Organizing The South: Worker Centers in the Southern United States

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Introduction

Over the last three decades, worker centers have grown nationally as a force for innovation and experimentation in worker and economic justice organizing. The South has been no exception: Indeed, some of the country’s first worker centers were established in Southern states in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as activists and organizers grappled with how to build worker power and shift the debate about the South’s low-road economic agenda in the face of deep hostility to unions and traditional labor organizing.

¹ Chris Kromm is executive director of the Institute for Southern Studies and publisher of the Institute’s magazine, Facing South, based in Durham, N.C. The author would like to thank the following for their generous time in discussing worker centers in the South: Chanelle Croxton, Neidi Dominguez, Jose Garza, Tefere Gebre, Jacob Horwitz, Lisa Hubbard, Ursula Price, Erica Smiley, Jack Wiley, and Tanya Wallace-Gobern. Thank you also to Simone Kwee for research help and Sue Sturgis for editing assistance.
Since that time, the number of worker centers has steadily grown in the South, to nearly four-dozen worker center formations in the region today. While many of the features of Southern worker centers have mirrored their national counterparts, Southern worker centers have been shaped in key ways by the unique political and economic context in the South, as well as the region's distinct organizing traditions.

In surveying the experience of Southern worker centers, this paper looks at four areas:

1. The historical and political context of Southern worker center organizing;
2. The current landscape of Southern worker center organizations;
3. The strategies and approaches used by Southern worker centers; and
4. How worker centers are engaging the challenge of shifting power in the South.

“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

— WILLIAM FAULKNER
Organizing in the Southern Context

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE LOW-ROAD SOUTH

An important backdrop to the growth of worker centers in the South\(^2\) has been the region’s unique history and political economy.

A defining feature of the Southern economy, from its roots in slavery, has been a “low-road” development strategy characterized by a reliance on cheap labor, disproportionately high levels of worker- and resource-exploitive industries, and an elite consensus among business and political leaders hostile to worker organizing — all elements of what Southern historian Charles Cobb calls “the economic and social legacy of the plantation.”\(^3\)

\(^2\) The definition of the South used in this paper is the same as that used by the Institute for Southern Studies, a nonprofit media, research and education center founded in 1970 by civil rights veterans and where the author serves as executive director. In this definition, the South includes 13 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

In the wake of post-Civil War Reconstruction, key elements of the South’s modern economic strategy began to take shape: In a region economically devastated by war and lacking investment capital, Southern leaders attempted to entice industry with visions of a “New South” offering a “friendly business climate.” Elites aggressively marketed the South with the promise of low wages, union-free workplaces and a lax regulatory environment. Beginning in the 1930s, they also gave companies generous tax breaks and other incentives to set up shop in Southern states, often with few strings attached. In the 1940s and 50s, this was followed by the passage of “right-to-work” laws, bans on public sector bargaining, and other legal measures aimed at institutionally limiting the power of organized labor in Southern states.

Racial and gender inequality were and remain central to the development of the Southern low-road strategy. In a region marked by overall high rates of poverty and economic insecurity, African-American and women workers faced a racially- and gender-segmented labor system that locked them into the least-skilled and lowest-paying jobs with minimal employment security, anchored in a broader repressive climate of political disenfranchisement, racial segregation, and coercive economic arrangements, from sharecropping to the convict lease system. These legal and extra-legal systems not only sharpened racial and gender inequality, but also lowered the floor for wages and security of all workers, cementing the dominance of the Southern low-road strategy. They also strengthened the ability of conservative forces to use white supremacy to undermine interracial worker organizing.
THE ENDURING LOW-ROAD

The key features of the South’s low-road strategy, baked into the region’s political economy for more than a century, continue to shape the Southern economic landscape today:

**Low-Wage Jobs:** While Southern elites eagerly point to the expansion of relatively high-paying employment in industries like international auto manufacturing and high tech, the South’s economy is still disproportionately driven by low-wage jobs. A 2015 study found that Southern states had the highest share of new jobs paying less than $15 an hour, ranging from 45 percent of new job openings in Virginia, to 60 percent in Mississippi and West Virginia. More recently, a 2019 analysis by Prosperity Now found that Southern states have the highest share of jobs that are in low-wage occupations, meaning median annual pay is below 100 percent of the poverty threshold for a family of four. In all but one of the Southern states (Virginia), the share of low-wage jobs is higher than the national average; in six Southern states, more than 30 percent of the jobs are low-wage.

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Anti-Union Climate: Southern political leaders largely remain committed to an economic and political strategy hostile to unions and workplace organizing. In recent years, before major union votes in Mississippi, South Carolina and Tennessee, state lawmakers mobilized to denounce the campaigns, intimidate rank and file labor leaders, and have frequently held out the prospect of massive job losses if the union elections were to succeed. In the United Auto Workers’ unsuccessful 2017 bid to organize Nissan in Mississippi, the state’s governor exclaimed a week before the vote, “If you want to take away your job, if you want to end manufacturing as we know it in Mississippi, just start expanding unions.” In 2014, then South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley went so far as to declare, “We discourage any company that has unions from wanting to come to South Carolina because we don’t want to taint the water.”

The aggressive anti-union tactics used by companies in the South, combined with right-to-work laws and other legal barriers, have largely succeeded in constraining the success of unions in the South: According to the latest Bureau of Labor Statistics data, just 4.9 percent of Southern workers belong to unions, less than half the national average (10.5 percent).

Public Corporate Giveaways: The dominance of business interests in shaping Southern economic development is brought into sharp relief by the generous tax breaks and other subsidies Southern leaders continue to give away for industry recruitment, often with minimal requirements for wages, hiring and job quality. Southern localities and states have consistently ranked near the top nationally in per capita spending on, and lack of standards attached to, corporate giveaways, often in the face of severe budget constraints for other public goods and services. The advocacy group Good Jobs First has identified 150 incentive “megadeals” in the South since the 1990s that together have cost local and state governments more than $34.6 billion — a figure that does not include tens of millions of additional dollars spent on thousands of smaller incentive packages. In a 2018 giveaway deal, local and state leaders in Alabama — where a decade of state budget cuts have left school funding lower than 2008 levels — gave Toyota-Mazda an incentive deal for an assembly plant in Huntsville that will cost taxpayers close to $900,000.

