed in terms of needing to build more of it and being essential to the growth of the labor movement. While not every interview subject mentioned solidarity, many gave it special attention especially with regard to the need for a working-class solidarity among both native-born and immigrant workers. Even if not discussed as solidarity specifically, several subjects did talk about a “working class analysis” of immigration or “worker’s rights” all of which indicate a need for some unifying sense of shared struggle or objectives. I examine several instances of these discussions in this section.

The issue of solidarity struck me most when talking with Hughes. As mentioned above he stressed the need to “apply a working person’s analysis to immigration” and the need for unions to have internal conversations about immigrant workers and “frame it in a working class perspective.” He was speaking specifically about some workshops that AFSCME had held in order to address workers’ concerns about the effects of immigration on the job market. Gloria Gonzales, a current organizer with AFSCME offered more details about the workshops and workers’ responses to them. It should be noted here that though these workshops were for AFSCME union members and not held with the building trades some important lessons could be taken away from these solidarity-building efforts. According to Gonzales, 150 members participated in a workshop that made the case that “immigrants are not coming because they want to come; they are coming because they don’t have a choice. There’s huge displacement in Mexico of farm workers because of trade agreements.” In addition to this workshop AFSCME also held a leadership conference on the importance of immigrant workers to the labor movement. Gonzales said the response was mostly positive. “People enjoyed it; they had a lot of questions. Members said they were more clear on the issues of immigration. In our conference the members are very responsive – you may have one or two that don’t agree, but 98 percent are very responsive.” This information from both Hughes and Gonzales illustrates not only the recognized need to build greater solidarity amongst immigrant workers and those in organized labor, but it also points to the role of education of the membership in that process.

Dale referred to solidarity with respect to the relationships between VOZ and the building trades and noted that solidarity can be built in less formal ways than education



and can be born out of greater communication and frequent interaction. “Once people got to know each other a lot, not all, of the opposition kind of went away.” He also pointed to the need, at times, for leadership to initiate these interactions in order for the membership to follow suit. “(Between) VOZ and the building trades, at least at the leadership level, there’s a higher level of mutual trust and respect. When you broaden that out there’s an understanding that the exploitation of anyone is the exploitation of everyone. It’s a growing notion that goes against the old-time religion.” For Dale, building solidarity is a means to build trust which is essential given the contentious past of this relationship and the nature of the issues at stake. Perhaps this may explain why, before any communication had been opened between VOZ and the trades there was opposition as Dale said, “familiarity leads to solidarity, but isolation leads to suspicion.”

In addition to the trust building that can result from open communication both Dale and Paramo point to the more practical benefits of increased solidarity. According to both men the sharing of information on exploitative employers has been beneficial for both VOZ and the trades. “We’ve faced similar issues. Sometimes we even share information on employers that don’t pay employees to know what employers over there are stealing from workers.” Furthermore, Dale noted that VOZ often “provide[s] information on what the scams are” to the trades. Continuing on, Paramo notes that building solidarity with the unions opens up the possibility that day laborers can find a place in the unions and that by combining the efforts of day laborers and unionized workers they can influence changes to, and enforcement of, labor laws. “There is mutual benefit because we’re fighting for the same issues to implement labor laws. If any worker is abused all workers suffer. We fight for worker rights and it benefits all

workers, union and nonunion.”

When it comes to the views of building trade unions on the issue of the solidarity opinions vary nearly as much as the different levels of involvement with VOZ. Brooke pointed more to the services offered by the union for both its members and non members as evidence that the need to build a labor movement that includes immigrant workers is not really necessary. “Trying to create a movement, I don’t think it’s necessary. At the apprenticeship level some classes are in Spanish. We connect them (immigrant workers) to colleges to learn English.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, Nelson could not emphasize the need for solidarity enough. “It’s really important to us for all laborers to have rights in the workplace. That’s always important. When you’re talking about a diverse industry, any type of work, it’s important to have as much solidarity as you can develop. It’s important to have good leadership too.” Despite acknowledging this need, Nelson did not offer any concrete ways to foster this solidarity, but rather reiterated the need for it, and the fact that it has been a consistent problem. “Long-term we have got to have more solidarity among the working class. It’s an enormous issue that’s been a problem as long as labor’s been around.” Finally, Ramirez noted that “if you have a desire to be in the trades, we want you on our side no matter where you’re from. We’ve got a pretty diverse group of members.”

