Chicago’s Worker Center Movement

A Structural Analysis

BY

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DISSERTATION

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This work is dedicated to my daughters Cecilia Rita and Tonantzin and my nephews Carlos Paz and Diego Joaquin and all the children of the next generation. We must continue to work for the structural change necessary that will allow for a better world for you to live in.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Pursuing a PhD is truly a life augmenting experience and I have been profoundly impacted by this experience as well as extremely grateful to the people who supported me in this 7-year endeavor and throughout my life.

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- The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, that allowed us to not be a mixed-status family.
- The state and federal financial aid programs that lowered the financial barriers for me and my siblings to enter a public university and gain access the opportunity of higher learning and enter a position of privilege that culminated in my pursuit of a PhD.

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFL-CIO</td>
<td>American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APO</td>
<td>La Asociación Pro-Derechos Obreros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CACOSH</td>
<td>Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCA</td>
<td>Direct Care Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEOC</td>
<td>Equal Employment Opportunity Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>EWC</td>
<td>Excluded Workers Congress</td>
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<td>FCWA</td>
<td>Food Chain Workers Alliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTE</td>
<td>Full-time Equivalent</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAO</td>
<td>U.S. Government Accountability Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDOL</td>
<td>Illinois Department of Labor</td>
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<tr>
<td>IRCA</td>
<td>The Immigration Reform and Control Act</td>
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<td>IWFR</td>
<td>Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides</td>
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<td>IWPCA</td>
<td>Illinois Wage Payment and Collections Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRNY</td>
<td>Make the Road New York</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASW</td>
<td>The National Association of Social Workers</td>
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<td>NLRB</td>
<td>National Labor Relations Board</td>
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<td>NDLON</td>
<td>National Day Labor Organizing Network</td>
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<td>NDWA</td>
<td>National Domestic Workers Alliance</td>
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<td>NYAG</td>
<td>New York State Attorney General</td>
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<td>NYDOL</td>
<td>New York Department of Labor</td>
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<td>OSHA</td>
<td>Occupational Safety and Health Administration</td>
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**ROC**  Restaurant Opportunities Centers

**RWDSU**  Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union

**SEIU**  Service Employees International Union

**WHD**  Wage and Hour Division

**WHW**  Wage and Hour Watch
SUMMARY

The emergence of the worker center movement has served as a novel approach to organizing workers in the low-wage labor sector. It is in this space that innovative strategies have developed to organize the "unorganizable." This research contributes to the literature by examining and developing a conceptual understanding of this organizing process through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 worker center organizers at eight worker centers in the Chicago metropolitan area. Data collected was analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach to understand the dimensions, properties, context, actions and their consequences related to the process of organizing vulnerable workers across a variety of low-wage industries and throughout distinct communities in the Chicagoland region. Utilizing a conceptual framework informed by Structural Social Work, this study explores the organizing process through the lens of the organizer both as an individual within a worker center supporting vulnerable workers as well as a contributor to the worker center movement in Chicago.

Specifically, this study investigated the following two questions:

1) How are the various factors present in the lives of immigrant low-wage workers, excluded workers, and the excluded workforce, in particular, elements of personal, cultural, and structural oppression understood by the worker center organizers?

2) How does this understanding shape and determine the interventions of the worker center organizer and the maturing worker center movement in the Chicagoland area at the three different levels of society; super-structure (interpersonal), structural (social institutions) and sub-structural (ideologies) in support of this vulnerable workforce?
Findings outlined in three chapters include a brief oral history of the emergence of a worker center movement in Chicago dating back to 1969, an examination of oppression at a personal, cultural, and structural level of this vulnerable workforce as articulated by the participants, and an examination of the worker center as a space for resistance to structural oppression present in the lives of vulnerable workers as well as personal development and support for the individuals seeking assistance.
I. INTRODUCTION

A. Brief Description

Global neo-liberal forces and changing workplace structures have altered the terrain for workplace organizing even within geographic areas known to be Democratic, “union-friendly” enclaves such as Chicago. The erosion of union representation in the private sector in the last 50 years, currently at 6.7% according to the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), has left the vast majority of workers without the possibility of gaining legal recourse for increasing workplace standards (Swanson, 2015). Workplace exploitation runs rampant within certain segments of the low-wage labor market. Investigations have not only been able to quantify the severity of the issue of exploitation but also the severe limitations of federal and state labor regulatory agencies in addressing the problem.

In the face of many factors that not only make low-wage workers prone to exploitation, but also the labor sectors in which they are employed difficult to organize, intentional efforts have been made to organize this population outside the established collective bargaining model driven by organizations known as worker centers. Worker centers are an eclectic mix of worker advocate non-profit organizations that support vulnerable low-wage workers to improve their workplace conditions by various means. The worker center movement has stepped in to fill the void left by a combination of limited labor policies, insufficient federal and state regulatory enforcement and the challenges to collective bargaining.

This research is a contribution to the emerging literature of the worker center model as a space for organizing low-wage vulnerable workers. The research sought to better understand
how worker centers have developed to respond to the needs of vulnerable workers who are left vulnerable to exploitation given the limited workplace regulatory enforcement, employment in areas excluded from labor protections, or workers who are excluded from the labor market altogether. The study also serves as an examination of a model for resistance to structural oppression manifested in marginalized communities. Structural Social Work theory is utilized as the conceptual framework for this study in order to ensure a focus on the components of oppression that make this population vulnerable and difficult to organize. By outlining the societal dynamics that impact the lives of vulnerable workers both in the workplace and in their community, this study develops a more comprehensive understanding of how worker center organizers navigate these various elements.

B. **Background, Rationale, and Significance of the Study**

1. **The Chicago context.**

   Chicago, site of the Haymarket Affair in 1886 where workers demonstrated and coordinated strikes in support of the 8-hour day and to this day is commemorated as International Labor Day, has an undoubtedly long history within the United States labor movement. Its development as a site of deindustrialization between the 1970’s-1990’s and emergence as not only a regional economic powerhouse, but active contributor to the global economy establishes Chicago as a global city, as conceptualized by Saskia Sassen (Sassen, 2005). Despite the shifts in de-industrialization, Chicago remains among the biggest industrial corridors in the Midwest and among the largest intermodal distribution hub in the world.
Present-day Chicago is also representative of the contentious position of the labor movement within the United States. The city is placed within a national context of a decimated labor movement as well as a state context which seems to encapsulate the national debate on labor within the United States’ two-party system. A political debate that within our existing two-party system oscillates between the lip service given by the Democratic party to the importance of the role of union representation in the private labor sector often unsubstantiated by actual pursuit of policy such as the “Employee Free Choice Act” that eases restrictions for employees to engage in collective bargaining within their workplace, and the Republican party’s aggressive pursuit of anti-unionization legislation, neighboring Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin have all enacted some form of “right-to-work” legislation since 2012 (Hamilton, 2011). Illinois has a Democratically-controlled state legislature which has been the political voice for labor within the state and a Republican governor who made his fortunes as chairman of a private equity firm and is vehemently anti-labor, running an electoral campaign on this position (Fortino, 2014). It is within this setting, which the worker center movement has developed in Chicago throughout the last 20 years.

2. The vulnerable labor market.

The vulnerable workforce in this study is defined as the combined population of workers organized by the worker centers in Chicago, including low-wage immigrant workers, day laborers, domestic workers, tipped workers, temp workers, and potential workers who seek employment and who are barred due to their race and/or criminal record. Vulnerable workers are workers that are employed in the informal economy, excluded from labor policy, and
maintain an exploitable position in their employment relationship due to their legal status, including being undocumented and/or having a criminal record. The literature has identified the vulnerability of certain workers due to their personal legal status, race, gender or participation in the informal economy. When the laws are in place that do offer protections to workers or those seeking employment they may not be enforced to the extent required by the law and/or the regulation mechanisms are either not set or capacity is extremely limited to enforce the laws in the workplace.

a. **The impacts of “illegality”**.

The literature has long emphasized the role of immigration policy in regulating the flow of foreign labor into the United States (Borjas, 1989; De Genova, 2005; Gomberg-Muñoz, 2011; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002; Sassen-Koob, 1981). Decades of increasingly restrictive U.S. immigration policy, culminating with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) established a present day political reality in which 11.9 million people live in the United States without legal status (Passel & Cohen, 2009). The political creation of “illegality” establishes a vulnerable and “temporary” population that is often exploited in the workplace and made to live in fear within their communities (Gleeson, 2010). In particular, the Mexican migrant community has for decades served as a continued and expendable pool of labor for the United States (De Genova, 2004). By creating a system of deportation targeting undocumented workers, the nation creates what is essentially a disposable commodity (De Genova, 2002).
Even though undocumented immigrant workers maintain many of the same legal protections as documented workers in the workplace, their undocumented status places them in a relatively powerless position. In fact, various studies have identified that undocumented workers face a higher likelihood of experiencing wage theft (Bernhardt, et.al, 2009; Fussell, 2011), wage disparities (Hall, Greenman, & Farkas, 2010; Rivera-Batiz, 1999), unsafe workplace conditions (Mehta, Theodore, Mora, & Wade, 2002), and workplace injuries and fatalities (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009; Sanchez, Delgado, & Saavedra, 2011). Substandard wages and workplace conditions plague entire industries and communities that employ a high percentage of immigrant workers (Bernhardt, et.al, 2009; Levin & Ginsburg, 2000).

Among the most pervasive experiences of immigrant workers is the loss of owed wages. Violations of wage and hourly laws are commonly referred to as wage theft (Bobo, 2009). It occurs through various forms including: failure to pay minimum wage (i.e., paid less than $8.25 per hour in Illinois for non-tipped workers), failure to pay overtime (i.e., paid less than 1.5 times the regular rate of pay for all hours over 40 per week), “off-the-clock violations” (i.e., work not compensated before or after regular shift), meal break violations (i.e., work during break without compensation), or illegal deductions taken from workers' pay. One example of this occurs when a worker is paid a fixed salary in cash, or “under the table,” for 40+ hours of work that is less than the established state or federal minimum wage rate. The issue has drawn significant attention due to its pervasiveness and disproportional impact on low-wage workers.

An analysis by Bernhardt et al. (2009) identified the industries with the highest rates of wage theft as measured solely by minimum wage violations which included apparel and textile
manufacturing (42.6% violation rate), personal and repair services (42.3%), private households (41.5%), retail and drug stores (25.7%), grocery stores (23.5%), security, building and ground service (22.3%), food and furniture manufacturing, transportation and warehousing (18.5%), restaurants and hotels (18.2%), residential construction (12.7%), home health care (12.4%), and social assistance and education (11.8%). The same analysis of minimum wage violations by demographics identifies undocumented immigrants as reporting the highest percentage of wage violations. Within this specific demographic there is a marked difference by gender; nearly half (47%) of undocumented female respondents reported minimum wage violations compared to 30% of undocumented men, by far the highest rate among workers interviewed.

3. **The need for and limitations of federal and state labor enforcement agencies.**

The relatively powerless position of vulnerable workers makes them less likely to report substandard work conditions. As a result, there is a considerable role for federal and state regulatory agencies to ensure compliance of wage and hourly laws for all workers, including undocumented workers. At the federal level the Department of Labor is tasked with, among other responsibilities, regulating workplace conditions. Specifically, the Wage and Hourly Division (WHD) “enforces Federal minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and child labor requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act” (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). However, analysis of the WHD has shown continued reductions in the investigative staff since its inception. In 1941 when it was first created, the WHD employed 1,769 investigators, compared to 1544 in 1962 and 750 in 2007. Investigators have decreased despite that fact that
the number of businesses covered by the WHD has seen a dramatic increase from 360,000, to 1.1 million, and 7 million in the respective years (Bobo, 2009).

Separate analyses conducted in 2005 demonstrate similar findings; between the years of 1975 and 2004 the number of investigators decreased by 14% from 921 to 788, while the number of workers covered increased by 55% and the number of businesses covered increased by 112%. The number of compliance actions declined by 36% and the number of workers receiving back pay declined by 24% (Bernhardt & McGrath, 2005). The current number of investigators is well below the 2006 recommendations of the International Labour Organization of one inspector per 10,000 workers in developed market economies, with one inspector per 75,000 workers prior to a modest infusion of resources under the Obama administration (Weil, 2008). The limited availability of investigators has led the WHD to be a worker-initiated complaint driven agency, where in 2007 approximately 75% of all investigations carried out by the WHD started from complaints (Weil, 2008). The prioritization of complaint driven investigations overlooks other alternative models of investigations, such as strategic enforcement, whose design can have a wider impact with the limited resources of the WHD (Weil, 2008).

Two consecutive reports released by the U.S. Governmental Accountability Office (GAO) in 2008 and 2009 highlighted the reduction in resources to the WHD and the overall failures in the WHD's handling of wage theft cases. The 2008 GAO report investigated the WHD in order to examine the number of enforcement actions the department carried out during the previous ten years, 1997-2007. The findings of the report established that the WHD's enforcement
actions dropped by a third over the ten-year period from approximately 47,000 in 1997 to fewer than 30,000 in 2007, with a concurrent decrease of investigative staff of just over 20%. A sharp decrease began in 2001 when there were 945 investigators and by 2007 only 732 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2008). The number of investigators has since increased during the Obama administration with a renewed focused on increasing enforcement within the WHD. The proposed number of investigators was 1,132 in the FY 2014 budget (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014).

In 2009, the GAO released a report indicting the WHD with mishandling of wage theft claims. The report titled Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division’s Complaint Intake and Investigative Processes Leave Low Wage Workers Vulnerable to Wage Theft received substantial press and reinforced claims that worker advocates have been proclaiming for years (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). In its investigation in which investigators filed fictitious complaints claiming the employer did not pay wages owed to the worker, the WHD frequently responded inadequately to those complaints. Investigators also found delayed response times to calls, in some cases never returning phone calls or even having a voicemail set up on the main number. There were also cases in which investigators lied to workers about their ineligibility to file a claim with WHD. The report uncovered delays in investigating complaints, cases where claims were never investigated, and complaints that were not recorded in the database. There was a failure by investigators to use enforcement tools; this often meant the failure to initiate a full investigation. When employers refused to pay owed wages, many times investigators informed the worker that there was nothing more that could be done and closed the case. As part of the investigation a fictitious case was presented to the
WHD in which the employer had agreed to pay owed wages in response to the investigation, yet the investigators failed to conduct the proper follow-up with the employer to ensure that the money was paid out even after the worker called to complain he was never paid. After failing to collect the money for the worker, the investigator recorded the case as successfully resolved in the database, bringing into question the accuracy of cases recorded as successfully resolved (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009).

Beyond the federal labor regulatory agencies, states can establish their own labor protection agencies in order to increase the level of protections for workers. However, the enforcement capacity and role of each state agency varies widely throughout the country. According to an analysis of state enforcement of wage and hour laws conducted by Meyer and Greenleaf (2011), states such as Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi do not have a state agency responsible for wage and hourly protections and rely exclusively on the federal WHD. Larger states such as New York and California employ large departments for enforcement, 254 and 422 full time employees (FTEs) respectively. New York State also counts on a special Labor Bureau with the office of the State’s Attorney General that also investigates and enforces wage and hour violations. Illinois employs 26 FTEs while Indiana employs 2.5 FTEs for the entire state. Given the variant and precarious nature of state and federal enforcement as well as being employed in jobs without collective bargaining protections, low-wage workers are often left to fend for themselves.
The emergence of worker centers.