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6 Chris Brooks, “Whey Did Nissan Workers Vote No?” Labor Notes, August 11, 2017
8 Chris Kromm, “Union Membership Continues to Hold Steady in the South,” Facing South, January 31, 2019
10 Ibid.
Labor Standards and Wage Theft: The Southern low-road strategy also includes a weak regulatory infrastructure that impacts every aspect of the quality of work, as well as the ability of workers to defend their rights. A key example is the weak enforcement of wage standards in Southern states, which has left Southern workers open to widespread wage theft and abuse, a focal point of worker center organizing.

Six Southern states (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Tennessee) have no investigators to handle violations of minimum-wage pay: Instead of filing minimum wage or overtime claims to state officials, workers in these states must appeal directly to the federal Department of Labor, which takes only a small number of cases. A seventh Southern state, Florida, eliminated its labor department in the early 2000s and theoretically turned wage enforcement over to other departments, but as of early 2018 it had not taken a single enforcement action in more than four years. Arkansas and Virginia also cut or defunded their wage enforcement agencies in recent years. As one public interest attorney noted, “State labor agencies in the South that enforce wage laws are few and far between.”

This lack of regulatory oversight has resulted in Southern states ranking among the worst for wage theft: A 2017 study by the Economic Policy Institute found that close to a quarter of minimum-wage-eligible workers in Florida experienced minimum wage violations, the highest rate in the country. The EPI analysis, which focused on larger states, also found more than nine percent of workers in Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas experienced wage violations.

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11 Marianne Levine, “Behind the minimum wage fight, a sweeping failure to enforce the law,” Politico, February 28, 2018
12 David Cooper and Teresa Kroeger, “Employers steal billions from workers’ paychecks each year,” Economic Policy Institute, May 10, 2017
THE CHANGING SOUTHERN LANDSCAPE

While many features of the South’s current economic and political climate fit familiar historical patterns, there are also important changes in the regional landscape that have been critical to the growth of worker centers across the region.

Perhaps most significant are the rapid demographic changes that have been underway in the South. Southern states are among the fastest-growing in the country, with nearly half — 49 percent — of the nation’s population growth between 2000 and 2019 taking place in the 13 Southern states. This growing population translates into rising political clout on the national stage: In 2020, 33 percent of the country’s voters were in Southern states, and 32 percent of Electoral College votes for president came from the South, making the region critical in shaping the nation’s political trajectory.

As the South grows, the makeup of the region is also changing. From the Deep South to Appalachia, every state in the region is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. The South has long been a home base for African-American communities, which have grown in recent years in part due to “return migration” of African-Americans from the Midwest and North to the South. Today, about half of all African-Americans in the United States live in the 13 Southern states. The South’s Black Belt is urban, suburban, exurban and rural, although the fastest growth of African-Americans has been in cities, helping fuel a broader growth in the urban and suburban South.

Among the largest demographic changes underway in the South is the growth of immigrant communities as the region has become a growing destination for Latinx, Asian and other immigrants. While this has been a national trend, what is most striking in the South is the rate of change: In many Southern states, immigrant populations more than doubled between the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s. While the rate of immigration has slowed in recent years, immigrant communities in eight Southern states still grew by 10 percent or more between 2000 and 2016. Of the Southern states, Florida and Texas have the largest share of population born in other countries (20.9 and 17.1 percent, respectively); Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia all have populations that are eight percent or more foreign born.

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A significant share of immigrant newcomers to the South are undocumented, and therefore especially vulnerable to workplace abuses. Undocumented immigrants make up a third or more of all immigrants in nine Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.\(^{17}\) While undocumented immigrants are often thought of as a fluid and mobile group, in much of the South they have begun to set down roots and are emerging as a lasting community presence: In eight Southern states, more than half of undocumented immigrants have been residents for a decade or more.\(^{18}\)

Outside of Florida and Texas, immigration to the South in the 1980s and 1990s was often concentrated in rural areas, driven by jobs in agriculture and manufacturing. As immigrant communities have grown and become more established in the South, new immigrants gravitated to jobs in construction and services in urban areas, a shift that has shaped the focus of worker center organizing. A 2018 analysis by the Migration Policy Institute found that construction was the leading occupation for unauthorized immigrants in 10 of 12 Southern states.\(^{19}\)

These immigration trends, along with growth of African-American and other communities in Southern cities, have fueled a demographic shift from rural to urban areas in the South, which are increasingly racially diverse. While many Southern states have populations that are still disproportionately rural compared to the national average, the last two decades have witnessed a steady shift of jobs and workers to the urban South, making cities and urban counties an increasingly important arena for Southern worker center organizing.\(^{20}\)

The South’s distinct historical trajectory, as well as critical new trends like the region’s fast-changing demographic landscape, have created a unique environment for Southern worker centers. The South’s hostility to labor organizing and elite commitment to the region’s extreme low-road economic agenda have presented very real challenges to worker center organizing. At the same time, the South’s history and recent developments have created an economic and political terrain that in many ways is naturally suited to establishing worker centers, with their focus on excluded and highly-exploited workers, their base among immigrant communities, and their broader mission of not just organizing workplaces but changing the debate about equality, inclusion and justice in the economy.

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\(^{18}\) Julia Gelatt and Jie Zong, “Settling In: A Profile of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, November 2018. The states are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.

\(^{19}\) Ibid. There was insufficient data in the analysis for West Virginia.