Labor education also plays a critical role in efforts to build stronger alliances and coalitions between organized labor and immigrant workers. Bruce Nissen contends that labor education is necessary because in order to expand organizing drives and grow the ranks of unionized workers “unions need to ‘transform’ themselves internally before they will effectively undertake organizing” (Nissen 109). Nissen uses the example of a

carpenters union in South Florida that made an earnest attempt to use education to create greater understanding of the benefits of these alliances. In this case there was already support in the national union for the inclusion of immigrant-friendly policies, but Nissen claims “resistance was coming from local leadership and membership” (114). By the end of classes attitudes had changed substantially from the “blame the worker” mentality where immigrant workers were often viewed as unorganizable to “an ‘Anglo’ organizer who earlier had warned of tuberculosis from the immigrant influx, now wander[ing] through the crowd trying to sign up undocumented workers to join the union’s apprenticeship program” (122).

As evidenced already by both Hughes and Gonzales, some unions, such as AFSCME are already fully engaged in educating their membership on both the issues related to immigration and the role that immigrant workers can play in the strengthening of the labor movement. It is also important to note that education does not necessarily go one way. Many interview subjects point to the need for immigrant workers to learn from unions as much as union membership to learn about the circumstances surrounding immigration. For Hughes this is way to build solidarity. “There’s a lot of education that needs to happen in the labor movement on this issue...employers are doing this to us and they’re doing it to the immigrants.” Gonzales reiterates this goal and has thus far been pleased with the results. “In a way, publically we are not doing anything, but internally we are educating our members...we wanted to be more open and supportive of that idea – change misconceptions. They (the membership) have been supportive of immigration reform.” From both Hughes and Gonzales we can see echoes of Nissen’s research and the goals of labor education in the South Florida building trade unions. Though it may be

argued that AFSCME does not deal as directly with immigrant workers as the trades do. Gonzales pointed out that currently AFSCME represents child-care workers, many of whom are immigrant workers, and have a direct stake in the education of their membership. What remains to be seen is if the building trade unions in Portland are willing to take on the same level of devotion to changing misconceptions about immigrant workers among their membership as AFSCME has been.

A final note related to education is needed though more attention will be given to the subject in the following chapter. One of the challenges to greater solidarity among organized labor and immigrant workers that came out in the interviews was a language barrier. Often representatives from the building trades would point to the fact that as long as immigrant workers can communicate in English they should have no problem joining a building trade union. Safety issues are often cited as the reason English language skills are needed on construction sites. As Ramirez said, “if a guy or women can communicate in English they can get in the trades... it’s in their best interest to communicate in English with their foreman and their supervisor.” This concern was echoed by Brooke. “There is one issue, a question of literacy. High-rises are much more dangerous. There are safety classes all individuals must go through and pass. Sometimes that can be a stumbling block.” Brooke goes on to point out that as the demographics of the building trades have shifted so too has the range of services offered, adding that some classes at the apprenticeship level are now taught in Spanish. This final point, while on the surface appearing to be an obstacle to increased cooperation between immigrant workers and organized labor actually opens up yet another opportunity for further interaction. Connie Ashbrooke of Oregon Trades Women noted that though her organization does not work

with VOZ directly one of their staff members teaches a carpentry class at VOZ in Spanish. Also, like many worker centers throughout the country, VOZ also offers classes in English to its membership. While such individual efforts are encouraging, perhaps more could be done between the unions and worker centers on the issue which would eventually lead to great solidarity between members of both organizations. This possibility will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter were this study will analyze several of the themes discussed here.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

This research set out to determine why the efforts to establish a strong coalition between organized labor and immigrant day laborers in Portland did not resemble similar successful attempts in Los Angeles, Omaha and Long Island. Essentially, Portland could be considered both a partial success and a work in progress. The fact that the building trade unions withdrew their objection to the opening of a day labor hire site may be one of the brighter spots in their relationship on a broad scale. Even more so, is the realization that the main obstacle to greater cooperation was a lack of communication that has largely been remedied by both VOZ's visits to union halls and union members' attendance at VOZ meetings. Still, some very fundamental challenges remain if there is to be a stronger bond between immigrant workers and the unions in Portland. Though there were certainly numerous possible outcomes to the efforts in Portland to establish greater cooperation between immigrant day laborers and the building trade unions, three broad frameworks will help guide the analysis of the interviews conducted for this project. I will briefly mention all three before going into greater detail on each of them.

First, there is the classic mantra that an injury or injustice to one worker is an injury or an injustice to all workers and therefore organized labor and immigrant day laborers ought to stand united to face and correct the abuses of exploitative employers. Second, there is the possibility that the building trades only withdrew their opposition because they, in fact, did not share anything in common with day laborers and thus saw no need to oppose their efforts. This framework of "we're not doing the same work" is potentially harmful in the long run. Finally, Portland may represent a combination of

very unique circumstances when compared with the similar efforts mentioned earlier and these circumstances may explain the fact that despite its reputation as a progressive city, day laborers and organized labor in Portland have not enjoyed the same accomplishments as other similar efforts throughout the U.S.