The worker center movement emerged as a local response to support the needs of vulnerable workers in a variety of low-wage industries. Although the growth of the worker center movement has been rapid in recent years—a growth that appears to be closely connected with the influx of immigrant labor—the movement in fact has historic roots (Fine, 2006). Janice Fine’s (2006) analysis of worker centers reveals three separate waves dating back to the late 1970s and early 1980s stemming from different regions throughout the country including New York City’s Chinatown, the Texas-Mexico border, North and South Carolina, and San Francisco. The second wave of worker centers emerges in the late 1980s and mid 1990s with the influx of Salvadorians and Guatemalan refugees as well as migrants from Southeast Asia. The current wave began in the early 2000s and spread throughout centers of migration in cities as well as suburban and rural areas, as well as in southern states.

Although each worker center organization is unique, common features exist. Worker centers are often hybrid organizations that take on various functions, including service provisions, advocacy, organizing and leadership formation. The organizations do not exclusively focus on workers from only one company but instead are place-based and work with employees from different employers. These are often democratic organizations, rooted in Latin American liberation movements, which employ elements of popular education. Worker centers often employ a broad agenda that involves causes outside of labor, such as education, tenant rights, immigration-related issues, among others. They may also involve international issues
and transnational work. The centers often have a small but dedicated membership that supports different functions of the organization (Fine, 2006).

Even though worker centers may be varied in their origin and function, they all are grounded in the need to organize local solutions where little else exists in an effort to address the challenges faced by low-wage workers. As a result, organizers have developed strategies to address the issue of workplace exploitation throughout entire sectors of the labor market and within specific communities. These organizers employ a variety of approaches, including direct action, legal action, policy initiatives, partnerships with state enforcement agencies, collaborations with ally organizations, and promotion of higher workplace standards among business community (Friedman & Axt, 2010; Gomberg-Muñoz & Nussbaum-Barberena, 2011; Smukler & Adam, 2010; Zlelniski 2006). Given the enormity of the global economic sphere in the neo-liberal age, the scale of labor exploitation and the vulnerable workforce, and the limited effectiveness of state and federal labor enforcement agencies, understanding the possibilities of resistance and structural change requires a higher-level view than the examination of individual worker centers, or the individual organizers housed within them, yet a structural analysis (an examination necessary for structural change) cannot happen without them. In Chicago, the organic development of a worker center movement in a city with such historic significance, merits examination for its challenges as well as potential to resist the forces of economic modernization that contribute to the structural and economic violence that play out in disadvantaged communities on the margins.
The National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics highlights the importance for social workers to “promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice” (NASW, 2008). The profession's stated goal to serve as change agents is central to the focus of this research. Social workers commonly work with communities ravaged by the impacts of globalization and with people suffering from the impacts of structural and economic violence, yet may be ill equipped to understand or address the complexity of presenting issues in the lives of the people they serve. This study addresses the dearth of analysis of workplace-oriented organizing in the social work literature by utilizing Structural Social Work as a practice model with which to intervene in support of excluded and vulnerable workers. Given that the role of the organizer is so varied and the work entirely dependent on the needs of the workers and the environment in which the organization finds itself, the opportunity exists for social workers to develop a rich theoretical understanding of the process by which the worker center organizers organize and provide support for this population.

C. **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this study is to understand the process by which worker center organizers serve as the catalyst for workplace organizing among the vulnerable workforce, while seeking to confront the structural violence placed on the lives of disadvantaged populations. The challenges faced by this population of workers is daunting given the interpersonal, social, political, and structural elements of oppression which limit the worker's ability to organize against workplace exploitation. Structural Social Work theory serves as the
conceptual framework for this research as a way of examining the various elements involved in the experience of any oppressed group. Moreau (1979) who is credited with the development of Structural Social Work stated the proposed theory:

[Is] an attempt to get away from dichotomizing person and situation; it directs attention to the transactions between people and specific social, political, and economic situations. The central concern of Structural Social Work is power, both personal and political. The key assessment question is the relationship between a client's "personal" problems, dominant ideology and his material conditions in the class structure. Structural Social Work is concerned with the ways in which the rich and powerful in society define and constrain the poor and less powerful. Of paramount concern are the injustices of the economic inequality endemic to society and its related requisite ideology. (p. 78–79)

Mullaly (2007), a contemporary theorist of Structural Social Work contends the theory, "views social problems as rising from a specific societal context - liberal/neo-conservative capitalism - rather than from the failings of individuals" (p. 244). By understanding the elements of social injustice as rooted in how society is structured, Structural Social Work also proposes that any sustained change requires challenging and changing the same social structures. Specifically, this theory seeks to achieve two objectives: to alleviate the negative impacts on people of the existing exploitative social order and secondly, to alter the conditions and social structures that generate these negative consequences (Mullaly, 2007).

The predominant focus on structural elements within this theory fits well with the focus of the research in that the theory is meant to be both descriptive and prescriptive in nature. Specifically, Structural Social Work theory will serve to conceptualize both the experience of vulnerable workers as well as the arenas in which the worker center organizer must operate. As a descriptive tool, it will serve in conceptualizing the personal, cultural, and structural factors
that make immigrant low-wage workers, excluded workers, and the excluded workforce both vulnerable and difficult to organize. Concurrently as a prescriptive model, Structural Social Work views society as a bridge with three levels in which the organizer must operate when working towards social change: a superstructure, pillars, and a substructure or foundation. The superstructure or the deck of the bridge, is the arena of social relations and interactions of the various social groups in society. The structural level\(^1\) (social institutions/pillars) are made up of the various social institutions that realize society’s functions. These include, but are not limited to, economic, political, educational, and welfare systems. Finally, the substructure or foundation, lying out of sight of daily life, is comprised of the ideologies that derive society’s structure and social relations (Mullaly, 2007). Using Structural Social Work as the conceptual model guided data collection as well as analysis by operationalizing the complex dynamics present for the vulnerable workforce, as well as for the organizers, who working within the worker center engage in the structural change work necessary to resist the impacts of economic violence by engaging in the three different levels delineated by the model.

D. **Research Questions**

The emergence of the worker center movement has served as a novel approach to organizing workers in the low-wage labor sector. It is in this space that innovative strategies have developed to organize the "unorganizable." However, the literature has been limited in

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\(^1\) It must be noted that in the description of this model by Mullaly (2007) appears inconsistent, in that he specifies that the model incorporates three levels, yet he does not offer a label for the level at which social institutions/pillars exist. Maintaining with other sociological and anthropological frameworks—in which there is a superstructure (social relations), a structural level (social institutions/pillars) and a substructure (ideology/ies), this research will label the social institutions/pillars as the structural level.
exploring the process by which organizers in this field have been able to be successful and overcome the challenges present in the experience of vulnerable workers in organizing as resistance to structural violence that is perpetuated on marginalized communities. This research contributes to the literature by examining and developing a conceptual understanding of this organizing process through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 worker center organizers at eight worker centers in the Greater Chicago metropolitan area. Data collected was analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach to understand the dimensions, properties, context, actions and their consequences related to the process of organizing vulnerable workers across a variety of low-wage industries and throughout distinct communities in the Chicagoland region. Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1) How are the various factors present in the lives of immigrant low-wage workers, excluded workers, and the excluded workforce, in particular, elements of personal, cultural, and structural oppression understood by the worker center organizers?

2) How does this understanding shape and determine the interventions of the worker center organizer and the maturing worker center movement in the Chicagoland area at the three different levels of society; super-structure (interpersonal), structural (social institutions) and sub-structural (ideologies) in support of this vulnerable workforce?
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature developed for this researcher project draws mainly from the bodies of literature; labor studies, sociology, and the emerging worker center research.

Beginning with a definition and brief exploration of globalization and Chicago’s position as a global city, the literature will review the levels of exploitation within Chicago’s low-wage labor sector. The chapter will conclude with a thorough exploration of the existing literature on worker centers throughout the country.

A. Globalization and the Impacts on Chicago

In order to examine the impacts of neo-liberalism on Chicago, it is important to first outline what is meant by the term. In the quarterly publication of the International Monetary Fund, *Finance and Development*, an article titled “Neo-Liberalism: Oversold?” starts with a succinct summary of its history and definition.

Milton Friedman in 1982 hailed Chile as an “economic miracle.” Nearly a decade earlier, Chile had turned to policies that have since been widely emulated across the globe. The neoliberal agenda—a label used more by critics than by the architects of the policies—rests on two main planks. The first is increased competition—achieved through deregulation and the opening up of domestic markets, including financial markets, to foreign competition. The second is a smaller role for the state, achieved through privatization and limits on the ability of governments to run fiscal deficits and accumulate debt. (Ostry, Loungani, & Furceri, 2016)

Structural Social Work examines globalization by utilizing the globalization thesis established by Ferguson, Lavalette, and Mooney (2002). They outline globalization in the following way:
• Globalization represents the triumph of capitalism over socialist alternatives.

• Neo-conservatism\(^2\) is the driving ideological force underpinning globalization.

• The dominant discourse of globalization assumes that globalization is normal, inevitable, and irreversible and, therefore, should not be resisted or interfered with.

• Nobody (or no group) is in charge of globalization; only the natural laws of the market regulate it.

• The spread of globalization will change dictatorships into democracies.

• Increased trade will spread prosperity across the globe; globalization benefits everyone.

• Nation-states must surrender much of their political and economic sovereignty to global markets.

• The welfare state is both unaffordable and the cause of many economic and social problems.

• The economy must be deregulated and labour unions regulated. (as cited in Mullaly, 2007, p. 7)

Neoliberal economic policies have undoubtedly reshaped the world. Itzigsohn (2006) asserts that neoliberal economic policies do not in fact reduce state intervention as it claims to do in favor of facilitating market functioning, but instead uses state power to facilitate the action of corporate entities at the global level. Centeno and Portes (2006) contend that the application of neoliberal policies developed in liberal countries such as the United States did

\(^2\) Mullaly (2007) establishes the link between neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism.
not fulfill their promise of rising economic conditions for all, by liberalizing the economy through removing the state, establishing minimal regulations and opening free markets for investment. Instead the impacts of these policies seemed to exacerbate the economic inequality and underemployment already present in Latin America (p. 38).

Saskia Sassen introduces the concept of global cities as a necessity for reconceptualizing notions of globalization and to examining its impacts on a variety of actors, including the disadvantaged; namely immigrants, women, people of color and racial minorities. As she argues, "introducing cities into an analysis of economic globalization allows us to reconceptualize processes of economic globalization as concrete economic complexes situated in specific places" (Sassen, 1998; pg. XIX). Sassen goes on to explain the importance of global cities in understanding and studying the conflicts of globalization:

Globalization is a process that generates contradictory spaces, characterized by contestation, internal differentiation, continuous border crossing. The global city is emblematic of this condition. Global cities concentrate a disproportionate share of global corporate power and are one of the key sites for its valorization. But they also concentrate a disproportionate share of the disadvantaged and are one of the key sites for their devalorization. This joint presence happens in a context where the globalization of the economy has grown sharply and cities have become increasingly strategic for global capital; and marginalized people have found their voice and are making claims on the city. This joint presence is further brought into focus by the increasing disparities between the two. The center now concentrates immense economic and political power, power that rests on the capability for global control and the capability to produce super-profits. And actors with little economic and traditional political power have become an increasingly strong presence through the new politics of culture and identity, and an emergent transnational politics embedded in the new geography of economic globalization. Both actors, increasingly transnational and in contestation, find in the city the strategic terrain for their operations. But it is hardly the terrain of a balanced playing field. (Sassen, 1998: p. XXXIV)
Sassen outlines seven hypotheses in organizing the elements at play in the global city model. The first four are rooted in the distribution of the economic activities throughout the global-sphere yet simultaneously headquartered and centralized in the global cities that gain tremendous economic power and command over the global economy (Sassen, 1998; Sassen, 2005). Related to this hypothesis Sassen also contends that the possibility also exists for global cities to serve as a "strategic geography for political activism that seeks accountability from major corporate actors, among others concerning environmental standards and workplace standards" (Sassen, 2005, p. 35). Of particular interest to this research project is Sassen's (2005) sixth and seventh hypothesis in which the increased demand of high-level professionals in these global cities have an "effect of the raising degree of spatial and socio-economic inequality evident in these cities" (p. 30). By contrast low-skill service sector and manufacturing are caught in cycles of devaluation, leading to "disproportionate concentrations of very high and very low income jobs" (Sassen, 2005, p. 31). The seventh hypothesis contends that given pressures for informalization driven by the large firms within the global cities; informalization in production, distribution, and service sectors is maintained as a method of smaller businesses for remaining competitive within those conditions (Sassen, 2005). The high-level service sector and the professionals employed within, also create the demand both directly and indirectly for low-skill low-paid service sector employment. High-level service sector jobs often require support in the various low-skill low-paid service sectors most notably, in the domestic sphere, have led to a demand for immigrant workers, especially for women, willing to find stable work (Sassen, 2002).
Globalization has had a significant impact on local economies throughout the world. Communities throughout the United States have struggled with the loss of manufacturing. This has transformed the economic landscape within cites such as Detroit and Chicago. Cities and neighborhoods that have depended on heavy manufacturing for economic sustainability have suffered with the loss of well-paying middle class jobs. At the same time there has been a rapid increase in the service sector, both high-skilled and low-skilled, creating many low-skill low-wage jobs and high-skilled service jobs with high-pay (Sassen, 2008).

Within global cities, such as Chicago, this dynamic has been clearly visible. A study conducted in 2009, evaluating the economic growth following a period of deindustrialization in Chicago, supports Sassen's theory. In Chicago, between 1992-1998 the period following deindustrialization, the strongest job growth was seen in jobs within the upper 3-5 quintiles of wages along with an increase in the informal and low-wage economies, jobs in the lowest quintile; this was coupled with a drop in job growth in jobs within the 2nd quintile. This trend continued, although less pronounced, between 1998-2000, only to enter negative growth following 2000-2004, through years of recession. It is also important to note that the study also found that the real wages of low-wage earners fell by 12% when adjusted for inflation between 1983-2004. This decline was felt by all those within the lower 50th percent of earners. Those in the top 25th percent saw their real wages increase over the same period (Doussard, Peck, & Theodore, 2009).
B. **Quantifying Workplace Exploitation in Chicago’s Low-Wage Industries**

As of 1998, research on sweatshops was mainly conducted in Los Angeles and New York, both cities with a considerable garment industry. A working group comprised of 32 organizations was developed to examine sweatshop working conditions in Chicago. Considering that Chicago does not have a garment industry comparable to that of Los Angeles and New York, the working group recognized the need to examine conditions in industries that were reflective of the job opportunities available for the immigrant community of Chicago. Levin and Ginsburg's (2000) assessment of workplace conditions for immigrant workers in Chicago combined a survey (n=799) and in-depth interviews (n=20). Recruitment was conducted with community partners, focusing on recruiting participants that lived in poor immigrant communities in Chicago and surrounding suburbs. The study limited responses to the question of legal status to legal permanent resident, citizen, and other; excluding the undocumented as an option. Only 10% of the respondents selected "other", with 5% missing. This may have contributed to the underreporting of "other". The demographics of the participants were diverse in age and ethnicity, with 60% of the respondents being female and 40% male.

The researchers utilized the U.S. Department of Labor definition of two or more workplace violations of state and federal labor laws as the threshold to establish a sweatshop. The study found that 36% of the respondents were currently employed in sweatshops. Seventy percent of the respondents whose legal status was "other" (those presumed to be undocumented) were found to be employed in sweatshops compared to 37% for permanent
residents and 22% for U.S. citizens. The occupations with the highest rates of sweatshop 
employment included daycare workers (61.1%), janitor (57.1%), maid/laundry workers (52.9%), 
tradesperson (50%), driver (50%), food preparation/restaurant worker (46.2%), garment worker 
(42.3%), medical/teacher aide (30.4%), factory worker (26.9%), and machine operator (25.3%). 
Smaller workplaces were also found to have higher rates of sweatshop employment, the rates 
for workplaces which employed 1-5 (63.7%) and 6-10 (50.5%) were higher than larger 
workplaces 11-25 (39.7%) and 26+ (22.4%) (Levin & Ginsburg, 2000).