The Southern Worker Center Landscape

Over the last three decades, worker centers have emerged as an important source of experimentation and innovation in Southern organizing. The economic insecurity fostered by the South’s racialized and gendered low-road economic strategy, the historic weakness of organized labor in the region, and the rapid growth of new immigrant communities in the South, along with other factors, have fueled a steady growth in worker centers across the region.
SOUTHERN ROOTS AND RECENT GROWTH

In some ways, the economic and political context of the South made it an ideal environment for worker centers to take root. As Janice Fine noted in her seminal study of worker centers in 2006, several of the first worker centers in the country were founded in the South. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, African-American and Latinx activists in Southern states started worker centers as an approach to organize black and immigrant workers in areas where union representation was unlikely due to the region’s anti-union climate and the lack of investment by national unions:

Some of the first centers were founded by activists who had been active in peace, student, civil rights, and worker movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Although “pro-union,” they were critical of the existing institutions of organized labor. For example, CAFÉ [Carolina Alliance for Fair Employment] and Black Workers for Justice were founded by individuals and organizations with long connections to the labor and civil rights movement who were struggling to bring organization to workers in the South after the post-World War II failure of labor’s southern offensive. La Mujer Obrera was founded by Central America solidarity and labor activists in El Paso in 1981 on the heels of a textile workers’ strike by Mexican women workers at the Farah Clothing Factory.21

An analysis conducted by the author in 2019 found that nearly four-dozen worker centers operate across the South.22 That represents a significant increase from 2005, when a national scan of worker centers by Fine and other researchers identified 29 organizations in the 13 Southern states.23

While the growth of organizations in the South is encouraging for the worker center movement, the fact that about 20 percent of the nation’s 250-some worker centers are based in the South — a region with more than 30 percent of the country’s population, and a disproportionate share of the low-wage, non-unionized constituency that worker centers have aimed to engage — underscores the challenges that remain for worker centers in the Southern region.

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22 In an original spring 2019 survey, the author identified 47 worker centers in Southern states, drawing on information gathered from the AFL-CIO, funders of worker centers, personal interviews and research, and affiliate lists of the following national worker center networks: Interfaith worker Justice, the National Black Worker Center Project, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and the Restaurant Opportunities Center. See Appendix for full list.
Worker Centers in the South and Affiliations with National Worker Center Networks, 2019

Interfaith Worker Justice
Springdale, Miami, Morganton, Birmingham, Memphis

National Black Worker Center Project
Raleigh, Greenville

National Day Laborers Organizing Network
Durham, Charlotte, New Orleans, Centreville, Jupiter, Atlanta, Charlottesville, Irving, Homestead

National Domestic Workers Alliance
Miami, San Elizario, Atlanta, Austin, San Antonio, Alamo, El Paso, Austin, Durham, San Antonio, Nashville, Miami

Multiple or Other Affiliations
Immokalee, Nashville, Austin, Hoover, Houston, New Orleans

Unaffiliated
Greer, Greensboro, Athens, Apopka, San Antonio, San Antonio, New Orleans, Jackson, Alexandra

Map data collected by Chris Kromm, Institute for Southern Studies, May 2019
While worker centers are dispersed throughout the South, a few states are notable for their heavy concentration of organizations. As of spring 2019, Florida and Texas accounted for 21, or just under half, of the Southern worker centers operating. These are the Southern states with the largest and most established Latinx and immigrant communities, a driving force behind the second wave of worker centers that emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. Florida and Texas also stand at the origin of two of the country’s main migrant farmworker streams; farm laborers have been a focus of organizing for two of the largest worker centers in the South — the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and the Farmworker Association of Florida — as well as other smaller groups.

As of spring 2019, North Carolina also had a high number of worker centers (six), a reflection of its fast-growing Latinx and immigrant communities which have inspired worker center groups, as well as the state’s legacy of progressive organizing and funding.
Most worker centers in the South are connected to national networks and organizations that support worker centers and nontraditional worker organizing. As of spring 2019, all but a dozen of the South’s 47 worker centers were affiliated with one or more national network:

- The **National Domestic Workers Alliance** (NDWA) had 15 affiliates in six Southern states in 2019, including eight in Texas. While most are independent organizations that have opted to affiliate with NDWA, those in Georgia and North Carolina are state chapters of the NDWA with dedicated staff and programs.24

- The **National Day Laborers Organizing Network** (NDLON) had 12 affiliates spanning seven states in the South; five were in Florida and Texas.25

- **Interfaith Worker Justice** (IWJ) had eight worker center affiliates in six Southern states. They also had interfaith committees that support worker organizing in four states in the South.26

Other national networks with a footprint among Southern worker centers are the National Black Worker Center Project, which in 2019 had an affiliate in Louisiana, Mississippi, and North Carolina; the Restaurant Opportunity Center United, which had a chapter in New Orleans; and the Center for Popular Democracy, which listed the Texas-based Workers Defense Project as a partner organization.27 The Painters and Allied Trades International Union recently opened three worker centers connected to the union in Atlanta, Houston, and Nashville.28

There are other national networks that have been important to the development of Southern worker centers. Jobs with Justice (JwJ), the national labor rights group founded in 1987, works as a supportive partner for worker centers, especially around common campaigns. Erica Smiley — the group’s executive director and a North Carolina native — says the work of JwJ has been guided by an informal “Southern strategy” targeting the region, which has included a series of gatherings and support for campaigns in the South, and an exploration of how groups like worker centers and organizations like JwJ can best aid worker organizing in a region with a large share of workers excluded from traditional labor rights.29 The National Employment Law Project has also been a valuable resource to many Southern worker centers, providing research, policy, and legal assistance.

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24 National Domestic Workers Alliance affiliate list, accessed at https://www.domesticworkers.org/national-affiliates
26 Interfaith Worker Justice affiliate list, accessed at http://www.iwj.org/affiliates
27 National Black Worker Center Project affiliate list, accessed at https://nationalblackworkercenters.org/affiliates; Restaurant Opportunities Center United chapter list, accessed at https://rocunited.org/about-us/#locals; Center for Popular Democracy partners list, accessed at https://populardemocracy.org/our-partners
SCALE AND FUNDING OF SOUTHERN WORKER CENTERS

The scale and funding of Southern worker centers varies greatly throughout the region, and speaks to unique opportunities and challenges faced by organizing groups in the South.

The vast majority of Southern worker centers are grassroots operations with a staff of 10 or fewer employees focused on a given town, city or region within a state, often organizing workers employed by a target employer or in select industry sectors.

At the other end of the continuum, a handful of worker centers in the South have grown significantly in scale and reach, deploying sizable staff and resources to organize a cross-section of workers by race, gender and occupation. These centers also wage high-profile campaigns against companies and industries, and in some cases entire supply and purchasing chains, and lead policy initiatives and civic engagement programs to shift the local and state political landscape.