### **1. “An Injury to One Is an Injury to All” Framework**

As evidenced by much of the literature discussed in Chapter II, a common refrain from organized labor, immigrant workers, and their advocates is that in order to build greater and lasting solidarity between unionized workers and immigrants they must share a common identity as workers. This can typically be done by emphasizing that abuses suffered by immigrant workers have, in one way or another, effects on all workers. This mantra was frequently stated in similar terms by numerous interview subjects. Ignacio Paramo of VOZ stated that “If any worker is abused all the workers suffer. We fight for worker rights and it benefits all workers, union and nonunion” and these sentiments were reiterated by Michael Dale of the Northwest Workers’ Justice Project when he claims that even in the broader scope outside of Portland we can see the realization of this principle. “When you broaden that out, there’s an understanding that the exploitation of anyone is the exploitation of everyone.” Even if not stated as explicitly, there is an undercurrent in some of the responses from interview subjects that the fate of immigrant day laborers and unionized workers is somehow linked. Steve Hughes claims that the viewpoint that ought to come out of a “working person’s analysis” of these issues is that “employers are doing this (creating cheap labor demand) to us and they’re doing it to the immigrants.” Romeo Sosa added that VOZ’s goal is to “improve working conditions for all workers.”

Hall's argument about the need for a worker identity to be constructed is evident in this mantra of "an injury to one is an injury to all." The dissimilar backgrounds of day laborers, unionized construction workers, skilled and unskilled workers, native-born and immigrant workers all serve to create division among the workers. By framing identity as a collective notion surrounding a common abuse by an employer suffered by the worker these other, sometimes competing, identities can be glossed over. As Hall states, "the 'unity' of classes is necessarily complex and has to be *produced* – constructed, created – as a result of specific economic, political and ideological practices" (Hall 293). Thus, we can view the familiar mantra as an articulation of this ideological practice of galvanizing workers of distinct and dissimilar backgrounds and identities around a common opposition to shared injustices. However, this practice was not always engaged in by VOZ, the day laborers, and the building trades.

These sentiments expressed by VOZ leadership, one of their ally organization's leaders and Hughes are contrasted by the language of some of the building trades' leadership and organizers. Though these statements do not contradict those already discussed, and in some ways they do express the shared struggle all workers face, they are more tailored for the union and how it can be of specific assistance to workers suffering injustice. Jeff Brooke stated that if they're (immigrant day laborers) having a problem and being cheated we want them to contact us. That's where the Latino organizers come in." Similarly, David Ramirez emphasized that "we represent all workers" and that "if you have a desire to be in the trades, we want you on our side no matter where you're from." These quotes, while related to the ones from VOZ and their ally organizations take a different tone. While the quotes from VOZ emphasize the



shared fight for workers' rights, those from the trades – if they talk about an inclusive vision – tend to frame it in terms of joining the union or coming to the union to seek assistance with specific problems. This division clearly points to the need for greater collaboration between the unions and VOZ. The result of such collaboration could be anything from coalition work on a particular issue to the further organizing of immigrant day laborers into unions.

All of this demonstrates the need for clear goals on both VOZ's and the unions' respective behalf. If VOZ's goal was initially just to have the building trade unions withdraw their opposition to the opening of the hire site then they have succeeded. However, both Paramo and Sosa pointed out that they are still working to build relationships with the building trades. In addition, Dale also noted that they are seeking the unions' support for their upcoming campaign on wage theft. This indicates that VOZ hopes to build and maintain a relationship with the unions though the goals of such a relationship remain unclear aside from having their political support and perhaps getting some laborers into unions. For the unions' part, those that talk about coalition and relationship building with VOZ and immigrant workers usually frame it in the terms of the willingness of the union to organize workers. The unions also admit that organizing new workers is not one the union's top priorities though some like Nelson pointed to the potential benefit of organizing the contractors that employ immigrant day laborers by working more closely with VOZ. In any case, this mismatch of stated goals between VOZ and the building trade unions has contributed to the lack of further relationship building and collaboration. Though there still appears to be hope on this issue with the

upcoming wage theft campaign, it remains to be seen if the building trade unions will take up this issue alongside immigrant day laborers and their advocates.

## **2. “We Don’t Do the Same Work” Framework**

When VOZ was initiating a relationship with the trade unions with the intention of convincing the unions to withdraw their opposition to the hire site, one of the main points VOZ focused on was that the day laborers who would be utilizing the hire site were not competing for the same jobs that members of the painters, laborers or ironworkers unions were filling. This fact has already been well-documented in this research by both the account of labor’s retreat from residential construction (Rabourn) and the statistics about the work day laborers typically do from the report on day labor in America. (Valenzuela et al). While this proved a successful strategy initially, the same logic is now used by some representatives and organizers in the building trades to explain the lack of a sustained relationship between VOZ and the trades. The fact that day laborers usually work in residential construction for homeowners or residential contractors often limits their interaction with and exposure to unions. Unions, for their part, have largely left residential work and are currently concentrated in commercial construction. In Portland, a total of 5.1 percent of the labor force are employed in the construction industry and Latinos make up 8.8 percent of the population of Portland (US Census).