The findings of this study were limited by the convenience sampling method, which 
could have contributed to the limited number of undocumented respondents. As a result, the 
findings were not generalizable to the larger immigrant population. Although the 
representativeness of the findings may be in question, the study begins to shed some light on 
the scale of workplace exploitation and the sectors most plagued by the problems.

Mehta, Theodore, Mora, and Wade (2002) conducted a study with the purpose of 
evaluating the working conditions of these populations in Chicago. Similar to Levin and 
Ginsburg (2000), Mehta and colleagues sought the support of 38 community based 
organizations, colleges, and churches in the Chicago-land area to survey the immigrant 
community. Each organization was selected based on the demographics of the community it 
served, as well as the geographical location. Immigration status of the participants was 
determined by having respondents answer if they were either undocumented, permanent 
residents or U.S. citizens, or had temporary visas.
In total, the sample included 1,592 respondents. The immigration status of the participants included 49.5% undocumented, 43.1% permanent residents or U.S. citizens, and 6.8% on temporary visa. Females made up 58.5% of the sample, whereas men made up 41.5%. The median hourly wage for undocumented immigrant workers was $7.00 compared to $9.00 for documented immigrant workers, whereas 10% of the undocumented respondents reported being paid less than minimum wage compared to 3% of the documented respondents. It is worth noting that in 2001 the state minimum wage was the same as the federal minimum wage of $5.15. Further analysis of wages by sex, ethnicity, and immigration status controlling for national origin, gender, legal status, length of U.S. labor market experience, English proficiency, education, location of residence, and occupation revealed a penalty in wages for certain immigrant workers. According to the analysis, undocumented Latin-American women earned 36% less per hour than the average for all workers, followed by documented Latin-American women (28%), undocumented Latin-American men (22%), and all East-European females (20%) (Mehta, Theodore, Mora, & Wade, 2002).

In regards to workplace violations, rates of non-payment were significantly higher for undocumented workers (26%) as compared to documented workers (9%). Statistically significant correlations were established between being undocumented related to underpayment or non-payment ($r^2 = .17, p = .01$) and working without breaks ($r^2 = .15, p = .01$). Incidence of serious workplace injury was correlated with being male ($r^2 = .06, p = .05$) or of Latin American descent ($r^2 = .08, p = .01$); however, no significance was found for workers' legal status (Mehta, Theodore, Mora, & Wade, 2002). Although the findings of this study may not be generalized given the limitations in sampling, the study was able to quantify the disparities in
wages and workplace conditions faced by immigrant workers both documented and undocumented in Chicago and surrounding suburbs.

A study conducted by Theodore and colleagues (2010) on workplace conditions for low-wage workers in the Chicago land area conducted in 2008 established similar findings. A survey was conducted with 1,140 respondents in Chicago and suburban Cook County. In order to obtain a representative estimate of the prevalence of workplace violation in the low-wage industries the researcher opted to utilize respondent-driven sampling (RDS) as their recruitment method, where sampling is done through the worker's existing social networks. The sampling method is designed to approximate a representative sample. RDS provides incentives for participating as well as for recruiting eligible respondents. Survey collections sites were established in six sites throughout the area. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes, guiding workers through an extensive questionnaire that assessed workplace violations without relying on the respondent's familiarity of state and federal labor laws.

The findings of the study develop a comprehensive understanding of the prevalence and breadth of workplace violations in Chicago and suburban Cook County. Overall 26% of respondents were paid less than the minimum wage in the previous week. Of the respondents who worked 40+ hours in the previous week, 67% were not paid the required overtime rate. The average amount lost was $50 out of weekly earnings of $322; calculated to be a 16% reduction. Adjusted to an annual amount, workers lost $2,595 of $16,753 in total annual earnings. The study approximates that 146,300 workers in Chicago and suburban Cook County have at least one violation in their pay; extrapolating from this approximation, low-wage
workers in Chicago and suburban Cook County lose $7.3 million per week (Theodore et al., 2010).

Minimum wage violations varied by occupation. The highest violation rates in Chicago were in childcare (74.6% violation rate), personal and repair services (60.1%), building and ground service (35.8%), cashiers, retail salespeople and tellers (33%), home health care (29.8%), cooks, dishwashers and food preparers (24.7%), stock and office clerks (24%), general construction workers (22.6%), maids and housekeepers (19.9%), factory and packaging workers (18.1%). Immigrant workers were 1.5 times more likely to have experienced a minimum wage violation as compared to the rest of the sample. The difference between undocumented workers and documented workers was less pronounced when it came to minimum wage violations, 38.1% compared to 28.9% respectively. Of the 26% of respondents who complained to a superior or tried to organize a union, 35% experienced one or more incidents of retaliation. An additional 15% of respondents did not complain due to fear of retaliation (Theodore et al., 2010).

DeFilippis et al. (2009) examined the characteristics of labor violations of work categorized as "unregulated work" in Chicago as well as New York City. Within the classification of "unregulated work" the study captured both employment covered within the protections of employment and labor laws but that routinely are cited for labor violations, such as restaurants, grocery stores, and jobs which fall outside coverage of legal employment and labor laws, such as those misclassified as independent contractors. Key informants including workers, employers, community organizations, legal groups, unions and governmental
regulatory agents were included, totaling 157 respondents for Chicago alone. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the respondents as well as worker focus groups. The findings of these interviews found numerous examples of wage and hourly violations, worker health and safety violations, failure to allow access to workers’ compensation coverage, discrimination, retaliation for attempts to organize under protections of the National Labor Relations Act, and misclassification as independent contractors. In many cases workers are forced to remain in these exploitative relationships for the simple reality of retaining employment. The study found in one case:

- a butcher using a large blade to cut a carcass severed his hand at the wrist. After the accident, he asked his employer about workers’ compensation. His employer scolded him and told him to forget about it, that such a thing was not an option for him. Instead, the boss gave him $2,000 and told him to consider himself lucky that he was not fired. This worker is still employed at the same supermarket and is indeed happy to still have a job (p. 74).

C. Introduction to Worker Centers

Even though the worker center movement has been around for decades, the literature in this field is still emerging. The literature on worker centers and worker center organizing can be found in various disciplines, including legal studies, economics, labor studies, sociology, and anthropology. For the purpose of this study the analysis of the literature will focus primarily on the organizing efforts of the worker center movement in the urban setting. Although it is recognized that organizing efforts of low-wage workers are not exclusively led by worker centers, in many ways the void left by labor unions in many major U.S. cities has indeed been filled by the worker centers in this area. The literature on farm worker organizing, although rich in history and importance, has been excluded to focus on the type of industries in the urban
setting. Also, given the constant evolution and developments of the worker center movement, this paper will focus on what Janice Fine (2006) describes as the current wave of worker center development of the last 15 years.

Although extremely informative, the existing literature on immigrant worker organizing through the worker centers has been limited. The research on the worker centers as organizations has been comprehensive, although primarily descriptive (Fine, 2006). Most of the literature consists of case studies of either organizing campaigns or of the worker center and their models of organizing. Some of the literature intermingles with efforts to organize for a union contract. The majority of the literature on worker center organizing comes from New York City or Los Angeles. Most importantly, the literature is nonexistent as an analysis of the organizing process of worker center organizing as a vehicle for structural change. The existing literature will contribute to the knowledge-base that this research will draw from, yet this project will look to fill the void in the literature in developing an understanding of the process of organizing vulnerable workers outside of the constraints of union organizing, as a vehicle for structural change.

D. In the Absence of Labor Unions: The Role of the Worker Center

Worker centers have stepped in to fill a void in the low-wage labor market that has been left unmet by the traditional labor unions. Various factors make organizing low-wage workers unfeasible for labor unions, mainly a calculation of the financial cost of attempting to organize a worksite compared to the likelihood of achieving employer recognition and collective
bargaining achieving a contract. Even if workers decide to organize a union, the employees and organizer face considerable hurdles.

Research published by Mehta and Theodore (2005) identifies the obstacles and common employer behavior in response to union campaigns, based on both the Chicago Representation Campaign which included 62 campaigns launched in 2002 and observations and evaluations conducted in 2005. Twenty-five campaigns were chosen to serve as case studies, including interviews with organizers, workers, and representatives of the National Labor Relations Board. Researchers found companies engaged in a variety of legal and illegal tactics. Among the employers in the study 30% fired workers, 49% threatened to close or relocate the business, 82% hired professional consulting firms to design and coordinate a counter-campaign. The methods seemed effective. In nearly all of the observed cases, workers indicated support of the union when petitions were filed, some cases reporting up to 80% support. Yet by the time of the election, unions were only successful in 31% of cases. Among the common tactics by employers were delaying National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections which bought them more time to disrupt union support, penalties for employers who violate rules were too weak and the NLRB fails to enforce them.

Worker centers have been able to step in when the traditional model of collective bargaining breaks down. In his case study of the Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles, Sullivan (2010) argues that worker centers are fast becoming the vehicles for moving the labor movement forward, as they are able to organize a base of workers long underrepresented by traditional labor unions: undocumented workers, racial minorities and women. Sullivan (2010) notes that the legal framework of the labor relations system not only limits the direct action
tactics available for organizing efforts but also makes them reluctant to pursue strategies that jeopardize the union's resources. His assessment led him to conclude that worker centers serve as "proto-unions" by meeting the immediate needs of workers not supported by unions and in the long-term establishing a foundation with this group of workers which future unionizing efforts can be built.

Focused instead on educating workers on their rights and developing leadership to improve workplace conditions, worker centers have played a significant role in workplace justice in industries that have not passed the cost-effectiveness test of unions. This has not been without unions trying to adopt the model. Dating back to the 1980s unions have also developed and supported worker centers in attempts to recruit nonunion workers in efforts to gain collective bargaining agreements. Yet over time many unions have abandoned the idea entirely, considering them costly and outside their mission (Jayaraman & Ness, 2005).

Jayaraman and Ness' (2005) case study of UNITE's Garment Worker Justice Center (GWJC) highlights these challenges. Formed in 1994 the GWJC offered associate membership to workers of the garment industry, providing a variety of services and benefits to associate members. In 1996 workers of a company in Manhattan initiated a series of strikes and upon public pressure the company relented and recognized the union. However, soon thereafter the retailers decided to shift their business to other producers while at the same time the owners were transferring work to a nearby facility. The workers ultimately had no control or legal recourse over these actions. The union gave up on the worker center given their inability to maintain a contract with the employer. This case highlights the limitations unions have to organizing contingent workers.
E. **The Function of the Worker Center**

Janice Fine's (2006) seminal study of worker centers throughout the country identified three common approaches worker centers utilize to achieve their mission of supporting low-wage workers: service delivery, advocacy, and organizing. She maintains that organizing makes these worker centers different from other immigrant service organizations. The focus of this research is to strengthen our understanding of this area.

1. **Defending labor standards.**

   Given the structural challenges of organizing vulnerable workers, what role do worker centers play? Among the most vulnerable of the contingent workforce are day laborers. The rates of wage theft for day laborers in the Midwest region of the United States reach 66% of workers reporting nonpayment by an employer in the previous two months (Valenzuela, Theodore, Melendez, & Gonzalez, 2006). Theodore, Valenzuela, and Melendez (2009) examined the role of the worker centers in improving working conditions and wages for day laborers by surveying directors and staff of 60 of the 61 day labor worker centers in operation in 15 states at the time of the study. The findings identify three main areas of regulation that worker centers are involved in within this labor market: wage setting; job allocation; and wage claim, grievance, and worker education. In total, 89% of the worker centers reported being involved in establishing a minimum wage among the day laborers. In doing so, the day laborers are not coerced or forced into accepting a low-wage for their work. The worker centers also serve to educate workers of their rights while also serving as a direct intermediary in
attempting to collect owed wages. In many ways, the worker center serves as the regulator of this unregulated and vulnerable work force.

2. **Developing leadership not just advocacy.**

Two separate case studies of the Workplace Project, a worker center located in New York City, identify a challenge faced by many worker centers as they attempt to support low-wage workers through legal advocacy. Established with the mission of supporting Latino immigrant workers, the Workplace Project created three programs designed to serve the immigrant worker: a legal clinic focused on addressing labor problems, community outreach on labor rights, and a worker organizing project. Yet the organization quickly realized that this model was severely undermining the organization's main objective of challenging the root causes of workplace injustice (Gordon, 1995).

Although the legal clinic was a big draw for the organization, it quickly became apparent that by only focusing on resolving exploitation as a legal matter the workers became dependent on the legal system, instead of considering the opportunity to organize in the workplace as a method of solving the problem. The lawsuits themselves were likely to get hung up in the lengthy legal process if not backed by a strong public campaign led by the workers. Yet given the possible monetary payoff and least amount of risk, solely pursuing a legal challenge was too tempting for workers, even though the public campaign would ultimately increase their chances of successful resolution of the legal case. They also discovered that although the Workplace Project was able to settle a number of legal settlements the industry remained untouched. The
organization realized it was only through mobilization that power could be reclaimed by workers in order to achieve substantial change in the industry (Gordon, 1995).

In the fall of 1999, the organization decided to study a newly developed model, designed to combine the organizing project with the legal component. The project, "La Alianza Para La Justicia/ The Alliance for Justice" was designed with the concept of "power-with", a notion that emphasizes the importance of indigenous leadership on the causes that impact their own community. The organizers realized that the emphasis on training workers on their legal rights only framed the problem of workplace exploitation as a legal issue. This only served to undermine a more important message: the importance of workplace organizing. The new model shifted to one that utilized collective problem solving from the moment of first contact, when workers came in to the agency to seek assistance for their case. Following the introduction to the group, workers were recommended to join an established team in the industry they were employed (restaurant, factory, or custodial work) and eventually required them to attend a day-and-a-half organizing training (Jayaraman, 2005).

Although it was challenging for many to understand, workers were encouraged to solve their problems without the guidance of lawyers. In a deliberate decision to build leadership, the three teams shared one attorney/organizer. Based on interviews with participants, it became clear to the participants how developing leadership skills increased their confidence and impacted their lives. The importance of the collective support was frequently cited by the interviewees as an important element of the program's success. As one worker put it:

Since coming to the Workplace Project my life has changed completely. Because I no longer think that I cannot do something, I always think that I have the capacity to do it. I
have the capacity to demonstrate that yes, as workers we can do many important things (Jayaraman, 2005, p. 102).

3. **The importance of direct action campaigns.**

Direct action serves as the most potent tool for worker centers in exposing and confronting workplace exploitation. Narro (2005-2006) examined the role of direct action in the case study of the Restaurant Justice Campaign in Los Angeles' Koreatown, known within the immigrant community as an area with many restaurants which employed Korean and Latino immigrants, many of whom were undocumented. The workers would often have to endure workplace violations and abusive treatment. A sweep from the Department of Labor found that 97% of restaurants were in violation of labor laws. In a business market such as this, complying with labor regulations was a competitive disadvantage. A strategic campaign was devised by the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocate (KIWA) to change the business practices throughout the industry. The strategy included boycotts against key restaurants, creation of a restaurant worker association, picketing of businesses, rallies, worker rights marches, and litigation focusing on establishing a settlement agreement (Narro, 2005-2006).

Shannon Gleeson (2013) explored the role of a worker center in Houston, one of the states with the weakest labor standards in the country. The study drew on 57 interviews with worker centers, labor enforcement agencies, union labor leaders, immigrant rights organizations, social service providers, and legal programs. Among other strategies utilized to address workplace exploitation among those interviewed, direct action was cited as an important approach needed to shame employers into compliance. Houston Interfaith Worker Justice (HIWJ) relies specifically on this strategy in what they call the "Justice Bus". This strategy
relies on support from other coalition partners. The supporters go out in numbers to demonstrate in front of businesses cited for workplace violations to confront employers.