The funding provided to worker centers by national foundations offers one window for assessing the varying size and capacities of worker centers in the South. An analysis of the 20 largest national funders of worker centers between 2013 and 2016 demonstrated that, out of just over $50 million spent in direct support to worker center organizations nationally, $15.6 million — or about 31 percent of the national total — went to 13 Southern worker centers. That figure closely mirrors the South’s share of the national population, and, given the smaller number of worker centers based in the South, reflects the success of several Southern worker centers in attracting national funding.³⁰

Of the 13 worker centers in the South examined in this funding analysis, more than half (seven) had received under $250,000 each from the 20 national funders over the four-year period. These were predominantly locally-focused groups with organizational budgets under $500,000.³¹ The slightly larger Miami Workers Center constituted a middle tier, receiving more than $600,000 from the profiled foundations over the four-year period.³²

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³⁰ Jarol Manheim, “The Emerging Role of Worker Centers in Union Organizing: An Update and Supplement,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2017. The author notes that, while the source of this information is an anti-labor research center, the author’s analysis of the foundation grant data found it to be accurate.
³¹ Ibid. The groups were Fé y Justicia, Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights, Northwest Arkansas Workers Justice Center, Our Vanderbilt, Western North Carolina Workers Centers, Workers Dignity Project and Workers Interfaith Network.
³² Ibid.
The bulk of national funding was granted to a handful of worker centers in the South that have garnered national attention for high-profile and successful organizing campaigns. About 90 percent of the $15.6 million in national funding for Southern worker centers flowed to five groups, which received more than $1 million each between 2013 and 2016 from the 20 top worker center funders: the Coalition of Immokalee Workers ($1.9 million), the Farmworker Association of Florida ($2.9 million), the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice, which during this period also housed the now-independent National Guestworker Alliance ($5 million), the Southwest Workers Union ($1.7 million), and the Workers Defense Project ($2.6 million).33

The above figures do not capture support from other local, state and national foundations, and they do not include funding from other sources, such as unions (which, with a few notable exceptions, has been limited in the South). The analysis also does not include a regional breakdown for two national groups with a significant presence in the South: the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which received $14.4 million from the top 20 national funders between 2013-2016, and the Restaurant Opportunities Center ($9.6 million).34

As these figures show, despite significant challenges and obstacles, the South has witnessed the emergence of a growing and robust worker center movement. While the organizations themselves vary greatly in size and capacity, together as a field — with the support of national networks and philanthropic backing — Southern worker centers have gained momentum as a vital force in building worker power and shifting the debate about economic policy in the South.

33 Manheim, op. cit.
34 Ibid.
Southern Strategies in Worker Center Organizing

Across the South, Southern worker centers have emerged as a vital force for defending workers’ rights, providing a space for workers to organize in a hostile political climate, and winning victories for workers on the job. Southern worker centers have also served as a critical backbone in moving a broader agenda of equality and justice, most notably in advancing the cause of immigrant rights, but also on a range of community issues including criminal justice, education, housing and transportation.
On a more fundamental level, the efforts of the Southern worker center movement, taken together, are posing a transformative challenge to the South’s low-road economic agenda. Using a variety of strategies and tactics, Southern worker centers have begun chipping away at the South’s elite political and corporate identity as a safe haven for low-wage, highly-exploitable labor, while articulating a new vision for a Southern economy that centers the needs of workers and communities.

WORKER CENTER THEORIES OF CHANGE

While worker centers nationally vary greatly in their makeup, priorities, size, strategies and tactics — and Southern worker centers are no exception — researchers Nik Theodore, Beth Gutelius and Ana Luz Gonzalez have identified several commonalities in the theory of change that undergirds worker centers. The worker center theory of change is driven by five goals: 35

1. Transforming low-road industry practices;
2. Modernizing labor standards;
3. Strengthening enforcement of employment and labor laws;
4. Improving job quality and expanding employment opportunities; and
5. Changing the public discourse on low-wage work and inequality.

With important Southern nuances, these components offer a useful framework for examining the efforts of worker centers in the South. The remainder of this report will examine the role Southern workers centers have played in transforming low-road industry practices, modernizing labor standards, strengthening enforcement of employment and labor laws, and improving job quality and expanding employment opportunities. It will also look at two additional important elements of Southern worker center organizing:

1. The focus on “whole worker” organizing and serving as a force in engaging broader community issues; and,
2. A growing focus on centering gender in worker center organizing.

TRANSFORMING LOW-ROAD ECONOMIES

In a region defined by its low-road economy, Southern worker centers have taken aim at companies, industries and entire supply and purchasing chains to change business practices and lift the floor not only for their core constituencies, but a broad swath of Southern workers.

The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a group that grew out of organizing by tomato pickers in central Florida in the 1990s, has pioneered strategies that target the corporate supply and demand chains affecting farmworkers. After winning campaigns for wage increases and anti-trafficking legislation, CIW in the early 2000s realized that influencing the purchasing power of the corporate food industry was key to changing the downward pressure on wages and working conditions. A multiyear boycott of Taco Bell, which drew on support from college campuses and faith institutions, resulted in the 2005 landmark decision by Yum Brands, Taco Bell’s parent company, to pay 1 cent more per pound for all tomatoes it purchased, boosting wages for 75 percent of tomato pickers. The company also agreed to a code of conduct for agricultural suppliers, a monthly monitoring process conducted by the CIW, and penalties for companies that failed to comply. CIW has since expanded this campaign to similar “Fair Food Agreements” with 14 multi-billion-dollar food retailers including Walmart, McDonald’s, Sodexo, Subway, and Whole Foods. The program also has significant geographic reach: The Fair Foods Standards Council, which oversees the implementation of the Fair Food Program, now includes the summer operations of Florida-based growers in Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.36

In Texas, the Workers Defense Project — a group started in Austin in 2006 which has since expanded into Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio — has aimed to transform standards in the fast-growing construction industry, which employs about 900,000 people in the state, disproportionately Latinx immigrants. One of the group’s signature programs has been the Better Builder program, a far-reaching initiative launched in 2012 to create buy-in among enlightened employers to agree to “high-road” standards. Drawing on reports the group published in partnership with scholar allies, Workers’ Defense found that more than 60 percent of construction workers reported not receiving worker training and more than half received poverty-level wages.37 Through Better Builder, employers agree to abide by an eight-point set of requirements, including paying living wages, employer provision of workers’ comp, and independent, on-site monitoring to ensure safety standards are met. The program now covers 16,000 workers in three cities, including workers at big-ticket projects like a $200 million Major League Soccer stadium slated for construction in Austin. Workers Defense also succeeded in ensuring the organization was approved to carry out the monitoring and enforcement of Better Builder.38