Additionally, building trade unions are obviously organized around trades. There has been a historical division in the labor movement itself between skilled and unskilled workers that goes back as far as the foundation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. This division has been perpetuated with regard to immigrant day laborers

and the building trade unions in several ways. Unions typically control the access to their apprenticeship programs where members can learn and be licensed in particular trades. Though, as Brooke claims “if they (immigrant workers) want to join we have to represent them, otherwise it’s discrimination.” Though, as Ramirez pointed out, “most of the groups are looking for training and jobs. We cannot provide that right now.” Due to the fact that the trades have some control over the market for skilled laborers there is clearly an incentive there to limit admittance into apprenticeship programs in order to better provide jobs for already existing members rather than increasing the pool of workers by organizing new members. This observation is confirmed by Ramirez as well. He asserts that his union is “engaged in organizing contracts but not community organizing.”

Often, the union representatives and organizers pointed to the current state of the economy as justification for focusing mostly on the immediate needs of their membership. This trend is not restricted to the building trade unions. Hughes pointed to the limited time and resources that unions have to work with as evidence that many unions, even outside the building trades, typically focus on servicing the membership rather than organizing new members. This comes into contrast with the literature that suggests a shift in some unions, especially those affiliated with the AFL-CIO (which many building trades are not), that have moved resources from member services (paid stewards or grievance officers or strike funds) to organizing (Sherman and Voss 90-91). Some unions involved in this study have taken the steps suggested by scholars such as hiring Spanish speaking staff members, however it is somewhat unclear as to whether this is a response to an already changing membership or an effort to organize new members. In either case, the disconnect between the work that day laborers perform in construction

and the workers that building trade unions represent is problematic. While the distinction was initially helpful for VOZ in order to get the trades on board with the hire site it seems to have been a double-edged sword in that the differences in the way unions view skilled and unskilled or semi-skilled labor have inhibited further development of this relationship.

Thus far we have examined two frameworks to analyze the success of efforts to build coalition among immigrant day laborers and the building trade unions in Portland. The first framework subsumes individual identity under a collective identity in that the violation of the rights of one worker is taken to be an affront to the rights of all workers regardless of immigration status, job skills and union or nonunion status. While such a framework for collaboration may be effective in some cases, in Portland the building trade unions needed to be assured that creating a space for immigrant day laborers, largely working in construction, would not harm the interests of unionized workers in the trades. As a result of this concern from the trades, we have the second framework in which individual worker identities are not assumed to be so tightly linked. In fact, great efforts are made to point out the differences in the work that day laborers do and the work done by unionized workers in the building trades. Each of these frameworks, while producing some successful results in Portland initially, have not contributed to continued engagement between VOZ and the unions. Therefore, I would like to venture a third framework used by other successful attempts at the same project continuing in Portland.

### **3. “Building a Movement” Framework**

The first framework attempts to gloss over differences in worker identities in order to convey a united group of people with the same concerns. The second framework

emphasizes certain differences in worker identity in order to ease the minds of those who see themselves as standing to lose from increased support of efforts to bring more workers into the unions or at least to have a place where day laborers can set a standard wage and be safe from employer exploitation. Perhaps what would be most effective is a hybrid of these frameworks with some important differences. First, it is important that differences in worker identity are not subsumed by a collective identity, especially one where there is an implication that the identity assumed is that of a victim. By claiming that all workers share that identity of “worker” because injuries to one are felt by all essential differences are lost and this results in misunderstanding the core goals of groups seeking to protect the rights of immigrant workers. Also, by asserting that injuries are not individualized, but rather collective, only focuses on rights after the fact whereas one of the main priorities for the day labor hire site is to claim rights for day laborers before they are violated. This is why they set a minimum wage and require employers to register with the site. On the other hand, by basing the argument for why the building trades should not oppose the opening of a hire site on the fact that day laborers do not perform the same work as unionized workers and thus do not take jobs that would otherwise be filled by unionized workers the conversation essentially ends there. The unions no longer have an incentive to organize immigrant workers or even help provide training in the trades. In fact, they have more incentive to refrain from becoming too involved with VOZ as such involvement may cost the union political capital.