4. **Advocacy through partnerships with federal agencies.**

Worker centers have been strategic in seeking out partnerships and alliances with state and federal regulatory bodies to increase protections for workers and holding those enforcement agencies accountable to carry out investigations of abusive employers. Friedman and Axt (2010) outlined various projects by Make the Road New York (MRNY), a worker center founded in 1997 in Brooklyn, to collaborate with Labor Bureau of the New York State Attorney General (NYAG) and the New York State Department of Labor (NYDOL). By joint involvement of the NYAG and MRNY an investigation against a business known for egregious wage violations resulted in $3 million in back wages and damages to workers. MRNY working with both the affected workers and the NYAG were able to build the case against the employer.

MRNY also partners with NYDOL in two different ways. First, MRNY sends workers who experience workplace exploitation to NYDOL to file claims while also tracking the subsequent case investigation. This allows the organization to identify problems that may occur during the investigation and intervene on behalf of the worker in order to ensure the full wages are collected from the employer. Second, an innovative partnership was established with the NYDOL where MRNY coordinated the implementation of strategic industry as well as geographic investigative sweeps. In 2008 a geographic sweep of businesses in Bushwick collected hundreds of thousands of dollars from businesses along one avenue. The following year with the support of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) an
industry specific enforcement sweep of supermarkets in three boroughs of New York City was conducted with NYDOL and MRNY. In a coordinated effort RWDSU and MRNY conducted outreach of workers while NYDOL investigators conducted surveillance of the businesses. This effort also netted hundreds of thousands of dollars of owed wages in a matter of days.

Fine and Gordon (2010) document a joint effort of six organizations, a combination of workers centers and labor unions, in New York City to establish the Wage and Hour Watch (WHW) program in partnership with the NYDOL. The purpose of WHW was to conduct community oversight of wage violations in specific areas with high concentrations of low-wage workers. Representatives from each organization participated in trainings in order to serve as "Wage and Hour Watch Members" of the NYDOL. The members would distribute brochures on labor laws to businesses and trainings on worker rights to community residents. As cases of labor violations were identified they were referred to the NYDOL. In doing so, the WHW program was not only able to identify cases of workplace violations but also to prosecute the employers to the full extent of the law.

5. **The growth and role of national worker center networks.**

More recently the literature on worker centers has focused on the development and efforts of national networks of worker centers. An analysis of these emerging national networks has found that by establishing larger national networks they have been able to: develop more effective sector-targeted strategies to realize their policy goals, maximize access for individual organizations to access national funding and resources, and expand the reach of organizations by bringing them together to share resources and best practices (Cordero-
Two forms of networks have been identified: agglomeration networks and replication networks. The agglomeration networks are networks such as National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) and National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA). These networks are comprised of independent affiliate organizations with a shared interest in a particular sector of the labor market. Replication networks expand an existing core organization either by creating new organizations or establishing new partnerships with existing groups, and replicating the models of organizing, service, and advocacy. Organizations such as Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC), Direct Care Alliance (DCA) and Interfaith Worker Justice serve as examples (Cordero-Guzman, Izvanariu, & Narro, 2013; Fine, 2011).

The development of worker centers as central figures in national movement building around national/international worker justice, immigrant rights, and representation of contingent workers has been striking. Fine (2011) highlights three examples of national alliances that have maintained this focus. The Excluded Worker Congress (EWC) was created in 2010 at the U.S. Social Forum with a focus on creating national representation of worker organizations of sectors historically excluded from the right to organize including: Domestic workers, farm workers, taxi drivers, day laborers, workers from "right-to-work" states, formerly incarcerated workers, guest workers, restaurant workers, and welfare workers. The Food Chain Workers Alliance (FCWA) is a coalition of worker centers and labor unions that organize and represent workers throughout the food-supply industry throughout the country. The FCWA has a stated purpose of elevating the food worker issue through research and policy work, including workers from the entire food system, such as source suppliers (meat packing, agricultural
workers), food-processing, food-service, warehouse, and grocery workers. Alto Arizona! was a national alliance created in reaction to the passage of the repressive law, Arizona Senate Bill 1070, which once enacted allowed police officers to verify immigration status as the discretion of the officer’s assessment of “reasonable suspicion”. NDLON and an immigrant rights group Puente spurred a continued resistance to oppressive policies in Arizona and nationwide through this alliance.

F. Conclusion

The levels of workplace violation in the Chicago-land area are well established, especially among immigrant workers both documented and undocumented (Levin & Ginsburg, 2000; Mehta, Theodore, Mora, & Wade, 2002; Theodore et al., 2010). Fear of reprisals by employers for grieving about workplace conditions limit what individual workers can accomplish on their own (Theodore et al., 2010). Research has begun to show the relative effectiveness of worker centers in other cities, such as Los Angeles (Narro, 2005), New York (Jayaraman, 2005; Gordon, 1995), and Houston (Gleeson, 2013) as well as the development of national networks that focus on expanding the reach of local initiatives to a national level (Fine, 2011).

Despite the richness of the current literature, which describes the work done by worker centers in low-wage industries, the literature fails to examine the role of the organizer in supporting the workers. There has also been a failure to explore the role of worker centers in Chicago, a metropolis distinct from that of New York or Los Angeles. The richness and diversity of its worker centers and the amount of experience of the organizers themselves, makes
Chicago a valuable source of information comparable to that of any other major city. The organizers that live the day-to-day, on-the-ground experience of organizing are vital to understanding the worker center movement and their work has practical implications for those interested in organizing within vulnerable communities. This research contributes to addressing the dearth of literature in workplace organizing as relevant to this topic within the field of social work. This study contributes to the literature by developing a conceptual understanding of organizing marginalized groups as not only addressing injustices at the interpersonal level but also through interventions at the institutional and foundational levels.
III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A. Background to Structural Social Work Theory

Structural Social Work was first postulated by Maurice Moreau in Canada in 1979. The structural approach to social work practice was created in reaction to the "medical and disease model" which seeks to work with people in a dependent position with the main focus on the person over the environment. Structural Social Work instead seeks to focus the intervention on the direct interactions between individuals and social, political and economic conditions (Moreau, 1979). Stemming from Radical Social Work which in turn is grounded in socialist ideologies, Structural Social Work criticizes conventional social work for a lack of critical self-awareness and pathologizing the oppressed by opting for individual diagnosis at the expense of addressing large social problems (Mullaly, 2007).

Structural Social Work seeks to address the failure of social work to analyze and understand the impacts of foundational ideologies of our society on the marginal populations contained within. Even with the attention given to societal level concepts, Structural Social Work is meant to be a generalist model of practice whose focus is to develop knowledge and skills to work with individuals, families, groups, and communities, while not losing sight of the interaction between the personal and larger cultural and political forces (Mullaly, 2007).

B. Structural Social Work View of Society

As conceptualized by Structural Social Work, society is envisioned as a bridge structure, whereby the bedrock, or substructure, on which the bridge is erected is the ideology that
underpins society (see Figure 1). In the similar way, that the foundation of the bridge is essential to sustain the structure on which it is built yet is out of view, so to contents Mullaly are the ideologies of society. The pillars holding up the bridge platform are the social institutions created to manage society’s primary functions. The platform of the bridge on which the general population exists and interacts is defined in large part by the lower portions of the structure. As Mullaly (2007) explains, "the substructures or foundation of society consists of a dominant ideology, which is transmitted to all members of society through the process of socialization and determines the nature of a society's institutions and the relations among its people" (p. 245). To achieve social transformation, change must happen at all levels and change agents must in fact be ready to navigate throughout the three levels.

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**Figure 1.** Structural View of Society. Reprinted from *The new structural social work*, p. 246 by B. Mullaly, 2007, Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.
The undocumented immigrant worker experience cannot be separated from the experience of oppression and exploitation, consequently the structural factors present in the lives of undocumented workers must be considered when working with this population. This model will serve to capture the various elements that are to be considered in this research. Figure 2 is a structural diagram of the areas impacting the lives of undocumented immigrant workers. However, this is not a comprehensive listing of all the structural factors present in the lives of immigrant workers, instead it serves as an initial assessment based on the aforementioned literature.

![Figure 2. Structural View of Society for Vulnerable Workers Based on Findings of this Study.](image)
The central concern to Structural Social Work Theory is power, specifically the existence of oppression as a symptom of structural inequalities. There are no distinctions made between various forms of oppression. All forms are rejected within this framework; none take primacy nor is a hierarchy of oppression established. Oppression as defined by Structural Social Work is when suffering, hurt, or restrictions are experienced by individuals not because of their own merit or failure, but because of their membership in a grouping of people (Mullaly, 2007). This is not to say that all groups are oppressed, nor equally oppressed. Oppression tends to be relational in that there must be a dominant group that oppresses a subordinate group. Those in the dominant group maintain a status of privilege, power and influence which serves to maintain their status often at the expense of the lesser groups. Given the complex nature of human social structure people may belong in the dominant group in one area of their lives while in the subordinate in others. That is to say, people may in fact be both the oppressor and the oppressed (Mullaly, 2007). There is a rich literature in the study of intersectionality which explores the relation of oppression and privilege, and individual membership in multiple oppressed as well as oppressor groups (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Once oppression is integrated into society it may permeate all personal relations (Gil, 1998). Oppression ultimately serves to maintain a social order in which benefits are retained by those in higher status groups. Oppressors profit from access to a range of benefits that the oppressed are excluded from, by way of privilege. Oppression serves to give preferential access and treatment by our society's institutions to those in the dominant groups, while creating a
continuous pool of labor to take on tasks in society that are considered menial and dangerous. Ultimately this system serves as a way to perpetuate and maintain the dominant social order that benefits the oppressors (Mullaly, 2007).

It can be questioned how is it that good-natured people who may not otherwise be seeking to harm others participate in such a function. Mullaly cites the work of Paulo Freire (1970) for an answer:

The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves... For them, having more is an inalienable right, a right they acquired through their own 'effort', with their 'courage to take risks'. If others do not have more, it is because they are incompetent and lazy, and worst of all is their unjustifiable ingratitude towards the 'generous gestures' of the dominant class. Precisely because they are 'ungrateful' and 'envious', the oppressed are regarded as potential enemies who must be watched. (p. 59)

As Freire identifies, the impact of oppression is marked on both the oppressor and the oppressed. When depicting the forms of oppression experienced by the oppressed, Structural Social Work draws from the work of Iris M. Young, a feminist political scholar. Her work (1990) developed five areas of oppression often encountered by the oppressed. Although not all five are always experienced, often times the oppressed encounter several at once. The five categories include: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.
Exploitation is defined as the "social processes whereby the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power, and assets from the energy and labor expended by subordinate groups" (Mullaly, 2007, p. 264). When exploring the concept of exploitation, Young (1990) describes class and gender-specific forms of exploitation; the latter focused on the often unacknowledged energies expended by women that free men to undertake other status-building work. She also makes a case for race-specific forms of exploitation. Her writing introduces the category of "menial" work, which she understands as the labor of servants; defined as "any servile, unskilled, low-paying work lacking autonomy, in which a person is subject to taking orders from many people" (Young, 1990, p.61). In societies where racism exists, there is an understanding of these jobs as roles to be filled by racially oppressed groups meant to serve those of privilege, which ultimately serve to enhance the status of those being served. Historically in the United States these jobs were reserved for ethnic minorities and still remain realms of Black and Latino workers. Mullaly (2007) broadens the definition of "menial" work to include work considered dangerous or physically demanding and damaging.

Considered by Young (1990) as perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression, marginalization is considered as exclusion of an entire category of people from the functional and meaningful participation in social life, subjecting people to material deprivation and death. Powerlessness manifests itself as a limited development of personal capacity, disrespectful treatment based on lack of social standing, and restricted control over one's life, including the lack of decision-making power in one’s working life. Cultural imperialism is defined as the generalization of the experiences and culture of the dominant group as a generalized norm. This ethnocentric worldview in turn gets projected into society as a representation of all others,
leading to measures of according to this socially sanctioned norm. Social institutions serve to reinforce these ideas and discount or stereotype excluded groups. Finally, oppressed groups face violence based solely on their group identity. Violence is not limited to physical violence, but also include harassment, intimidation, or exclusion. Systemic violence can often go unpunished or receive only minor reprisal and can be tolerated by the dominant group (Mullaly, 2007).

Mullaly (2007) dismisses the use of the term 'social or structural inequality' as a term utilized by the dominant professional culture serving as a facade to depoliticize the violence experienced by oppressed groups throughout the world. The use of the word 'inequality' also serves traditional role of social work, as one tasked with redistribution of goods and services with the aim of addressing disparity, but it does nothing to address the institutional policies and practices that create the inequality in the first place (Mullaly, 2007). Instead the term “socially sanctioned structural violence” captures the physical and emotional consequences of oppression (p. 276). Both overt and covert forms of oppression have drastic effects on those of subordinate groups; illness, psychological harm, underdevelopment, and premature death are consequences of oppression. The plight of undocumented workers, who must tolerate harsh or dangerous work environments which can result in the development of health problems or death at the workplace without consequence to employer are one example of structural violence.
1. **Responses by the Oppressed to Oppression.**

Broadly speaking Structural Social Work organizes the responses of the oppressed to oppression into two categories: "1) accommodation and compliance through a process of inferiorization; or 2) rejection through a process of collective resistance and politics of difference" (Mullaly, 2007, p. 276). Structural Social Work draws from the work of Adam (1978) and Young (1990) in defining inferiorization as the experience of members of the "outside" group as being seen as deviant, different, or inferior; leading to members of these groups being treated as inferior, insignificant, objectified or devalued in other ways. The personal or cultural experiences of these groups are excluded from dominant culture, leading to marginalization. Often this inferiorization of people leads to the internalization of the oppressors’ image of the subordinate group, affirming the dominant culture’s belief and perpetuating the oppression within the group. The cultural and ideological dominance of ideas such as meritocracy by the dominant group serves to reinforce self-blame by the subjugated groups for the limitations imposed on them (Mullaly, 2007). The internalization of oppression can also contribute to the perception that it is unchangeable, deserved, temporary, or the fault of those in their immediate surroundings (Adam, 1978). The work of Paulo Freire (1970) identifies the concept of fatalism, the belief that nothing can be done or that it is in 'God's hands', as another of the consequences of oppression.

Adams (1978) identifies seven coping responses to oppression as a way of reducing the distress caused:
• Mimesis, the adoption of behaviors and beliefs of the dominant group as a way of gaining a better status. The social identity as the "hard-worker" among undocumented immigrant workers serves as an example (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010).

• Escape from identity, as a method of avoiding or easing oppression. For undocumented people, not revealing their undocumented status to those around them serves as an example of such a behavior.

• Psychological withdrawal, often seen as passivity, lethargy, or capitulation.

• Guilt-expiation rituals, or behaviors that alter one's self to conform to the dominant culture.

• Magical ideologies, appealing to the divine or a fantasy to escape the oppressive conditions.

• In-group hostility among the oppressed. For example, recent immigrants being discriminated by longer established immigrants in the workplace.

• Social withdrawal, the behavior by which the oppressed person will develop different behaviors among different groups of people, often seen as withdrawn in the presence of dominant groups as a way of placating the dominant view established not challenging it.

2. **PCS Model of Oppression.**

As previously discussed, oppression is not limited to any one dimension of personal space. In fact, people who encounter oppression seldom experience it on only one level, instead it can be seen across the personal, cultural, and structural spheres. Mullaly (2007) defines harm caused by covert and overt thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors towards individuals.
as personal oppression. The shared values, norms, and patterns in thinking, involving an assumed understanding of what is normal that support the belief of superior and inferior culture as cultural oppression. The integration of those beliefs are woven into the elements that sustain social order including social processes and practices, and their formalization as policies, laws, and social institutions, in manners that benefit the dominant group at the expense of the subordinate as structural oppression.