37 Workers Defense Project, Build a Better Texas, 2013.
38 Author interview with Jose Garza, executive director of Workers Defense Project, May 2019; Better Builder Program website, accessed at http://www.betterbuilder.org
The Restaurant Opportunities Center, which has an affiliate in New Orleans, has pioneered campaigns to transform the low-wage restaurant industry. Their Restaurants Advancing Standards in Employment (RAISE) initiative seeks to have city restaurants sign on to an agenda promising livable wages, paid sick days and access to health care, career advancement opportunities, safe and healthy workplaces, tackling race and gender discrimination and environmental sustainability.39

“Worker centers have been a central force in the fight to advance immigrant rights in the South.”

39 RAISE program website, accessed at https://www.raiserestaurants.org/
POLICY CHANGE AND MODERNIZING LABOR STANDARDS

Given the conservative political environment and anti-worker organizing climate in which many Southern worker centers operate, achieving policy victories that change labor standards is extremely challenging. Despite these obstacles, there are several areas where Southern worker centers have been successful.

The Workers Defense Project in Texas has succeeded in passing a range of local ordinances that improve conditions for workers. In Austin and Dallas, the group won paid rest breaks for construction workers, the first ordinances of their kind in Texas. In Houston, Workers Defense specifically targeted the lack of accountability in business giveaway programs by winning an ordinance that requires developers receiving tax abatements to provide constructions workers with Occupational Safety and Health Administration training. In 2018 in Austin, Workers Defense co-led a coalition that secured the first local ordinance in the South requiring paid sick leave for all city employees; successful campaigns in Dallas and San Antonio followed.40

More broadly, worker centers have been a central force in the fight to advance immigrant rights in the South. The role of worker centers in immigrant rights struggles has been especially important in some areas in the South due to the relative newness of immigrant communities and a dearth of well-resourced immigrant-rights organizations: In several states, worker centers arose around the same time that immigration in the South began to rapidly increase in the 1990s and 2000s, and worker centers have been leaders in the South’s emergent immigrant rights movement.

The shape and focus of worker center engagement with immigration issues has been as varied as the range of issues and attacks facing immigrant workers and communities. In Alabama, the Adelante Alabama Worker Center in Birmingham has anchored a campaign to shut down the Etowah County Detention Center, a detention center that has drawn widespread condemnation for rights abuses.41 The Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights has organized a network of 18 comités across the state to confront anti-immigrant threats from the local to state level.42 In Louisiana, the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice, founded after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, has built a base through its Congress of Day Laborers and, more recently, its Seafood Workers Alliance — formed through a partnership with the United Food and Commercial Workers union — that engages immigrant workers not only in confronting threats on the job but also a range of immigration policy issues at the federal level.43

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41 ShutDownEtowah campaign website, accessed at http://shutdownetowah.org
42 Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights website, accessed at http://www.glahr.org
43 Author interviews with Ursala Price, executive director of the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice (January 2019) and Jacob Horwitz, former organizer for NOWCRJ; New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice website, accessed at http://nowcrj.org
STRENGTHENING ENFORCEMENT

In the lax regulatory environment of the South, ensuring basic compliance with the region’s already-weakened labor laws and standards is a common starting point and central area of work for many Southern worker centers.

Wage theft in particular has been a core issue for many worker centers across the country, and the South’s weak regulatory regime has made it an especially important area of focus for centers in the region. A majority of Southern worker centers have engaged in campaigns around the issue of wage theft.

Together, Southern worker centers have recovered tens of millions of dollars in lost wages in the South. Through their use of media and public-pressure campaign tactics, these initiatives have also shifted the debate about low-wage work in the South, and have often laid the groundwork for larger campaigns focused on high-violation companies or entire industries and sectors.

For example, Workers’ Dignity in Nashville — a group founded in 2010 and largely rooted in the city’s growing immigrant workforce — launched Just Hospitality, a multi-year campaign targeting the low wages and exploitive conditions among the city’s cleaning workers. In 2014, Workers’ Dignity secured important concessions from Hilton DoubleTree Hotel in the city’s tourist district, winning $13,000 in unpaid wages and increasing pay and benefits by an estimated $120,000 per year for 30 workers. That has evolved into a Cleaning Workers’ Bill of Rights, which the group is presenting as a unified demand across major employers in the hospitality industry. More recently, in 2018 the group succeeded in convincing mega-retailer Target to break its contracts in Tennessee with Diversified Maintenance Systems LLC — and audit Diversified’s practices nationally — after Workers’ Dignity had repeatedly been forced to pressure the cleaning subcontractor to recoup unpaid wages. Altogether, Workers’ Dignity documents more than $500,000 in stolen wages recovered for its members, and states that wages and benefits have increased more than $680,000 per year across seven Nashville hotels since 2013.\footnote{Author interview with Jack Willey, co-executive director of Workers’ Dignity; Workers’ Dignity website, accessed at http://www.workersdignity.org/}

In one of the more spectacular legal victories against labor abuses in the South, the National Guestworker Alliance (NGA) — formerly a project of the New Orleans Worker Center — was instrumental in a successful $14 million lawsuit in 2015 against Alabama-based Signal International over labor abuses. Signal had recruited 500 Indian men as guest workers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and NGA organizers discovered the workers had been falsely promised residency documents and were charged $1,050 a month to live in guarded labor camps, among other abuses.\footnote{Kathy Finn, “Indian workers win $14 million in U.S. labor trafficking case,” Reuters, February 18, 2015.}
Another key role of Southern worker centers has been to educate, train, and support workers, and to help them become more effective leaders and advocates for workplace improvements. At their most successful, these efforts have led to systems changes in companies or industries that improve the quality of work for tens of thousands of employees.