While the third framework I put forth is not unique in that it draws both on some of the literature from Chapter II and some of the interviews conducted for this research I do believe that it effectively synthesizes the two frameworks discussed above and

provides some points of consideration to keep in mind for future attempts at similar projects. From the first framework it is important to link the fate of workers together, but it needs to be broader than injuries or injustices and ought to include reference to the power of organized workers. Strength in numbers was only cited once in the interviews from Connie Ashbrooke. This is an incredibly important component to the argument that labor must look to incorporate more immigrant workers into the unions. As evidenced by the work done in Los Angeles to organize everyone from janitors to garment workers, there is still room for the labor movement to grow. It is especially important to note that this growth can be in the private sector where labor has faced its sharpest decline in power. Additionally, by identifying as workers regardless of national origin or industry especially on a politically charged issue such as wage theft, immigrant workers and union members can organize from a position of power rather than one of victimization. From the work done in Long Island with child and elder care workers we can see that working from a position of moral strength has the potential to bring the general public on the side of workers, union or nonunion, native or foreign born.

At the same time, acknowledging the differences between immigrant workers and union members allows for greater understanding of individual backgrounds and concerns. It should also be briefly noted that I am not operating under the assumption that immigrant workers share a singular identity and that union members share an identity similar to one another yet somehow different than day laborers. Obviously, countless factors influence one person's identity which, itself, is constantly fragmented and in flux. However, it is assumed that at different times and under differing circumstances individuals inhabit one or more identities and can, under the right conditions, identify as

an immigrant worker, a day laborer or a union member. What is important to keep in mind in this regard is that differences can be a uniting principle by the fact that while several differences exist between someone born and raised in Oregon who works as a roofer in commercial construction and a day laborer who immigrated from Guatemala and builds cabinets for \$10 an hour, both workers share a belief in their right to collectively bargain for a fair contract. Finally, this also gets at the heart of coalition building. The Oregonian roofer and his union may seek political support or numbers at a rally supporting the Employee Free Choice Act. If a relationship has been built with the worker center then there is a resource for these numbers. Then, when the worker center and its coalition partners need a big turnout for a march in support of fair immigration reform they can call on their allies in the building trades. In both cases, differences can serve to highlight similarities that help build trust and partnerships.

The three frameworks presented here are not meant to be exhaustive of the possible outcomes of efforts to build coalitions between organized labor and immigrant workers, but they do serve to offer points of comparison as well as possible modifications that may make future work in this area more successful. Further attention will be given to this in the following chapter. What remains to be analyzed is why the outcome of these efforts in Portland do not mirror similar efforts in Los Angeles, Omaha and Long Island. A potential contributing factor is that Portland does not enjoy the same rich labor history that is often attributed to places like L.A. Another possibility is that fact that in Portland these efforts focused on an industry – construction – that has been notoriously difficult to integrate. And in turn, during the civil rights movement and the subsequent affirmative action movement and does not follow the AFL-CIO in expressing the need to

organize immigrant workers in order to build the labor movement. One final possibility could be that those involved in these efforts in Portland were not able to effectively communicate a shared identity of “worker” among those parties involved. It could be that in their efforts to gain the support of the trades in the opening of the hire site VOZ undermined the future potential for cooperation by too aggressively asserting differences. On the other hand, the building trades may have overlooked an opportunity to gain a foothold in an industry – residential construction – long abandoned by unions by appealing to the public in a well known progressive city regarding the exploitation of immigrant day laborers and using such moral authority as an organizing tool.



## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research set out to examine the conditions of coalition building between organized labor and immigrant workers and their advocates in Portland. The focus fell on VOZ, the worker's education project, and their efforts to establish and run a day labor hire site. Additionally, the role played by the building trades unions was also a subject of this study. I compared the efforts of VOZ and the trade unions in Portland in their continued attempts to work in conjunction with one another with similar programs in Omaha, Long Island and Los Angeles. For the purposes of this study, it was my aim to examine both of the aforementioned parties under a theoretical framework informed by Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. I wanted to know what conditions aided and prevented successful cooperative efforts in Portland during the last two and a half years in comparison to similar efforts made elsewhere in the country. Through a series of interviews conducted with labor leaders, organizers and the leadership of VOZ coupled with city council minutes and testimony, and VOZ's grant application the picture of the last few years became clearer. While much of what is happening between the building trades and VOZ in Portland is still unfolding, a work in progress, there are still some conclusions that can be drawn from the research. The following will outline those conclusions and offer some recommendations for the future of this relationship. Additionally, I will explore the limits of this research and possibilities for future research in this area.