Drawing from the work of Thompson (1997), Structural Social Work Theory utilizes this multi-perspective model of analysis (see Figure 3). Utilizing this method of analysis will allow this study to consider the influence and interaction among each level of oppression. For example, undocumented immigrant workers may face exploitation in the workplace (personal), but also may be told by society that complaining about the abuse will not do any good (cultural), while dealing with the fear of deportation (structural). Each of these areas interact yet are separate. The PCS Model of Oppression will help develop a better understanding of the multi-faceted lives and challenges in organizing vulnerable workers.
Figure 3. PCS Model of Oppression. Adapted from *The new structural social work*, p. 263 by B. Mullaly, 2007, Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press. Reprinted with permission.

D. **Structural Social Work as a Method for Analysis**

Rooted in critical social theory, Structural Social Work seeks to understand oppressive social phenomena through a comprehensive and critical understanding of the existing social, economic, and political institutions and practices with the aim of changing them. As part of the cluster of critical theories, it seeks to be emancipatory in nature as one that is meant to also have practical impact for those on the margins of society by involving people in social analysis and support in the practice of social change (Mullaly, 2007).

Another key component to Structural Social Work is its use of dialectical analysis in understanding the process of social change. The use of dialectics challenges the false dichotomy that has been present within the profession of social work of either an idealist tradition, which encourages change through self-determination or a structural determinist
tradition that views people as being shaped by a social environment that cannot be changed. In this view individuals are both creators of, and created by, the social world (Mullaly, 2007). Specifically, Structural Social Work utilizes Naiman’s (1997, p. 13-14) conceptualization of the main principles of dialectics:

- **Everything is related**: Nothing in the universe is isolated, but, rather, all things are dependent on each other. The relationship may be direct or indirect, and therefore, nothing can be understood in isolation.

- **Change is constant**: Nothing in the universe is final, absolute, or immutable. Everything is in continual process of change with the replacement of old forms by new forms preserving the viable elements of the earlier form. Change is neither linear nor circular, but more like a spiral.

- **Change proceeds from the quantitative to the qualitative**: Change usually occurs gradually and cumulatively over time. At some point, however, the cumulative or quantitative changes result in a qualitatively (i.e. radically) different nature or form. In other words, small changes eventually add up to something quite different from what existed in the first place.

- **Change is the result of the unity and struggle of opposites**: We tend to think in terms of binary opposites – good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly, true or false, capitalist or socialist, and so on. Dialectics emphasizes the unity of these binary opposites – things can contain within them two opposing forces at the same time. The tensions or contradictions between these opposing tendencies eventually become the basis for social change. (as cited in Mullaly, 2007, p. 237-238)
Dialectic theory in Structural Social Work allows for a better understanding of social processes that are elemental to the work of structural change as well as the contradictions and natural tensions present within our understanding of society. Mullaly (1997) contends this is especially important within the field of social work because it helps social workers to resist false dichotomies that have long existed within the social work; the idealist tradition, where the belief exists that change can happen through self-determination; and the structural determinist tradition, which view social environment to be deterministic of individual’s experiences which are immutable. Instead by utilizing a dialectical analysis those interested in social justice work may instead view both society and its social processes that contain opposing and contradictory forces that should be understood, in order to avoid falling into false dichotomies. Mullaly (1997) utilizes the example of the welfare state in the following way:

The welfare state has both social care and social control functions, it contains bot liberating and oppressive features, and it represents both the fruits of the struggles of oppressed people and a mechanism used by the dominant group to ‘cool out’ the powerless. (p.128)

E. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model developed for this study will integrate the three aforementioned analytical tools utilized by Structural Social Work. Figure 4 is the schematic diagram that will guide the research. Utilizing the Structural Social Work model this study places the worker center organizers between the social relational (super-structural) level and the institutional (structural level). The feedback loops represent the dialectic relationship and dynamic interplay of the organizing process within each level as a process of analysis, reimagining, intervening and
evaluation. The arrows represent the existence of oppressive factors present at all levels as articulated by the PCS model as well as the opportunities for resistance that exist in response.

*Figure 4. Schematic Diagram of Conceptual Framework Prior to Initiating the Study. The diagram was developed with an alternative orientation where the social relational level is presented as being at ground level.*
IV. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is valuable when studying dynamic, complex, and intricate social processes. In order to do justice to the subject matter, this study is designed with the full intention to examine complexity. In short, the study explores the multitude of variables and layers of society through the lens of the organizer who engage with this complexity, both as an individual within a worker center supporting vulnerable workers as well as a contributor to the worker center movement in Chicago. To capture this complexity Structural Social Work served as a necessary conceptual framework that contributed to the methodology. Therefore, this study utilizes naturalistic interviewing that is shaped by Structural Social Work theory and draws on elements of grounded theory in its analysis (Miles & Jozefowicz-Simbeni, 2010).

A. Grounded Theory and its Limitations

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. Glaser, a trained quantitative researcher and Strauss, a PhD in sociology from the University of Chicago, combined to develop a rigorous method of research with the defined purpose of developing theory from studying interactions between individuals and their social environment, based on the theory of symbolic interaction as developed from the work of Herbert Blumer at the University of Chicago (Oktay, 2012). Glaser and Strauss (1967) delineated the essential elements of grounded theory as constant comparison, theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, and theoretical saturation. These four areas interact with each other and inform the development of a theory. The development of a final theory evolves with continuous cycles of
inductive and deductive logic, generating hypotheses and testing it against the continual collection of data until saturation is achieved.

A notable critique on grounded theory has been developed by Michael Burawoy. An ethnographer with a PhD in sociology from the University of Chicago. Burawoy challenges the apolitical nature of symbolic interactionism. His critique of symbolic interactionism, which became the theoretical foundation of grounded theory, centers on the limitations of this framework as a restrictive study of “negotiated orders within bounded spaces” (Burawoy et al., 2000, p. 10). As Buroway et al. (2000) states, “the Chicago School shrunk this global ethnography into local ethnography, and from there it disappeared into the interiors of organization” (p. 33). By doing so the researcher loses the ability to relate the observations to the external forces that contribute to shaping the lives and interactions of those involved, thereby also ignoring the sociopolitical and historical context. As a practitioner of extended case method he promotes the four moments of this research method which include: “extending from observer to participant, extending observations over time and place, extending from process to external forces, and extending theory” (Burawoy et al., 2000, p. 29). Specifically, it is the third area of study, which Burawoy contends is left out by the Chicago School theorists and consequently ground theory. Maintaining a connection to the external forces present in the world of the organizers is of central importance to this study, making this a key consideration to the methodological design of the study.
B. **Research Design**

The study was designed to utilize in-depth interviews with organizers of eight Chicago-land worker center organizations as the primary source of data. The rigor of the grounded theory method was useful in conducting the analysis of the interviews and elaborating the theoretical understanding of the organizing process in which these organizers are involved and how they actively navigate the external factors present in the lives of vulnerable workers. In order to guard against the limitations of grounded theory, this study was conceptualized and designed to be guided by an existing conceptual framework. Utilizing Structural Social Work as a theoretical base served to develop a better understanding of organizing process among this population of workers as a way of exploring the interpersonal, structural, and ideological factors as outlined by this conceptual framework.

This research therefore relied on elements of grounded theory to explore the dimensions, properties, context, actions, and their consequences related to the process of organizing vulnerable workers across a variety of low-wage industries in Chicago, with particular attention to the dimensions of Structural Social Work theory as described in the conceptual framework discussed in the previous chapter, with the goal of deepening and refining theory. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) suggest the use of provisional coding in such cases, beginning with a loose “start list” of codes to ensure that questions emerging from the conceptual framework can be explored without foreclosing any other possibilities. Doing so will ensure to not miss any of the major dimensions relevant to the Structural Social Work. At
the same time, the researcher must in such cases take care to remain open to findings that are not consistent with, or are unrelated to, the established conceptual framework.

Given the richness of the experience of the various organizers that were interviewed, this research sought a deeper level of understanding based on the data collected rather than imposing the understanding of the researcher onto the participants. As a result, the findings of this research were jointly created. Through the thorough analytical process delineated by grounded theory, in-depth interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of the role of organizers in working with vulnerable workers. This study contributes to the development of organizing theory by expanding the understanding of organizing with low-wage vulnerable workers in low-wage industries within an urban setting.

The data were collected through a series of in-depth interviews with current and former staff organizers and worker-leader volunteer organizers from all the worker centers in Chicago that organize vulnerable workers. One in-depth interview per organizer was conducted over a period of nine months. The contents of the interviews were intended to be retrospective in nature, exploring the experiences of the organizer in semi-structured open-ended interviews. Finally, the study ended with a member check where the researcher’s findings would be shared for feedback from participant.

C. **Study Population**

The study sought to develop an understanding of the organizing process by collecting data from organizers working within all the worker centers operating in the greater Chicago-
land area. Despite the diversity of worker centers in the area, they can be organized in two categories:

(1) Worker centers which organize within specific low-wage industries, including:

- **Restaurant Opportunities Center of Chicago** - a Chicago affiliate to a national worker center which focuses on organizing restaurant workers (Did not participate in study)
- **Chicago Workers’ Collaborative** - primarily focuses on organizing temporary staffing workers
- **Latino Union** - primarily organizes day laborers and domestic workers
- **Warehouse Workers for Justice** - focused on organizing warehouse workers

(2) Worker centers which organize workers among a variety of industries and/or focus their efforts within a specific geographic area, including:

- **Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project** - organizes on the southeast side of Chicago and adjacent southern suburbs among a variety of low-wage industries
- **Chicago Community and Worker Rights** - focuses on the southwest side with workers of different industries
- **Workers Center for Racial Justice** - focuses on the African-American communities of Woodlawn and Austin with employed and seeking employment throughout the city
- **Arise Chicago** - which organizes among a variety of diverse low-wage industries throughout the city

Included in this study is a worker center coalition comprised of all the listed organizations, **Raise the Floor Alliance** (hereinafter referred to as The Coalition).
1. **Recruitment.**

Following IRB approval and subsequent expansion of IRB approval of the 2 additional organizations, the researcher was able to contact each of the nine organizations listed above via email. The researcher made a formal request for participation in this study to the executive director of the worker center and/or to the lead organizer. The researcher made himself available to present on the research and answer any questions for worker center staff by offering an in-person visit prior to their involvement. No organization made the request. Prospective participants were requested for an hour and a half block of availability for an in-depth interview. All organizational staff invited to participate by the director or lead organizer were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, and that information of participation would not be conveyed to the director/lead organizer of who participated. The researcher conducted individual interviews in a location as chosen by the organizer. Not all interviews were conducted in a confidential space; the researcher deferred to the participant’s selection as to the location as long as background noise would not impede audio recording. Informed consent was obtained prior to beginning the interview. All worker centers were responsive to recruitment efforts for this research except *Restaurant Opportunities Center of Chicago*; after multiple emails to the Chicago coordinator requesting participation in the study with the request for submission of the proper documentation necessary for involvement there was no response during recruitment phase. As a result, the organization had to be excluded from the study.
2. **Research Participants.**

The final sample included a total of 18 participants representing the 8 worker centers included in the study. Participants ranged in age between 25 to 61, with an average age of 41. The sample was made up of 14 men and 4 women. All participants were active or former organizers for the worker centers included in the study. The level of educational attainment of the sample included 3 with a high school or equivalent degree, 2 with an associate’s degree, 8 with a bachelor’s degree, 4 with a master’s degree, and 1 with a law degree. The participants included 13 that are U.S. born and 5 were born in Mexico.

D. **Data Collection**

All data collection was done by the primary researcher. All identifying information was linked to research data through a participant ID number that was assigned by the researcher. The audio files were stored on a password-protected computer and immediately deleted from the recording device once transferred to the computer. The audio recording was transcribed in the original language by a paid transcription service. Transcriptions were reviewed in their entirety for accuracy. The transcriptions were stored on a password-protected computer. All quotes utilized for the findings chapters were de-identified by stripping any information that could be connected with the respondent, including but not limited to names, organization name, and union affiliation. To facilitate reading, quotes were cleaned of filler words and statements. False sentence starts were removed when it did not impact the meaning being conveyed. Translations were conducted by the researcher and translated quotes included in the findings along with the Spanish excerpt, in order to maintain integrity of the quotes.
The interview guide was divided into multiple sections (see Appendix A). The first involves questions focused on the organizer’s background and training. The second focused on the worker center they are a part of and the workers they serve. The focus of the questions sought to establish a thorough understanding of the role of the organizer and the challenges faced, including an exploration of oppression. The questions were adapted to the specific organizing focus of the organization. The third section explored the organizing process as understood by the organizer. This was necessary not only to reflect on the work of the organizer but to serve as a comparison across organizations with differing focuses for similarities and differences. The fourth section was aimed at developing a discussion of the organizers’ perceived role and understanding of various levels of intervention including in the personal, structural and foundational, as outlined by Structural Social Work theory. The final section explored how the organizer and organization understand outcomes at the various levels of intervention. The interview guide served as a basic reference which changed as the data collection and analytical process evolved throughout the course of the study.

E. **Data Analysis**

The transcriptions of the interviews served as the data for analysis. After transcripts were reviewed for accuracy, interview transcripts were imported into computer-based qualitative analysis software, NVivo Version 10, to organize, sort, code and review the data.

Grounded theory as a method of analysis is meant to be a constant loop utilizing both inductive (theory generation) and deductive (theory testing) logic from the start of the first interview until the end of the project. Oktay (2012) contends that grounded theory is based on
two processes, “asking questions and making comparisons” (p. 62). This was the analysis process employed in the study. The researcher was enveloped in the process of making comparisons and developing questions from the first interview until the conclusion of the study which ended with the member check.

Grounded theory methods rely on four interconnected components in the process of formulating a theory from data: theoretical sensitivity, theoretical sampling, theoretical saturation, and constant comparison. The researcher begins with knowledge developed through their theoretical sensitivity as gathered prior to the start of the study. Upon the initiation of the study, the researcher collects data from the participants, developing new concepts from the data which is processed through theoretical sensitivity to be further refined by more data collection until theoretical saturation is met (Oktay, 2012).

1. **Theoretical sensitivity.**

Theoretical sensitivity requires the researcher to develop an analytical understanding of the data being collected. The researcher must be prepared to identify the characteristics within the data to develop categories and concepts relevant to a theoretical understanding of the subject matter. This theoretical sensitivity is based on the researcher’s familiarity and understanding of established theories, relevant literature and conceptual models incorporated in the study, as well as personal and professional experience in the area being investigated. Personal and professional experience can both be of added value to grounded theory research but also a source of potential bias. Oktay (2012) recommends creating a researcher identity memo in order to identify potential advantages and
disadvantages prior to entering the field as a way of identifying how personal experiences have shaped the researcher’s thoughts in regards the research question. In the case of this study, the researcher’s interaction and involvement within the worker center movement in Chicago provided the access necessary to be able to interview and fully be submersed in the data.

The researcher’s positionality (hereinafter indicated in the first person) was an aspect in which I had to be fully aware of constantly not only throughout the process of interviews and data analysis, but prior. In many ways understanding my positionality with this research project began with the first day I entered the Ph.D. program in 2010. It was then that I began to formulate my research interest and began exploring both my interest and limitations in studying this subject. Making a conscious decision to remain in the field as a full-time social worker and stepping away from my role as co-founder of one of the worker centers included for this study, both allowed me access and provided me a limited view within the movement, a view that only became more limited as the years progressed and my employment and family responsibilities increased, and academic work remained a constant demand. Nonetheless the passion for this work maintained my interest for continuing the research project that only grew in scope as I developed my research question throughout the years in the doctoral program.