The **Farmworker Association of Florida**, begun in the early 1980s and one of the South’s oldest worker center groups, has been a leader in creating structures to train and support farmworkers, especially around protecting farmworkers from dangerous pesticides. In the early 1990s, the group co-founded the Farmworker Health and Safety Institute, which provided popular education pesticide safety trainings and helped secure passage of the Florida right-to-know act giving farmworkers access to information about pesticides used in their workplaces. They have also spearheaded vocational rehabilitation for injured farmworkers and trained more than 5,000 workers about pesticide safety. The **Coalition of Immokalee Workers** has arranged for companies that are part of its Fair Food Campaign to agree to a regular enforcement regime, which includes monitoring by the CIW itself.

Other worker center groups, such as **Adelante** in Alabama; **Fe y Justicia** in Houston; the **Western North Carolina Workers’ Center** in Marion, North Carolina; **Workers Defense Project** in Texas; and **Workers’ Dignity** in Nashville all prioritize ongoing popular education programs that provide continuous training for workers about identifying problems in the workplace and the rights of workers to organize for changes.

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66 Farmworker Association of Florida website, accessed at https://floridafarmworkers.org
67 Greenhouse, op. cit.
ENGAGING THE “WHOLE WORKER” AND AGENDAS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Nationally, worker centers have often seen themselves as more than just a place to organize workers or address workplace concerns. In their more expansive incarnations, worker centers have also strived to serve as organizing hubs that address the “whole worker,” addressing a full range of community, social and political issues that affect marginalized working-class communities.

This broader conception of the role of worker centers is especially notable in the South. As Erica Smiley, the executive director of Jobs with Justice, said:

The worker center movement around the country has been very anchored in immigration and day laborer work … at least in the early stages. And it evolved into more sectoral work, black [communities]. That’s been the national story and trajectory. What’s unique is that the worker centers in the Southern region were more focused on a community-driven perspective…. Instead of worker centers in the South being typecast as just doing this one thing, they were beginning to meet a variety of needs of workers in the region.48

Several factors play into this dynamic in the South. For one, the relative weakness of unions has positioned worker centers to take up a larger role as a voice for working-class communities and their interests in the region. Secondly, the historic elite hostility to unions in the South has always made it necessary for worker organizing campaigns to forge deep alliances of solidarity and support within the broader community to be successful, which in turn has always given Southern worker organizing a strong community-oriented flavor.

48 Author interview with Erica Smiley, June 2019.
Lastly, the way in which Southern worker centers engage a broad range of community issues using a variety of approaches is in part a response to needs in the larger Southern progressive landscape. The relative weakness of progressive organizations and infrastructure in many Southern states has compelled worker centers to take on a larger role as multi-purpose organizations, working on a diverse array of issues and in multiple capacities. Jose Garza, co-executive director of the Workers Defense Project, describes how gaps among progressive forces in Texas influenced the group’s decision to grow into taking on a broader set of issue areas affecting workers, and expanding capacities within the organization such as research, policy advocacy, and voter mobilization, complementing the organization’s focus on direct worker organizing:

I think of us as a power-building organization for low-wage working people and undocumented people. We’re a policy think tank, we do independent research. We move policy at the state and local level. And we’re also an advocacy organization, we’re an immigrant rights organization, and we are a voter mobilization organization…. Part of the interesting thing about Texas, and I would imagine it’s the same in the South more broadly, is that, unlike, for example, the states of New York or California, we don’t really have the developed and established infrastructure that those states and others like them have. We don’t have the luxury of strictly defined divisions of labor…. We really find ourselves, in many instances, called on to do a lot.49

Garza adds that the need for Workers Defense to step into its role as a multi-issue, multi-capacity organization became even clearer after 2016, with the election of President Donald Trump and a sharp rightward turn in the Texas legislature: “The lack of statewide progressive infrastructure was directly causing harm to our members,” Garza says. “We felt a responsibility to try to solidify and strengthen the statewide infrastructure.”

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49 Author interview with Jose Garza, May 2019.
Many of the signature campaigns and causes taken on by Southern worker centers have reflected this deep orientation to organizing the “whole worker” and engaging a wide range of community issues and struggles. For example:

- **Housing:** The Miami Worker Center, founded in 1999, began its organizing in two public housing developments in Liberty City; through Low-Income Families Fighting Together, the center fought a protracted and ultimately successful seven-year battle to convince the county to preserve public housing or rebuild new affordable housing options.\(^{50}\)

- **Education:** In Virginia, Tenants and Workers United, with leadership from its youth wing, succeeded in pressuring Alexandria City Public Schools to hire bilingual (Spanish/English) liaisons to help parents communicate with teachers and institute culturally-sensitive college prep opportunities for low-income and immigrant students.\(^{51}\)

- **Transportation:** Workers’ Dignity in Nashville has spearheaded the Music City Riders United bus union to expand public transit options in African-American and Latinx neighborhoods. In 2019, the group partnered with the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1235 to issue joint demands including funding for safe, protected crosswalks, bus shelters and benches, and improved pay for bus drivers.\(^{52}\)

- **Criminal Justice:** The New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice found through its organizing that a key barrier for low-wage workers was the prohibitive fines and fees levied by courts for minor crimes. The group responded by organizing “warrant clinics” with pro bono attorneys; they resulted in more than $3 million in fines and fees being waived, providing direct material benefit and also reducing criminalization for low-income, working-class city residents.\(^{53}\)

\(^{50}\) Miami Worker Center website, accessed at http://www.miamiworkerscenter.org

\(^{51}\) Tenant and Workers United website, accessed at https://www.tenantsandworkers.org

\(^{52}\) Workers’ Dignity website, accessed at http://www.workersdignity.org

CENTERING GENDER AND WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP

Some worker centers in the South have increasingly centered gender as a focus of their work, complementing a traditional emphasis in worker center organizing that often prioritized issues of race and class. The emphasis on women workers and leadership is not new: As mentioned above, one of the first worker centers in the South was La Mujer Obrera, which was based among women textile workers in El Paso. In recent years, several worker centers and leaders have more intentionally focused their efforts on the disproportionate discrimination and exploitation faced by women workers in the South, as well as the importance of developing the leadership and power of women, especially women of color.