## **Findings**

While VOZ represents what Janice Fine may define as an example of community unionism, there are some important distinctions to be made about the type of worker center VOZ runs as well as the day labor hire site. VOZ and their hire site cater to the construction trades and are most often frequented by residential contractors and home owners. The Workplace Project that Fine discussed was representative of workers in several types of jobs ranging from housecleaning to landscaping (Fine, “Community Unions” 164). Additionally, the day labor hire site in Portland was partially born out of already existing city and community support where in Long Island the Workplace Project had to build this support over time. Furthermore, the fact that many of the day laborers, who seek employment at the hire site, work in the building trades industry plays an important role in distinguishing this research from similar scholars whose research observed these efforts elsewhere and in different industries. As stated in the first chapter, VOZ was originally born out of the Worker’s Organizing Committee, which itself, was formed in order to address the needs of day laborers who were discouraged from seeking work at two major intersections in Portland by local police. (VOZ) As part of the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON), VOZ broadly sought to “unify and strengthen its member organizations to be more strategic and effective in their efforts to develop leadership, mobilize, and organize day laborers in order to protect and expand their civil, labor and human rights” (VOZ). In part to fulfill these goals VOZ applied for and was awarded a grant offered by the city of Portland to open and operate a hire site for day laborers. It was not until this point that a concerted effort to bring organized labor into the fold of immigrant worker rights was recognized. This fact could account for a

portion of the continuing resistance from some of the building trade unions in Portland to VOZ and the hire site. However, it is important to note that despite some of this resistance, VOZ was effectively able to get the Columbia Pacific Building Trades Council to withdraw its initial opposition to the project even if they have yet to establish a lasting coalition partnership. Finally, as noted by Ignacio Paramo, director of the day labor hire site, it was not until fairly recently that VOZ recognized the possibility of getting some of their members organized into the building trade unions as one of the goals of the center. These two factors could partially explain some of the reasons for a lack of greater cooperation and coalition between VOZ and the unions.

Furthermore, the continuing insistence that day laborers do not perform the same work that unionized construction workers undertake presented both an opportunity and a challenge to VOZ and the building trades. On the one hand, the trades no longer viewed VOZ and the hire site as a threat to their jobs and their share of the commercial construction market and thus they were comfortable in withdrawing their opposition to the hire site. On the other hand, the trades also believed that their membership had little in common with day laborers in construction and, as a result, the need for coalition and the possibility for mutual benefit seemed remote. Such sentiments demonstrate aspects of the theoretical framework due to the fact that the interests of day laborers and unionized construction workers have not or cannot be articulated as shared or common. Therefore, there is no way to produce meaning and substance to the shared identity of “worker” between day laborers and unionized workers. Even though, as the theoretical framework maintains, identity is necessarily produced, in this case the conflicting

message inhibits the production of said common identity because it highlights the inconsistency of the relationship between VOZ and the unions.

Despite these obstacles VOZ and the building trades have established the grounds for future cooperation, which VOZ cites as a goal for their organization. It remains to be seen how much and which building trade unions intend to participate in further coalition building. However, the Laborers Union has expressed a desire to do so and almost all union leaders have acknowledged the need to bring immigrant day laborers into the fold. The following section provides some recommendations for how such continued efforts might be fortified and strengthened.

The construction of a “worker” identity was undermined by more practical concerns in getting the trades to withdraw opposition to the day labor hire site. While this served a necessary short-term goal, it nonetheless leads to further challenges in building lasting coalitions between the unions and the day laborers. Hall highlights this issue in his discussion of working class racism. While racism is certainly related to this research I wish to draw on Hall’s discussion of the inherent contradictions in class identity without delving into a prolonged discussion of racism. Hall asserts that Gramsci “shows that subordinated ideologies are necessarily and inevitably contradictory...he (Gramsci) shows how the ‘self’ which underpins these ideological formations is not a unified but a contradictory subject and a social construction” (Hall 308). In the case presented here we are made aware of the effect of this constructed identity and the competing and contradictory elements of identity – the results of competing and contradictory ideologies – has on attempts to build a shared identity of “worker” among such diverse people and their respective groups. When VOZ reassured the unions that

day laborers would not displace unionized construction workers this left little incentive for the unionized workers and their leadership to buy into the ideology of “an injury to one is an injury to all.” Though, on some level this ideology has sunk in a little more, the fact remains that as long as the focus of the union is on contracts for already organized workers and employers, progress will be slow and minimal.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations focus on three possible ways to increase cooperation between VOZ and the building trades: education, outreach and working on a political issue. Though discussed separately each recommendation can be employed in any number of ways to help increase interactions between VOZ and the trades, which ideally, will lead to greater trust and understanding. While I certainly acknowledge the limitations of each of these recommendations, it is my belief that investing time and resources in any or all of them will lead to mutual benefits for all groups involved. In turn, the investment of time and resources into any of these recommendations offers a greater opportunity to see or produce the inherently shared interests of workers and their stake in the future of the labor movement. Each of these recommendations also serves to help produce the shared worker identity needed in order to continue to build and foster greater solidarity among unionized workers and immigrant day laborers. Education allows for both immigrant workers and unionized workers to engage in dialogue and perhaps discover similar concerns, hopes, and circumstances that will subordinate other facets of their “self” under that of worker. In much the same way, outreach not only involves opening dialogue between groups, but also opening practices. Finally, political

campaigns provide perhaps the most obvious benefits when campaigns are successful and as such foster a shared identity among workers around political or economic victories.