My involvement within the worker center movement began in 2006 as I entered the world of worker center organizing via my involvement with the mobilization effort in southeast Chicago for the immigrant rights marches of March 10th. It was through this space that I began to meet many of the leaders within the immigrant right movement, of which many were also involved in the worker center movement. In 2008, learning more about the operations of
worker centers and seeing the need in my own community on the southeast side of Chicago, I co-founded a worker center with other leaders in the community, including the current director who I married in 2009. Throughout my time with the organization my role was that of an active volunteer. In this role, I was able to take the position as participant-observer of worker center organizing. It was important to recognize my affiliation to this worker center as well as to my personal relationship with its director as having a potential effect on the interviews. Special attention had to be paid as to how this influenced data collection through the memoing process (see Data Analysis Plan).

It has been through my direct/indirect connection within the worker center movement that I have been able to maintain an understanding of the efforts and intentionality involved with organizing low-wage workers. It is also seeing the direct impact worker centers can have on the issues related to workplace exploitation that brought me to this area of research as I entered my doctoral studies. I remained engaged in this research throughout the 7 years. I believe this is what creates value to the study being conducted, the interest to document the critical work being done by these organizers and the emerging movement that seeks to challenge oppression for the vulnerable workers in this global city. As I maintained a courtside view on the work being done on the ground, I was also able to engage in the academic space in order to develop an understanding through the aerial view as is allowed through the process of theoretical exploration. Understanding that this may in fact provide a risk for potential bias (see Quality of Study), I contend that this type of study would only be possible with my positionality and access to capture its complexity and allow for the voice of the organizers to carry through in the findings. Each interview was richer as a result of my shared understanding
with the organizers and respect for the work and shared values of empowering the marginalized in society. The conversations floated through a variety of themes as intended based on the interview guide with an ease and comfort that would not have been easily captured by an outside research. It was with this desire to document the work of these organizers and capture the lessons to be learned that may be applicable to organizing other marginalized groups, that shapes the research question and where my theoretical sensitivity can develop the study’s findings by relaying the voice of the organizers.

2. Theoretical sampling.

The methods of grounded theory require sampling to be driven by the developing theory, therefore requiring flexibility of the sampling strategy throughout the study. For this study the research question was initially limited to with the parameters of including worker centers that organized low-wage immigrant worker. As the data collection began it became apparent that worker centers had been working beyond solely that population. The worker center organizers also frequently made mention of The Coalition. Two changes happened to the study as a result: 1) the population of workers captured within this research was changed to more accurately reflect what has come to be defined as the vulnerable workforce and 2) the sampling of organizations increased to include the two organizations not initially included within the research design Workers Center for Racial Justice and The Coalition.

One of the key components to grounded theory is theoretical sampling, in which the sampling plan attempts to maintain maximum variation instead of finding a representative sample as in quantitative research. Oktay (2012) notes that the "aim instead is a sample that
allows thorough exploration of the relevant concepts" (p. 17). Understanding that the limitations to sampling given the small pool of present and former worker center organizers, the sampling was more of a census than an exploration of maximum variation among the sample. However, to gain variation in the data from the limited sample, the research design allowed for the possibility of follow-up interviews to allow for elaboration on concepts. For the purposes of answering the established research questions in this study, saturation was accomplished with one interview with each participant, follow up interviews were not necessary.

3. **Theoretical saturation.**

Theoretical saturation is determined when no additional data is being collected by which further properties of categories can be developed. Data collection continues until saturation is completed. Given the limited pool of subject for this study, saturation may be obtained by additional follow up interviews with existing participants. Interviews will be repeated as needed to achieve theoretical saturation. Saturation is only required for central categories in order to terminate data collection (Oktay, 2012). In the case of this study, given the limited number of active organizers available to interview for this study the possibility exists that more and different information could have emerged if there were more people to draw from for the sample.

At every stage of the data collection and analysis process, emerging topics led to the development of new questions and evolving ideas as formulated by the researcher and contributed to the dialogue in the subsequent interviews. Some of the emerging concepts and
topics were carried throughout the analysis until the very end. For example, the exploration of the role of ideologies both as personal ideologies of the organizer and the role of ideologies in organizing was encountered in the first interview and carried throughout the entire process. Other concepts reached saturation early in the study as common themes were repeated across interviews. Probing for further elaboration led to repetition of the established themes without building additional depth, as a result these topics received less attention as the study progressed.

4. **Constant comparison.**

The method of constant comparison is an essential element within grounded theory. Constant comparison requires that the researcher compare interview against each interview in order to develop emerging concepts and categories. In this process of constant comparison differences and similarities are identified and develop further concepts and categories to be tested and compared. These comparisons drive the inductive/deductive feedback loops from the data to the emerging theory and back to the data, the process that defines the grounded theory method (Oktay, 2012). The application of constant comparison for this study is detailed in the following section.

5. **Grounded theory as testing emerging conceptualization.**

While the intent of grounded theory is to develop new theory after thorough exploration of the data, this study stops short of developing a new theory. Instead this study utilizes the core elements of grounded theory while investigating within the theoretical

When describing data analysis in grounded theory, Oktay (2012) separates the process into two phases: early and late-stage data analysis. Similarly, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) employ a two-stage analysis. During the early phase of data analysis, Oktay explains the purpose of early coding is to "narrow the scope of the study" (Oktay, 2012, p. 54). This is done with the process of open coding and grouping codes. To begin with open coding, the two main objectives are extraction of substantive and theoretical codes. Substantive codes are codes that are derived from the content in the interviews. In-vivo and process codes as described by were utilized as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). The use of theoretical codes also referred to as provisional codes, as described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), were utilized within the early stage of coding. Theoretical codes are created by the researcher, by way of their theoretical sensitivity. While recognizing and tracking these codes is important for the research, Oktay (2012) warns that these codes should be treated carefully as to not be imposed on the analysis, but instead over time must merit a place within the analysis.

After completion of the transcript, the researcher reviewed it in its entirety, not only reviewing it for accuracy with the recording but to also reengage with the participant’s views. The researcher refrained from coding and instead sat with the content while reflecting on previous interviews and developing theories and incorporating and challenging the developing conceptual formulations. In order to address the risk of theoretical coding being imposed on the data, the researcher utilized only substantive codes in the analysis of the five interviews
before developing any provisional codes to be utilized in the subsequent analysis. This generated a high volume of codes at this early stage of analysis. Only after doing so were theoretical codes developed. These provisional codes in some cases matched the substantive codes developed.

Within early stage data analysis, formation of concepts were developed as a larger number of codes were developed. As Oktay (2012) proposes, this requires the researcher to begin to combine codes into concepts. The researcher is tasked with organizing codes into concepts based on similarities. Eventually these concepts are combined into broader categories. Oktay (2012) recommends early in the process to label everything a concept and only to begin creating categories after repeated concepts develop in subsequent interviews. The purpose of this grouping phase is to identify and refine the concepts and categories as changes and shifts between these two labels are expected throughout the process.

Once again to protect against the imposition of the conceptual model the analysis at an early stage, early grouping of codes or concepts and emerging categories were limited to those naturally occurring within the process. Organization of codes into parent groups as a way of linking shared concepts and subtle distinctions was the primary focus. At this stage the researcher paid careful attention to not impose label or group codes as understood within Structural Social Work theory. The resulting groups became a helpful outline of testing the theoretical codes that were generated based on the study’s conceptual model.

Oktay (2012) proposes that an equally important element of this early data analysis is the creation of memos. Memos are meant to be a space for the researcher to explore ideas
and hypotheses that begin to develop. They provide an opportunity for constant comparison, to reflect on personal observations of the interview, and to write about similarities and differences that begin to be observed in the data. Memos are meant to be a space for both creativity and analysis, where the researcher can develop ideas without necessarily having to commit to them. These ideas support the development and further testing of hypotheses, leading to the selection of future participants (theoretical sampling) and shaping future interviews and data collection. Memoing is meant to continue throughout the duration of the study, shifting its purpose throughout the different phases. In late-stage analysis memoing supports the researcher as they connect the emerging theory to higher levels of abstraction.

Memoing was conducted throughout the duration of the data collection and analysis. Memos were written before and after interviews, during moments of reflection, during both the early coding process and late-stage coding as well as into the writings of the findings. Coding served to pose questions, reflect on the elements of the interviews that stood out, contradictions with other interviews and the researcher’s own knowledgebase and world view, and concepts that were developing into the formation of the final findings. Although the final goal was not theory formation, the memoing helped develop emerging concepts and findings to be tested in subsequent interviews and in writing. Many times memoing, as a process of creative writing, served to more fully develop understandings of ideas and challenge established notions of the researcher. These ideas were shared with colleagues and with the researcher’s advisor.
Late-stage data analysis is focused on the development of theory by utilizing the process of axial and selective coding. Axial coding is a deeper exploration of the categories and concepts in the early data analysis. Oktay (2012) presents the three components that make up axial coding: “1) identifying the variety of conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences associated with a category; 2) relating a category to its subcategories; and 3) looking for clues in the data about how major categories might relate to each other” (p.74). Understanding the relationships among the categories and emerging theory is what allows the researcher to move the emerging theory into higher levers of abstraction. This is done by tying the emerging theory to established social science theory (Oktay, 2012).

As grounded theory enters the final stages Oktay discusses the elements of selective coding, which involves identifying the core category or categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) define the core category as the category "that appears frequently in the data, is abstract, is related to your other categories, is applicable to other areas, and grows in complexity and explanatory power as you relate it to your other categories" (Oktay, 2012, p. 81). Once the core category is established, data analysis focuses around this area. Selective coding allows the researcher to focus on establishing theoretical saturation on this core category as a requisite to completion. Saturation of other categories is not necessary, even though it may be desirable. It is at this final stage that the researcher must review the results for "completeness, as well as for internal consistency and logic" (Oktay, 2012, p. 83). At this stage a final round of data collection may be necessary to test and tie together and complete the findings, including the defined limitations of the theory.
During this stage of analysis, the researcher wrestled with the integration of codes into the study's conceptual model. Having conducted 16 interviews by this stage, the researcher spent a week sitting with and organizing the 178 codes established, with the creation of 36 additional codes in the process of refinement and review of existing codes throughout the week. The development of the core categories was not immediately organized into the elements found within Structural Social Work, instead the researcher allowed for the core categories to shape themselves through testing and challenging the connections between groups. As discussed with the exploration of axial coding, comparison of concepts and categories with one another and their relation with the research question was key for the study. Concepts that were developing throughout the interviews were solidified at this stage, requiring the widening of the research questions. This also allowed for the development of the additional elements within the data that emerged naturally from the questions such as the findings chapter on the history and development of the worker center in Chicago. This phase of the analysis included the challenging of the Structural Social Work theory to test its limits; doing so required testing the structural model (Figure 1) as well as the PCS model (Figure 3). The findings established the elaboration of these models as the core categories fit within the conceptual model. This was by no means an easy task as the testing required an integration of the previously defined codes, concepts and categories, most of which were allowed to develop organically at each stage. In doing so the study was testing emerging naturalistic concepts against Structural Social Work theory throughout the process.

Finally, before concluding with data analysis, the final three final interviews were conducted to include the two organizations added in the study. These interviews served well to
test the expanded research questions and finding as well as to test against the developed conceptual understanding of Structural Social Work theory. Given that these organizations operated outside of the scope of the initial parameters of the research at its onset, to which every interview organically broadened the scope to ultimately merit their inclusion, these interviews allowed the researcher to test the developed core concepts. All three interviews allowed for the addition of further richness to the concepts developed but no new elements were added, confirming saturation and ending data collection and analysis for this study.

6. **Member check.**

In order to allow the participation of the respondents in the analysis process, the study concluded with a member check. The member check created the opportunity for the researcher to report back to the participants the analysis as developed through the grounded theory process. Any discrepancies identified with the final analysis of the researcher would be discussed during the member check and reported within the findings chapters. The member check also allowed an opportunity for respondents to further articulate their own perspectives and elaborate on the findings presented by the researcher, those contributions were included in the findings chapters.

The member check was conducted as a group presentation with time allotted for input and questions after the presentation of the findings those in attendance. The member check was open to all organizers interviewed and organizers staffed within the selected worker centers that were not interviewed. Eight organizers attended the member check representing five of the eight worker centers included in the study. The only discrepancy identified by the
participants with the researcher’s analysis during the member check related to the history of
the worker center movement. The conversation allowed for the reorganization and the
elaboration of the timeline created. A final opportunity for feedback was offered to
participants via email prior to submission, based on feedback provided by the dissertation
committee on the timeline during the defense. This revised timeline was shared with
participants and underwent a final round of revisions and elaboration via email and phone
conversations prior to submission of the dissertation.

F. **Quality of Study**

Trustworthiness is a measure by which qualitative research is assessed for validity.
Padgett (2008) describes the three main threats to trustworthiness in qualitative research and
six strategies researchers can use to reduce bias. The main threats include: reactivity to the
effects of the researcher on the respondents; researcher bias (when interpretations are
influenced by the opinions of the researcher); and respondent bias, or social desirability (when
respondents respond as to please the researcher). As discussed in the theoretical sensitivity
section, given that the researcher was familiar to many of the respondents, respondent bias
was of particular concern for this study.

In order to increase trustworthiness, the following six strategies are recommended:
prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing/support, member checking, negative
case analysis, and memoing. Special consideration must be given in developing the strategies
to reduce biases while considering possible limitations and challenges. The following plan was
utilized for this study. In order to decrease researcher bias, memoing was done throughout the
study as described in the data analysis section. Memoing also helped develop an audit trail which can be reviewed by committee members, as it presents a record of the researcher’s thought process during the study and how it shaped the development of data collection. Throughout, the memoing as part of negative case analysis was done to challenge emerging theories, which served to reduce researcher bias. Negative case analysis is the process by which developed theories are tested with examples in the data in which the theory does not hold up in order to understand limitations in theory. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources to inform and verify the development concepts. It is an important component to increasing trustworthiness of a study given its positive effect of reducing reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias. Triangulation for this study was achieved by using multiple sources of data from multiple interviews as concepts were developed within the study. For this reason, it was important that concepts were never fully developed from a single interview. Finally, conducting member checks with the organizers within the worker center movement after the findings were formed served to reduce the threat of reactivity, researcher bias and respondent bias.

In order to increase the reliability of the coding process, the researcher asked for the assistance of a second coder for the first two interviews. The second coder, a social work doctoral candidate trained in human subject protections was asked to independently code the transcription for common themes in order to compare them to that of the researcher. Identified discrepancies were examined with the second coder to understand the difference in coding and explore the necessity to continue further reviews of established codes. The review did not yield any discrepancies, instead the second coder was able to substantiate the
established codes given the researcher’s codes were more detailed yet lined up with those of the second coder.

G. Human Subjects Protections

The study was approved by the University of Illinois at Chicago Institutional Review Board in order to ensure the protection of participants. The purpose and procedures of the study as well as the risks and benefits were articulated to each participant during recruitment and again before any data collection begins. Before beginning each interview, the Research Participant Information and Consent Form (Appendix B) was reviewed in its entirety and any questions were answered. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were told they were able to discontinue their involvement at any point without an impact on current or future relationship with any of the worker centers or the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The content of the research questions was not expected to produce any strong reactions by the participants, given the professional focus of the interviews. Despite attempts to make participants anonymous in the final report, the limited number of worker centers in the Chicagoland area, each with a specific focus, organizers were informed of the risk of identification of the organization by those familiar with the organizations. Even though, the information gathered should not pose a significant risk to participants since the organizers maintain a public presence in their work, additional layers of protection for the individual organizer were taken in the production of this final report. All participants are identified with a random number assignment in this document to de-identify gender. Finally, to protect identification based on the connection to the worker center, quotes are not identified by
source in the chapter on the history of the creation of the worker centers. All attempts were made to de-identify the quotes as associated to the specific industry organized in subsequent chapters. While participants did not directly benefit from their involvement in the study, they were able to contribute to the emerging literature of worker center organizing.