For example, the Miami Workers Center undertook a strategic planning process that in 2016 led to the launching of the Femme Agenda, a conference and framework “for women, girls and femmes to deepen their understanding of the feminization of poverty and to craft a program to end the way poverty disproportionately impacts women.” The reprioritization has led the Center to begin organizing domestic workers, focus on universal health care, and emphasize building women’s leadership.\(^5^4\)

The National Domestic Workers Alliance launched dedicated chapters of the organization in Atlanta, Georgia, and Durham, North Carolina, as part of an intentional strategy to organize African-American women and speak to the historic racial and gender divisions of labor in the South. In a campaign that consciously builds on the legacy of Dorothy Bolden, the Atlanta-based domestic worker who founded and led the National Domestic Workers Union from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, the Alliance’s “We Dream in Black” campaign in the South is organizing black women around a program that includes expanded public investment in home health care, basic labor standards and enforcement for domestic workers, and extending to domestic workers the right to collectively bargain and receive other social benefits, such as Federal Housing Administration grants.\(^5^5\)

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\(^5^4\) Miami Workers’ Center website, accessed at https://www.miamiworkerscenter.org

\(^5^5\) Author interview with Chanelle Croxton, director of North Carolina NDWA chapter, July 2019; We Dream In Black website, accessed at https://www.wedreaminblack.org
In many cases, the work and campaigns undertaken by worker centers in the South have reflected that of worker centers nationally: seeking to transform low-road industry practices, organizing to shift policy and improve labor standards, strengthening enforcement of labor laws in areas such as wage theft, and providing training and other support that can improve the quality of work and employment opportunities. The shape this work has taken in the South, however, has been deeply influenced by the Southern context. From the South’s lax regulatory regime to the broader hostility to worker organizing in Southern states, the South’s historical and political legacy has compelled Southern worker centers to develop innovative strategies and approaches to organize workers and move their agendas.

More broadly, a range of factors unique to the Southern landscape — including the historic weakness of unions, the need for community solidarity to support worker organizing, and gaps in Southern progressive infrastructure — have compelled Southern worker centers to embrace an expansive vision of their role in engaging community issues and serving as a catalyst for broader change. In key cases, this has included a greater attention to the intersections of race, class and gender in both organizing constituencies and developing leadership.
There’s little question that, as a field, worker centers have had an enormous impact in the South. The success of Southern worker centers in organizing unorganized workers, winning concessions from employers and entire corporate supply and purchasing chains, and moving policy agendas is especially remarkable given the larger conservative economic and political climate in which they operate. Indeed, given the often difficult context in which they are trying to organize, Tefere Gebre — the executive vice president of the AFL-CIO who started his career in the labor movement organizing alongside worker centers in California — suggests that, “The true successes [of worker centers] have happened in the South.”\(^56\)
It is equally clear that, in challenging the pillars of the South’s low-road economic regime— including persistent inequalities of race and gender — Southern worker centers continue to face critical and unique challenges. One key barrier is the dominance of corporate and conservative interests in state politics, and the constraints this imposes on worker center organizing. The ability of state-level political actors to block, limit, or undermine worker center efforts has forced Southern worker centers to think boldly and creatively about different routes to success, including how to engage with progressive efforts to shift power and change the political climate in Southern states.

**BLOCKING LOCAL PROGRESS**

The conservative dominance of state political power in the South has become an increasingly important backdrop to worker center organizing in the region. On the one hand, it is true that hostility to worker organizing has been bipartisan through much of Southern history. For example, in his seminal study of North Carolina, Tar Heel Politics, the late sociologist and state legislator Paul Luebke noted, “Whether under Democratic or Republican governors, modernizer or traditionalist ideology, organized labor has not succeeded in winning a regular seat at the table.”

At the same time, in the decade between 2008 and 2018, the South underwent a sharp rightward shift in state-level politics that greatly reduced the avenues available to move worker-friendly policies, and directly undercut organizing victories at the local level. Fueled by massive investments in state-level elections by conservative and corporate forces, the political right won key state and local races in Southern states in 2010; once in office, Republicans benefited from partisan gerrymandering to lock in conservative control. In 2008, there were six Democratic governors and seven Republicans in the South, and the region’s 26 legislative chambers were evenly divided: 13 with Democratic majorities, 13 controlled by Republicans. By 2018, Republicans controlled every legislative chamber in the South, and Democrats held only three governorships.

While Southern Democratic leaders were often unresponsive to labor’s concerns, Southern Republicans actively sought to shift the balance of economic and political forces against labor and aggressively promote corporate interests. As noted above, the regulatory infrastructure for enforcing labor laws was weakened in several Southern states — an especially dangerous outcome for workers given the weakening of federal labor law enforcement under the Trump administration, and increasing devolution of enforcement responsibilities to states.

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One of the most important tools conservative lawmakers have used to undermine worker center organizing in the South has been preemption. The bulk of the policy campaigns spearheaded by Southern worker centers have targeted local governments at the municipal or county level. As described above, several of these campaigns have been successful; but increasingly, many local organizing victories have been blocked or rolled back by preemption, or the use of state law to void local ordinances.

Preemption has grown as a strategy used by corporate and conservative interests in response to growing momentum at the local level to move a progressive economic agenda, primarily in states in the South and West. In 1997, Louisiana became the first state in the country to bar local increases in the minimum wage, in response to a successful campaign by ACORN and labor to boost local wages. Today, all Southern states except Virginia and West Virginia have laws banning local wage increases.

Over the last decade, states have passed preemption laws to undermine local policy gains on a wide range of worker and economic justice issues:

- 10 of the 13 Southern states have laws prohibiting states and counties from requiring local employers to offer paid sick leave or other forms of paid family or medical leave.

- Nine of the 13 states in the South ban local Project Labor Agreements used by unions in the construction industry to set basic conditions for safety, pay and benefits on municipal projects — an especially important barrier given the heavy concentration of construction workers among the membership and constituency of Southern worker centers.

- Five Southern states prevent localities from requiring that municipal contracts pay a prevailing wage, or the local median wage, for a given type of work. Four also ban local fair-scheduling laws requiring employers provide workers with more stable and predictable work schedules.

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62 Ibid.
63 Economic Policy Institute, op. cit.
64 Economic Policy Institute, op. cit.
ENGAGING THE CHALLENGE
OF STATE POWER

Southern worker centers have employed a variety of strategies in the face of growing efforts by state-level political forces to reverse local organizing and policy gains. As noted earlier, one approach has been to directly pressure employers to win victories for workers around issues such as wage theft or worker abuse. More expansively, worker centers have organized sectors of employers, or entire supplier and purchasing chains, in a way that effectively creates an alternative enforcement regime, such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ Fair Foods Standards Council and the Workers Defense Project’s Better Builder program.