### *Education*

Perhaps most clearly pointed to in the interviews is the need for education on both sides of this relationship. As both Gloria Gonzales and Steve Hughes mentioned when examining the successful education efforts underway with AFSCME the need to expand these workshops and programs is evident. Nissen demonstrates that such education efforts can be successful in the building trades as well. The focus of these efforts initially ought to be a narrative of the economic and political forces spurring immigration. This allows for both a broad and abstract discussion of the shared pressures on native born and immigrant workers. This narrative could then be coupled with the opportunity for immigrant workers to articulate their own accounts of personal immigration narratives as suggested by Paul Apostolidis' work. As Apostolidis suggests, these narratives often help form bonds of solidarity among workers because it allows immigrant workers to demonstrate their history with unions in their home country while also bolstering already existing critiques many unionized workers have of globalizing forces like trade agreements. While this element may be somewhat limited in the building trades because of the nature of the work, it is nonetheless important to implicate such forces in the discussion as a manner of applying what Hughes termed as a "working class analysis of immigration." Bruce Nissen demonstrated that such education efforts can be successful in the building trades as well. He recognizes that "unions need to 'transform' themselves internally before they will effectively undertake organizing" (Nissen 109). This need for transformation can again be seen in the scope of the theoretical framework used for this

study as the need to transform subjectivities such as “white, unionized, painter” into a broader identity like “worker” in order to not only recognize the need to bring immigrant, nonunion workers into the fold of the union, but also to support fellow workers in general.

Education can also take on a more practical form especially in the building trades. Teaching safety or apprenticeship classes in the native language of day laborers provides both a very practical service to immigrant day laborers but it also leads to increased interactions between the unions and day laborers. As a result of increased interactions we can reasonably expect greater communication and possibly understanding. Though some of the building trade unions have expressed a desire to limit the size of the available union workforce and may thus be unlikely to support these types of apprenticeship classes, others have already begun citing the changing demographics of the workforce and the need to service the existing membership. Still other unions have expressed the desire to expand their membership as VOZ has similarly expressed a desire to help their members find a place in the building trade unions. This seems like an obvious area for collaboration between the unions and VOZ though some may sight the limited availability of resources as an obstacle.

### *Outreach*

While education requires a fairly significant investment of time and other resources I believe the results would be well worth the time and effort. However, as demonstrated through some of the literature and interview responses, the resources unions and worker centers have at their disposal are already limited. Outreach requires much less in the way of time and resources though the resulting benefits will likely take

much longer to surface. For the purposes of VOZ and the building trades the outreach that I am proposing is as simple as designating one person from each group to serve as a delegate to the other. A delegate from VOZ could attend regular meetings of the Columbia Pacific Building Trades Council or specific unions and vice versa. Such outreach has limited though still significant benefits. It, like education, allows for increased interaction between the two groups as well as the opportunity for a consistent exchange of ideas. In this way VOZ can be aware of the most pressing issues facing the trades and the trades will have an opportunity to hear about projects VOZ is running. With this knowledge both parties are more capable and likely to offer support and assistance. A final benefit to this outreach is that it provides a forum for each group to address the needs of all parties involved. Several labor organizers mentioned the desire to share information with VOZ regarding exploitative employers. By attending regular meetings the formal opportunity to share this vital information and combine limited resources to resolve abusive practices is more frequently available. Though, as stated earlier, this type of interaction generally takes a while to establish and has limited benefits, it does not require a significant investment of time or other resources.

### *Political Campaigns*

Finally, to borrow from the work of Janice Fine, my last recommendation is that both VOZ and the building trades engage each other with work on political campaigns. I am not suggesting that the two groups throw support behind certain candidates, but rather that they focus on local, state and sometimes national issues that they share a common interest in such as wage theft, minimum wage laws, workplace safety issues collective bargaining rights, etc. Michael Dale of the Northwest Workers' Justice Project



mentioned that VOZ is already in the midst of a campaign against wage theft and is currently seeking the support of the building trade unions. Ben Nelson, of the Laborers union also noted that they have received VOZ's support at rallies for issues such as the Employee Free Choice Act. Since the political issues that workers face are potentially limitless and significant strides have already been made to bring these groups together on various political issues, increasing these interactions seems like the next logical step.