Participation in the study was strictly voluntary. In order to gain access to the participants it was necessary to get permission from the executive directors of the respective worker centers. Yet given the role of the executive director as the employer of the organizers, it was important that participants were not coerced to participate in the study. The following steps were taken to avoid this possibility. After gaining access to the participants by the director, I asked to either attend a staff meeting to introduce the opportunity to participate in the study to staff or to email or text organizers separately inviting their participation. The researcher did not inform the director of the staff that chose to participate. Additionally, the researcher interviewed subjects in a private space of their choosing; this allowed subjects to take into consideration the risks of being seen with the researcher. All attempts were made to meet in a space in which the conversation could be uninterrupted without others listening, however the research deferred to the organizer’s location of choosing.

Only the researcher and the hired transcription service had access to the audio files and interview transcripts. All consent forms and eligibility checklists were stored in locked file cabinets separate from the study data. All electronic data files were stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher had access to. In order to link participant data over time, a list connecting participant names, study IDs and pseudonyms was stored in a
secure, locked file cabinet, separate from the study data. This list was destroyed once data collection was completed. The audio file of each interview was destroyed upon completion of the study. Only the researcher and a hired transcription service had access to the audio files and transcripts throughout the course of the study and they were not used for any other purpose besides this study.
V. FINDINGS I: AN INITIAL HISTORY OF CHICAGO’S WORKER CENTERS: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MOVEMENT

The worker center movement within Chicago has been one of continued evolution and growth since the beginning of its formalization approximately 17 years ago. However much of the foundation can be traced back to decades prior, and the findings of this study cannot begin without its documentation as this foundation which lays the groundwork for the present-day research. The origins and development of the worker center movement were not only recounted in the interviews but also were embedded within the personal experiences of each of the worker center organizers interviewed for this study. The historical development of the worker center movement in Chicago composed in this chapter was largely compiled through the interviews conducted in this study, additional research was done when attempting to fill in the gaps. The interview guide included a set of questions asking participants to describe their development as an organizer, the worker center they are a part of, and the type of workers that their organization focused on. Twelve organizers (67%) retold the development of the organization as a way to answer those set of questions.

This abbreviated history is as much an initial effort to document the untold story of the development and evolution of the worker center movement within Chicago, as it is to illustrate the context of the current state of the worker center organizations for the purpose of this research. The researcher’s positionality is included in this historical recount given that his introduction and involvement with the worker center movement began with his support of the mobilization efforts beginning with the March 10th 2006 immigrant right’s mobilization in
Chicago. This involvement is being included as the historical telling of Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project.

This initial telling of the historical development of the worker centers was explored and further developed during the member check with the worker center organizers in attendance. A review of the literature finds limited information on a comprehensive historical development of the worker centers in Chicago; sources are cited where available. This history merits further refinement and elaboration for future publication. The following timeline outlines the year each worker centers (utilizing the current name) was founded as detailed in the following sections.

**First Wave**  
**Proto-Worker Centers**
- 1969 *La Asociación Pro-Derechos Obreros* (APO, The Association for Workers Rights)
- 1976 Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (CACOSH)
- 1981 *Comité Latino*
- 1990 Chicago Coalition for the Homeless
- 1991 Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues
- 1993 Erie House

**Second Wave**  
**Chicago’s First Worker Centers**
- 2000 Chicago Workers’ Collaborative (originally Chicago Area Workers’ Center)
- 2001 Latino Union
- 2001 San Lucas Workers Center
- 2002 Arise Chicago (originally Chicago Interfaith Worker Rights Center)
- 2007 Working Hands Legal Clinic

**Third Wave**  
**The Development Towards a Movement**
- 2008 Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project
- 2009 Restaurant Opportunities Center of Chicago
- 2009 Warehouse Workers for Justice
- 2009 Chicago Community and Worker Rights
- 2009 Just Pay for All Coalition
- 2012 Worker Center for Racial Justice
- 2014 Raise the Floor Alliance
- 2016 The Domestic Worker and Day Labor Center of Chicago
A. **The First Wave: Early Worker Organizing**

Prior to the era in which worker centers were formally identified as such, various organizations in Chicago were fighting for access to quality jobs for the Latino community, addressing workplace safety, and advocating for worker rights. The earliest account of this type organization presented in the interviews was of *La Asociación Pro-Derechos Obreros* (APO, The Association for Workers Rights) in Pilsen founded in 1969 (Ramirez, et.al., 2011).

There was Rita Bustos, she was one of the main organizers which she also helped a lot at *Comité Latino*. She was part of the board of *Comité Latino*. Rita Bustos, Humberto Salinas, and even Rudy Lozano were working at APO, and APO was like the labor-side of CASA [Centro de Acción Social Autónomo – Hermandad General de Trabajadores/ Center for Autonomous Social Action – General Brotherhood of Workers] which was the whole Aztlan movement and APO was dedicated to discrimination of the workplace basically working for minority hiring at People’s Gas, Coca-Cola... What is now the extension of the Benito Juarez campus, that used to be the Coca-Cola plant in Pilsen, and the Coca-Cola plant in Pilsen didn’t have a single Latino, so they boycotted Coca-Cola and Coca-Cola pretty quickly said ‘okay no problem we’ll hire Latinos so they were concentrated on that. You know, it was not defense of worker’s rights but mostly hiring practices and working for the city of Chicago to hire Latinos and that kind of stuff. But I think that would be considered to be the beginning of a worker center, in that sense of an immigrant worker center. ³

Another contemporaneous effort was the Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (CACOSH). One respondent spoke about the role and history of the CACOSH group in Chicago and the involvement of the respondent dating back to the 1980’s. In the

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³ To protect confidentiality, quotes that describing organizational development will not include any names of respondents or participant ID numbers. When necessary to link respondents across quotes organizers will be identified as Respondent # in this section.
following two excerpts the respondent credits the CACOSH group as the direct link to the workplace occupational safety work being done in Mexico with that of Chicago.

They only did occupational health and safety but definitely... It is the labor groups, outside the labor unions. So, you know that dates like from 1976 or something like that. The first COSH group was CACOSH, Chicago Area COSH group.

Well [I was involved] in Mexico in the student movement. Afterwards I collaborated with the farmworkers movement a little bit, and then I started working at a law firm and that is where I began to learn basic law. After a while a group of physicians wanted to get involved in the labor movement and we started a non-profit called el Centro de Salud Laboral [Center for Workplace Health]. That was in 1981, ‘82 and we put them to do occupational health and then I also learned a lot about occupational health, so then I knew laws and occupational health. And as time went on we made contact with the groups here. There is a network that is the COSH groups, the Committees on Occupational Safety and Health and then they invited us to come to exchange experiences and then I was invited to come to the United States to offer courses in Spanish on occupational health laws for Latino workers in 1985, ’85 ’86 and in ’87. They told me to come and stay here to give continuity to all that work, so I stayed here.

Information found on a CACOSH website offers additional information on the history of the group in Chicago and at the national level.
Over 30 years ago, occupational medicine physicians joined activist labor leaders to address the carnage in Chicago's workplaces. Too many workers were being killed and crippled on the job. They formed CACOSH to advocate for the right of all workers to safe and healthy workplaces. CACOSH was the first of the over twenty COSH groups in the United States today. The groups it has spawned span the nation from the East Coast to California, even penetrating the right-to-work states in the South and reaching north to Alaska. The Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health has been involved in a variety of projects designed to outreach to the population of workers, to train workers in Health and Safety concepts, and to help address specific concerns brought by members, organizations, or individual workers. Projects have included creating workers' guides to Illinois Workers' Compensation laws, making recommendations to reform Workers' Compensation, and taking the message of workers' rights to vulnerable workers including teens, immigrants and refugees, 'contingent' workers, workers of color, and low-income workers. (About CACOSH, n.d.)

Comité Latino, was also mentioned in a separate interview as another precursor to the worker center movement. A newspaper article reported on the one-year anniversary that the organization identified Comité Latino as founded in May 1981 with the support of the Organization of the North East, by Stella Cannella, Inocente Tafolla, and Rita Simo (Galvan, 1982). Two respondents recalled it in the following way:

Comité Latino on the North side which is like the only worker center I know about in Chicago back then. They were doing what a worker center does, I mean it was called Comité Latino. It was up in Rogers Park and they would basically teach workers about their rights and they would do protests and they would fight wage theft and all that kind of stuff. It was just a general thing in that area. Yea, yea. And all those guys ended up being union organizers like they... Comité Latino closed and they went and became union organizers. They closed around 1994 I think, '95.

They were located on Clark Ave. That was the time when CISPES [Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador] was really active so they had a lot of Salvadorians, Guatemalans, and what not. Frank Klein was the executive director, then he left to go work for some labor union, then Margarita Klein took over the Comité Latino and at some point they all went to work for the labor unions.
In 1983 John Donahue, a former priest and advocate for the poor, became the first director for *Comité Latino*. In 1990, he became the director of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (Mcclory, 1991). The Coalition for the Homeless has been credited for developing the early response to temporary labor agencies (commonly referred to as day-labor agencies at the time). The following excerpt from an article in *The Nation* explores the demands of temporary workers in 2000, captures the connection various respondents commented on the role of research and the Chicago Coalition with the Homeless:

In Chicago, police sweeps and flagrant day-labor-agency abuses have inspired uprisings among the city’s burgeoning, largely Latino day-labor force. According to Chirag Mehta, researcher at the University of Illinois Center for Urban Economic Development, somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 Chicagoans rely on day labor; this includes some 75 percent of the city’s homeless shelter residents, a recent study by the center found. “They are living day by day, working day by day in a cycle of homelessness and day labor,” says the center’s research director, Nikolas Theodore. Many are undocumented immigrants, according to José Landaverde, Latino task force coordinator for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, which is helping the laborers get organized. Recently three laborers, angered at being underpaid, showed Landaverde their paychecks: “They worked eight hours and got paid $28.25 for the day. The employment agencies do whatever they want because they assume the workers don’t have documents.”

But in February these workers, many of them women, fought back with loud street protests, public hearings and a one-day strike against one of the day-labor agencies. With good media coverage and help from a city alderman, they shut down two agencies that were operating without licenses and allegedly taking illegal deductions for nonexistent benefits and pensions, says coalition organizer Dan Giloth. The coalition, working closely with Jobs with Justice, the Interfaith Committee for Workers’ Rights and various local unions, is lobbying the city to spend $1.9 million to finance eight workers’ centers where day laborers can wait for work in peace. The centers would be run by day-laborer board members, says Giloth, and are part of a long-term strategy to create a day-laborers’ co-op to negotiate better wages and conditions. (Cook, 2000)
Those involved in this effort and initiative aimed at bringing attention to the plight of vulnerable workers engaged within the city’s budding day-labor industry. In 2001, two worker centers formed as a direct result of this work: Latino Union and San Lucas Worker Center.

Another precursor was the immigrant serving social service organization located in Chicago’s north side, Erie House. The role of the organization in educating the immigrant worker community on their rights in the workplace is shared by one of the organizers in the following two excerpts.

Then I moved to Erie House in 1993 and I was the, I was the literacy coordinator and what I did at Erie House was I basically, they had a lot of space right? It was a big building and it had like... there were a lot of immigrants that live right around there on all the streets around the organization and so I just started recruiting volunteers to teach English and giving them training on how to teach and stuff and then inviting people from the community to come and learn English, right. Suddenly we had like I don't know, maybe on any night in that place we had like 300 people coming in to classes and so what happened was we created what was called a Student Leadership Council to inform the program about what the needs were of the community as far as education goes. And so I invited a couple folks to do leadership training there to help the council members you know function like council members. We had this training from it is called South Bronx People for Change and they had this curriculum called Organize and so they would learn... the council members would learn about like how do you know how to make an agenda, how to run a meeting, how to build power, how information plus people equals power, and, so they had that training and we just kept repeating the training like for 5 years because we got it from South Bronx People for Change and actually they were Jesuits from El Salvador and had brought that from El Salvador to up to Bronx and then they went around the country. It was like this one sister who I think ended up being banned from the church because she was like pro-abortion or something and this one Jesuit priest and so they were just going around to do trainings like this at different community organizations. So we would use that, build a council and from that council we started getting really involved in like a new legalization program, like organizing marches because like between 1986 and 1994 you have this like massive influx of people from Mexico. I mean it was like it was, I mean literally we were getting people coming into the center, you know who had just come from Mexico.
I mean every day there were more and more and more people and then what was going on was as everyone was getting jobs in factories right and in hotels and every other place and there was a lot of exploitation of those workers and so the council, the council started saying that the biggest need for the students was to learn about labor rights and so, so we started doing labor rights classes and learning about, just everyone there learning about our rights. (Respondent 1)

I became president of the local union and there were fifteen hundred teachers working in 350 different community-based centers. That could be you know like a community organization, it could be a union hall, it might be a health clinic, it might be any kind of thing in the community or City College or one of its offsite places. And so I made it my business to go out and visit all the teachers and so in doing that I made all these connections with these community organizations and not least of which was Erie House which had a very big program. [Respondent 1] was the director of their program, their ESL program and a teacher himself and he was active in the union. But then I went, you know the union hired me to go do more traditional union organizing, so I did that and I worked on a state-wide campaign for the union, organizing group-home workers in the mental health field and developmental disability field. But as I was working for the union and learning more about labor rights all of my friends from the ESL programs, and the GED programs, and Literacy programs, and the community centers they would call on my knowledge of labor rights. And so I would go and do presentations in the classes and you know that kind of thing and as we were doing it we started realizing like, there's a real need here. Like, these are workers who are not in unions, they're working in the worst conditions, largely undocumented, or really low-skilled, or formally incarcerated, the most vulnerable workforce, or part of the workforce out there and you know of course, jobs were changing too. So now they were more of what they call ‘fissured workplace’ people don't work for the company that hires them they are farmed out; temp staffing, independent contract, franchising agreement, things like that. Yeah it was just starting, it was more like the independent contractor stuff. The staffing was just starting to grow, temporary staffing. So you know so that just became more, we recognized that as more of a need. (Respondent 2)

Finally, there were early collaboration between labor unions and faith-based institutions through an initiative started in Chicago.

[In 1991] Kim Bobo launched the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues and at the time as the name suggests it was not a worker center, it was you know organizing the religious community just to support union campaigns. So you know [Union], their
contract expired their negotiations stalled with the hotel, our group would sort of get a bunch of religious leadership to like do a delegation to the hotel to say you got you negotiate in good faith with [Union] or [Union] would take a bunch of workers out on strike, we would organize through a network of congregations a drive to support the families of the striking workers’ things like that. Civil disobedience having clergy to do high stakes civil disobedience for you know while workers were in struggle, for workers that could not do civil disobedience so kind of like connecting with labor unions

B. The Second Wave: The Formation of Worker Centers in Chicago

The second wave encompasses the formalization of worker centers as registered non-profits with a defined vision as captured by the established characteristics currently defined as worker centers. The emergence of this wave develops in 2000 with the creation of four worker centers within the city. Each organization develops within sectors of the labor force that was rife with exploitation. These organizations serve as the catalyst for the development of the current worker center movement within the city. Between 2000-2006 these worker centers contributed to challenging employers and responding to an evolving economic landscape within the city, as the city emerged from deindustrialization and continued pressures for efficiency were being felt by the remaining manufacturing sector.