In other cases, worker centers have found ways to advance their agenda despite a hostile political climate. In 2011, for example, the Workers Defense Project and other advocates succeeded in passing a change to the Texas Penal Code that closed a loophole which had allowed employers to evade prosecution for wage theft.  

A third and newer approach has been to directly challenge state preemption laws. In Louisiana, the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice is part of the 29-member Unleash Local coalition, which also includes the AFL-CIO and nine unions. With seven local chapters across the state, the coalition in 2019 rallied around a bill that would have restored the right of parishes and municipalities to raise wages and require a minimum number of vacation and sick days, paid or unpaid. While the bill died in committee in May 2019, the coalition is exploring a next phase to move their agenda. Also in 2019, worker advocates in Texas won a key victory when, due to savvy organizing and legislative maneuvering, they succeeded in preventing the Republican legislative leadership from preempting local paid sick day ordinances in Austin and San Antonio.

Worker centers are also exploring legal challenges to state preemption. In 2015, after workers and allies in Birmingham passed a local increase in the minimum wage of $10.10 an hour, the Alabama legislature quickly passed a preemption bill to void the measure. Workers sued the state on equal protection grounds, arguing that the state law discriminated against Birmingham’s black citizens, and that it violated political-process doctrine by transferring control from the majority-black Birmingham City Council to the majority-white Alabama legislature. The lawsuit was initially dismissed but then upheld by the Eleventh Circuit; that court reversed the dismissal of the equal protection claim, and while it ultimately upheld the dismissal of the political-process claim, the court acknowledged the “rushed, reactionary, and racially-polarized nature of the legislative process; and Alabama’s historical use of state power to deny local black majorities authority over economic decision-making.”

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66 Unleash Local website, accessed at https://www.unleashlocal.org
Finally, worker centers are also exploring ways to link local organizing to broader efforts to shift power and change the political climate at the state level.

In Texas, the Workers Defense Project has become increasingly engaged in statewide civic engagement efforts to engage and mobilize voters in collaboration with the Texas Organizing Project and other allies. In 2012, Workers Defense launched a 501c4 arm to engage more directly in elections, and in 2014 it ran its first voter mobilization program, centered in Dallas. By 2018, the group could boast that its 501c3 and 501c4 operations together ran the fourth-largest voter mobilization effort in the state. Among the victories the group claims in these efforts are the election of Gregorio Casar, a former Workers Defense organizer, to the Austin City Council, and the defeat of a four-term conservative council member hostile to the organization’s agenda in Dallas.\(^{69}\)

The National Domestic Workers Alliance’s political arm, Care in Action, similarly flexed its political muscle in Georgia in 2018. The group had the largest independently-funded ground game in the state, with more than 500 paid canvassers and 1,400 volunteers carrying out more than half a million contacts with voters. While the group fell short of succeeding in electing Stacey Abrams, their preferred candidate for governor, Care in Action State Director Nikema Williams, was elected to a state Senate seat.\(^{70}\)

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\(^{69}\) Author interview with Jose Garza, co-executive director of Workers Defense Project, May 2019

Conclusion

The experience of worker centers in the South is a unique and important chapter in the story of the country’s worker center movement. In many ways, worker centers have been a form of organization ideally suited to the Southern context. The South’s elite hostility to formal labor organizations and low levels of union density; a low-road economic system marked by high level of exploitation and severe racial and gender inequality; the region’s large and growing working-class African-American and Latinx communities — these and other forces created conditions that made worker centers a natural approach to building worker power and winning victories for excluded communities in the South.
While the size and capacity of worker centers in the South varies greatly, their impact as a field is undeniable. Together, Southern workers centers — with critical support from national networks and philanthropy — have improved the wages and conditions of hundreds of thousands of workers. More broadly, Southern worker centers have been leaders in advancing working-class interests on a broad range of issues, and have posited a fundamental challenge to the Southern low-road economic and political regime. As the field of Southern worker centers continues to mature and grow, it is engaging the challenge of shifting power at the state level, a key arena for defending workers’ rights and advancing the interests of working people in the South.

“Southern workers centers have improved the wages and conditions of hundreds of thousands of workers.”
## Appendix:

### Worker Centers in the U.S. South, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worker Center</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Network(s)</th>
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<td>Adelante Alabama Worker Center</td>
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<td>NDLON, NDWA</td>
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<td>Workers Dignity/Dignidad Obrera</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
<td>IWJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers Interfaith Network/Memphis Workers’ Center</td>
<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>IWJ</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**CHART:** Chris Kromm, August 2019

**SOURCES:** Affiliate lists of national worker center networks; author interviews with worker center leaders and experts; media and research reports; worker center websites.

**NATIONAL NETWORKS LEGEND:**

- CPD: Center for Popular Democracy
- IUPAT: International Union of Painters and Allied Trades
- IWF: Interfaith Worker Justice
- NBWCP: National Black Worker Center Project
- NDLON: National Day Laborer Organizing Network
- NDWA: National Domestic Workers Alliance

**NOTE:** Southern states included in this analysis are Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

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1 The Stand with Dignity Worker Center, associated with the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice, is an affiliate of the National Black Worker Center Project.
About the Worker Centers in Retrospect and Prospect Project

For nearly two decades, worker centers have been at the forefront of rethinking strategies for addressing economic injustice and building worker power. Worker Centers in Retrospect and Prospect is a project launched by the Ford Foundation in 2018, in partnership with the UIC Center for Urban Economic Development, to document and uplift the important efforts of worker centers to improve the lives of workers in low-wage industries and to raise standards in those industries.

The project is guided by the following questions: What does it take to make lasting change in low-wage labor markets? What are the implications of worker centers’ interventions for a 21st-century labor movement that can raise the tide for workers? With an eye toward the future, Worker Centers in Retrospect and Prospect commissioned a series of papers to critically assess the state of the field by reflecting on past challenges and successes, highlighting some of the most promising recent developments, and identifying crucial issues for the field as it moves forward.