Involvement in political issues has several benefits, some of which Fine highlights. First, as she aptly noted, worker centers and other groups involved in community unionism usually have limited economic power since they represent workers in low wage jobs and do not usually represent the largest share of the workforce (Fine, "Community Unions" 156). Additionally, worker centers have generally been successful mobilizing political resources because they draw heavily on the community for support. One could reason that living wage campaigns would be successful especially if they involved a coalition of immigrant day laborers and unionized construction workers.

Of course such political coalitions, depending on their frequency, can have similar effects as education and outreach. Increased interactions will more than likely result in familiarity and trust building. In addition to campaigns to raise awareness about wage theft or to promote a living wage, campaigns surrounding a particular piece of legislation can also be effective. Whether it is immigration reform or the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), issues surrounding immigration and workers provide ample opportunities for cooperation and coalition.

In the end, any of these recommendations on their own or in combination could lead to greater cooperation between VOZ and the building trades. Each recommendation,

at the core, offers a potential to increase opportunities for the members of the parties involved to interact on a person to person basis. I believe through greater interaction these groups can form lasting partnerships that ultimately benefit both unionized and immigrant workers. Such partnerships have been effective elsewhere and they have often been the result of innovative and concerted approaches to the problems faced by all workers in the current state of declining union power and the exploitation of immigrant workers. These efforts in Portland may be a work in progress and it remains to be seen if the already established lines of communication will continue to serve the needs of all involved. The current wage theft campaign will be a good test of these relationships and possibly a trial of some of the recommendations outlined above.

### **Limitations of This Research and Possible Directions for Future Research**

The conclusions drawn from the research discussed provide several points of departure for future research. While this study was certainly limited in its scope, it nonetheless contributes another account of recent attempts to bring organized labor and immigrant workers together in an effort to both bolster the labor movement and assert workers' rights regardless of unionization, or in some cases, citizenship status. I conducted ten interviews for this study and also drew on city council testimony and minutes. With more time and resources more interviews could be conducted that would offer greater insight into the more than two-year history of the relationship between VOZ and the building trade unions in Portland. The upcoming wage theft campaign could provide a very useful way to observe and evaluate the continuing cooperation between the trades and VOZ especially on a focused issue that has the potential to garner significant community support. Finally, future research could also broaden the scope and

possibly combine with work already being done by scholars such as Lynn Stephen with PCUN in Woodland, OR. While PCUN (Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste – Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United) is quite different from VOZ in structure and industry, a comparative study could provide some insight into the best practices of each organization in the way of coalition building and outreach to organized labor (Stephen *The Story of PCUN*).

Taking this research even further I see potential benefits from seeking to study groups like VOZ that work primarily in construction outside of Oregon and on a national scale. As stated numerous times throughout this study, the building trades pose unique opportunities and challenges in terms of relationships with worker centers and immigrant day laborers. While much of the scholarship in this field examines worker centers, very few have taken a broader look at the building trades and how work might be done to bring these two disparate groups closer together.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Because these interviews were semi-structured the questions below served more as a general guide than a strict checklist. Though not every interview subject was asked every question, most of the questions were asked of most subjects depending on their relationship to and knowledge of the topics addressed in each question.

In what, if any, capacity has your union been involved with VOZ?

Does your union view immigrant workers as an important part of building a stronger labor movement?

What, if any, challenges do you see stemming from great cooperation between organized labor and immigrant workers and their advocates? What potential benefits do you see?

Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked you about?

How are decisions regarding coalition-building usually made?

Is coalition-building a priority for your union?

How important is a feeling of solidarity among workers and possible coalition groups when considering entering into new alliances?

What do you feel has contributed to that success or lack thereof?

How has building coalitions benefited your union and its membership? In general and any specific cases or examples?

How have these alliances benefited other coalition groups?

Does your union actively seek to build coalitions or do other groups seeking to build them typically approach your union?

APPENDIX B  
LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Interviewee	Title/Association	Date of Interview
Connie Ashbrooke	Executive Director, Oregon Tradeswomen	February 11, 2011
Jeff Brooke	Local 10 Painters and Drywall Finishers	February 2, 2011
Michael Dale	Executive Director, Northwest Workers Justice Project	February 14, 2011
Gloria Gonzales	Organizer, Oregon AFSCME Council 75	January 11, 2011
Steve Hughes	State Directors, Working Families Party, Oregon	November 16, 2010
Ben Nelson	Organizer, Laborers International Union	October 27, 2010
Ignacio Paramo	Director, MLK Day Labor Hire Site	February 8, 2011
Maurice Rahming	President, National Association of Minority Contractors of Oregon	February 9, 2011
David Ramirez*	Representative for building trade union	January 20, 2011
Romeo Sosa	Executive Director, VOZ	April 1, 2010

\*Interviewee asked not to be identified by name.

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