One respondent shared the connection between the creation of the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative and the unwillingness of the labor unions to support the needs of the Mexican immigrant workforce in the city’s manufacturing sector. According to the respondent challenging factories and labor unions resulted in and increased political pressure placed on Erie House, which had integrated workplace rights and the support of immigrant workers into their service delivery model. The following details the origins of the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative:
In the late eighties and early nineties there was also when there was a...in the unions there was a lot of corruption and a lot of, there are a lot of unions there were basically like The Sopranos and so the Mexican workers belong to a lot of those unions and they would get, these were unions that were basically set up to help out the company and not the workers. I think part of the worker center stuff and a lot of the organizing that happened and why workers would come to the community centers was because in many cases they were in unions that were not helping them at all and so you would get a lot of, you would get people that had unions and you know, no idea what their contract was, no idea. They were making like minimum wage with the union contract and getting fired and no one was doing anything about it you know.

You guys get a lot of money from the city for your child care programs and everything else so what we decided to do to answer that, was to create another organization outside of Erie House, that did not have those vulnerabilities of having government funding that they can go after. That is where we started the Chicago Worker Center (currently named the Chicago Workers Collaborative) and the first board of directors was made up of the leaders of all the different factories and it was all very similar to the Jay’s experience with all these different factories. Yea and that was like 2000, yeah I think it was 2000, 2001 and that's, so the Chicago Worker Center started and [Organizer] quit the union and became the first coordinator.

Similarly, the Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues quickly found out the immense volume of workers in the city facing exploitation when it published a comprehensive manual on worker rights in multiple languages. The demand for support quickly led to the development of a worker center currently known as ARISE to address the overwhelming need as explained in the following excerpt:

In 2001, it wasn't until 2001 that we published our worker rights book, the workers manual and then at the time. I mean it's funny if you think about it, to me I was not there, but in retrospect it was funny because like they did not expect this but like hundreds of workers calling the organization being like that we’re not part of the labor union just saying, ‘hey like I see your book’ because we publish almost thirteen thousand copies. Spanish, Polish and English so we had hundreds of workers literally calling the group saying, ‘what do I do? You publish this book now what do I do.’ And we are like well you know the organization had no idea because that is not how we were set up, right. That is when [Organizer] got hired and then also [Organizer].
Early on there were not many worker centers and they were not networked. There was not really a lot of awareness of like it is not like you said worker center and people knew what that was and there was not really awareness of like what we were doing. It was just flying by the seat of our pants. So basically what the organization, what [Organizer] and [Organizer] did is they set up a pretty effective way of like doing mass workshops, doing mass intakes and then doing mass referrals to attorneys.

I saw all this untapped power and so for me I was like we should do a formal membership program and we should do a direct action strategy and that was really the two contributions I feel like I made for making changing the center. So I inherited like several hundred complaints of government agencies. The ones that were at the Department of Labor we had 0 result out of 250 at the US and Illinois Department of Labor together we had $0 ever make it to a worker’s hand. So I have put on hold basically for a year we did not do any cases and they would call them cases at the time. We called Arise workers advocates, it was all this other, basically a social service model that I inherited and I was really trying to, and with some pushback from like, one of the staff left because they were like ‘I don’t want to go to organizing.’ ‘I like service.’ And I'm not one of those guys that is like macho about it, like [social] service is wussy stuff, like it is about organizing. I'm not all about that. I just felt that our organization was better suited to organizing model because who got all these marginal workers showing up on their door step ready, I mean if you train them to take action, they will take action. So why would we just and plus we were bleeding power like we like helped them fill out a form, send it and then say goodbye to them. To me that was crazy, you know. So really what, I said was we are not going to file with the Department of Labor. So I ended all filings with government agencies and I said we are not going to take, you know, we are not just going to like take somebody's case or whatever. We are going to make them become a member contingent upon us putting resources into their, we are going to call them a campaign and we are going to make them actually a leader on a campaign not a client to a case. So those were some of the changes that I instituted and it took a long time transitioning that and then we invested on somebody that their exclusively member organizing, internal organizing what the unions call right. So not, so that workers that after they are on the campaign, what do we do with them, right. We are going to keep them engaged with a member organizer that is doing nothing but, ‘hey can you come to the domestic worker press conference?’ ‘Can you come to, you know can you speak to the media about this issue on sexual harassment given that you have fought for this in the workplace?’ And so we have one organizer that only does that intro member stuff and then we have our external organizers you know that are either doing small groups, in individual workshops or campaigns that could spill over and be bigger, right. Multi-hundred, you know several hundred workers in a class action,
perhaps a union organizing opportunity, things like that. [Organizer] who has been an incredible addition which she started shortly after me in 2007. She like almost completely complementary differences, right. So I come out of like what I described to you, she comes out of like you know doing Urban Ministry for 20 years and organizing clergy for labor unions in labor movement. So she had done with work with SEIU. Helped to lead a major janitor strike at the University of Miami. So she came out of like labor unions and then also

A: Through IWJ or separate?

I: No, separate. Yeah and then, she actually worked briefly for Kim when it was Interfaith Worker Justice. She did work on a contract with her on an Ohio campaign and stuff. So that is where she kind of came out of. And so when we came together it was kind of an interesting mix, because we were like, we had these two different separate programs.

So we had up until 2008, we actually had a third program so we had the Faith and Labor Solidarity work, we had to Worker Center work, and there was also in the African-American community we had, there was a black minister on our staff that led pre-apprenticeship training programs for African-Americans to join the building trades and labor unions. So it was in the building trade. So it was a good faith effort from the building trades to make sure that they were actually facing their racist past and making good on it in the present and by doing that, they were investing money for us to then do trainings of black workers to then pass the exams and get into those programs. So when the financial crisis hit in 2008 a lot of those trades closed their training programs and we couldn’t ask for funding for it and it was funded through them. So we shut that program down and have never opened it since. But anyway that was sort of the scope of our work for those three pieces. [Organizer] and I have increasingly moved our two programs closer and closer together.

So the confusing thing is that since Interfaith Worker Justice is a national group but it is based in Chicago, right. So and our Chicago Interfaith Committee on Worker Issues, our Chicago group which we renamed to Arise in 2009. IWJ grew out of our group and so Kim went there. And then in 2007 or 2008 is when we became fiscally independent. So back then when we split it was you know we had a different board, different bylaws, different budget that’s when we split.

As the researchers and homeless advocates identified an entire segment of the labor force that was being marginalized within the city in the emerging temporary staffing industry as well as in the unregulated day labor sector, two organizations emerged and evolved as they
become specialized in the issues they were addressing, Latino Union and San Lucas Workers Center. Two respondents speak of the creation of Latino Union:

You had like Jose Landaverde out there protesting it you know, and Latino Union that's how they got started. The Latino Union at that time that is what they were organizing they were organizing the day laborers in Albany Park but they were also organizing temp workers.

Jose Landaverde got involved with a group of women who were suffering wage theft, sexual harassment all types of issues and so he started working with them and I think that is how they kind of just separated from the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. So that was basically the start of Latino Unions and those compañeras [female comrade] were the first leaders to help Landaverde really like identify and start Latino Union and they started by just Landaverde’s style, like helping whoever walked into the program and eventually faded into working with the jornaleros [day-laborers] in 2001, 2002 and by the aguila [a well know statue] in Pilsen and then also on Cermak. Those corners no longer exist but back then those compas [male comrades] were fighting to preserve the rights to work there and so the word spread to the north side just seeing them on the news and the compas contacted Latino Union to start collaborating here in Albany Park in about 2001 also in 2002-ish so they were working multiple stuff and before I got involved they had already had campaigns on Lawrence and Pulaski there was a McDonald's there and they had a struggle with McDonald's and all the businesses there. The alderman decided to move all these compas to a space at the Salvation Army parking lot. Six months past, kicked them back out. Gave them another temporary space at an old CTA bus turnaround on Foster and Pulaski and that is when I was also coming in and that is when the compas got tired of just being moved around and saying we are going to a planton [an occupation] and we are going to take over this until we can negotiate. So that was the entire summer of 2003. Got kicked out by late fall. Got funding because of all the attention finally got a salary and they designated me to organize those compas here in Albany Park throughout the winter and then towards the end of the winter we got funding enough to open up the Worker Center [hiring hall] and then help establish operations and all of that. [Organizer] was also coming in at that time. [Organizer] was already here [Organizer] came a little after me also so the three of us with [Organizer] kind of building up the organization. (Respondent 3)

So there was one year from 2004-2005 it was like nine months. Somewhere in there and then after they, the Latino Union, wanted to hire me and I stayed. And I think what it was... So what we did specifically was to... we didn’t have the worker center at that
point and by worker center where... because there is confusion right so I know you talk about worker center in the context of as an organization when I say worker center I actually mean the hiring hall, portion of it because we call it the Albany Park Worker Center and for a long time that’s what a worker center was, you know the definition of it was like an actual hiring hall. So we were looking Latino Union was looking at models throughout the country about this hiring halls and this, the day laborer organizing which at this point was also very sexy you know. And what was going on. Latino Union ended up in Albany Park because the organization started in the Back of the Yards neighborhood and it was founded by women who worked in temp agencies and then they joined with a couple of activists, one of them was Jose Landaverde who helped them work out issues you know of wage theft, sexual harassment and all these things that they were facing. And that's kind of because of these women and these two activists like actually Latino Union got started as a volunteer organization.

We built our own space. There was a small structure that was built and then the workers then also got together. And you know with our facilitation and figured out a job distribution system, so when you go into this hiring sites for day laborers it's like you all stand there. A contractor drives by and, you all run. We all run to his truck and there is you know like the contractor maybe like I need two painters and people like, you know I'll go for 10 bucks an hour. You know and the other person will be ‘I’ll go for 8, the other person who will go for 7 and you know. It's very competitive you know. And so one of the things that they started creating structure around, was actually maybe you know whose turn is it to go. So instead of competing against each other, it is like how can we work together so we also don't drive our salaries down, and all that stuff.  

(Respondent 4)

San Lucas Worker Center formed simultaneously as a splinter group following the release of the study and continued their focus on challenging the largely unregulated temporary labor industry. Various participants referenced this organization even though it is no longer in operation. The origins were briefly described by one of the respondents:

Chicago Coalition for the Homeless did a survey with Nik Theodore in 2000 and found and in the survey found that the Chicago’s homeless population a good 70, 80% of it had worked through temp agency, through day labor agencies and that their homelessness was a great deal a result of the fact that they did not have steady secure work. So it was Dan Giloth. Dan Giloth and Jose Landaverde were the two organizers and Jose
Landaverde went on and formed the Latino Union and Dan Giloth went out and formed the San Lucas Worker Center and the San Lucas Worker Center was mostly African-American temp workers.

No representative who worked at San Lucas Worker Center organization made part of this study. Nonetheless the contribution of this organization made a lasting imprint. A business profile posted for public access on a website lists some of their achievements of San Lucas Worker Center during their time of operation:

Organization’s most significant accomplishments have been: In 2001-2003, forced seven-day labor agencies into negotiations that stopped specific abuses around fees, unsafe rides, and unpaid wages. In 2001, effected the local closing of Trojan Labor, a discriminatory and extortionist day labor agency (and later settled a discrimination lawsuit with Trojan’s national office). In 2001-2003, organized Illinois Department of Labor audits at four-day labor agencies that refunded more than $300,000 (of illegal fees) to workers. In 2001-2002, authored the major provisions of and headed the organizing fight to win the City of Chicago Day Labor Ordinance (effective, May 1, 2002). In 2003-2006, developed a Code of Conduct for fair and ethical day labor standards and signed four agencies to it. Played a major role in the writing, negotiations, and passage of the Illinois Day Labor Services Act of 2006. In 2006-2007, won pay raises, holiday pay, seniority rights, and 'temp-to-perm' advancement for 100 day laborers at two Chicago companies through Code of Conduct campaigns (as part of our Day Labor Accountability Project). As a founding board member, helped to create the Working Hands Legal Clinic in 2006-2007, a legal assistance group that supports organizing among immigrant and other low-wage workers. (San Lucas Worker Center, n.d.)

Finally, in 2007 the Working Hands Legal Clinic, a long time legal support for many of the worker centers was founded. WHLC was started by a worker center organizer who entered law school with the intention of starting a legal clinic that would provide legal and financial support to the worker centers.

The idea was to enforce all these laws we were passing. So, the Day Labor Service Act gets passed, so now you need a really strong way to enforce that. Well how do you do that? Well you need to have your own enforcement team.
This center later transition into the Raise the Floor Alliance, with attorneys incorporated into the Raise the Floor Legal Department. A brief history found on the website of Raise the Floor, outlines the history of the Working Hands Legal Clinic as follows:

Founded in 2007 by three worker centers, the Legal Clinic has helped catalyze low-wage worker organizing by providing free and accessible legal services to low-wage workers facing employment abuse, providing legal support to worker center campaigns, and providing legal expertise on local and statewide public policy campaigns. In Chicago, the Legal Clinic is widely recognized as the expert in low-wage worker employment legal services, with particular expertise in wage theft. Since its founding, the Legal Clinic has recovered over $10 million in stolen wages. (Our Accomplishments, n.d.)

C. The Third Wave: The Emergence of a Worker Center Movement

The massive nationwide immigrant right’s mobilizations beginning with the first large scale mobilization in Chicago on March 10th, 2006 represented an explosion of the building tensions of the legal vulnerability of the immigrant community in United States. An examination of the era, events leading up to and after the immigrant rights manifestations of 2006, are explored thoroughly in the edited volumes of Voss and Bloemraad (2011). In Chicago, where manifestations exceeded 100,000 participants in March 10, 2006, and 400,000 in May 1st, 2006 and in 150,000 in May 1st, 2007, the impacts cannot be underestimated on the strengthening and development of the immigrant rights organizing in the city (Archibold, 2006; Avila & Olivo, 2006; Chernoff, Gutierrez, O’Brien, & Rowlands, 2007). The strengthening of networks and development of the supportive structures have led to a resurgence of activity that contributed to the emergence of a third wave of worker center development in the city, an energy that contributed to the creation of three worker centers within the 2008 and 2009 with organizers who were directly involved in the marches of 2006 and 2007. One respondent
captures the connection between the massive manifestations of the immigrant community in
the marches and in an increase in workplace organizing in the following way:

I believe that this is the connection yes... We taught millions of people how to march,
how to shout, that remember that you have rights and that you have dignity above all,
of which had been completely oppressed in the prior five years from 2001 to 2006. ‘So
you’re an immigrant without papers? Hide, because the Patriot Act is there and you are
a terrorist and so on and so on.’ And there are the Minute Men and they are armed at
the border and this consciousness had been repressed. And so, that consciousness
revives and manifests itself in the marches of 2006.

Yo creo que esa es la conexión si... le enseñamos a millones de personas como marchar,
como gritar, que te acuerdes que tienes derechos y que tienes dignidad sobre todo lo
cual había estado pues completamente apachurrado en los cinco años anteriores desde
el 2001 hasta el 2006 pues ‘¿eres inmigrante sin papeles? escóndete porque ya está el
Patriot Act y eres terrorista y etcétera, etcétera.’ y allí están los Minute Men y están
armados en la frontera y se había reprimido pues esa conciencia de la población y esa
conciencia revive y sale en las marchas del 2006. (J34)

The immigrant rights movement has in many ways reinvigorated the labor movement
within the country, and Chicago was no exception. Prior to the immigrant rights mobilizations
of 2006, the 2003 Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides (IWFR), served to as a milestone in the
improvement of relationships between labor and the immigrant community of the U.S. The
IWFR were a nationwide coordinated effort were 18 buses carrying 800 immigrants departed
from 10 cities, stopping at over 100 communities in 42 state, with coordinated rallies, press
conferences, and meetings with political leaderships, converging in Washington DC and New
York City (Greenhouse, 2003). The IWFR were organized by UNITE HERE and SEIU with the
sponsorship of the AFL-CIO, among the key demands included were: “providing legal status to
immigrant workers; reviving labor regulations to guarantee the right to fair treatment on the
job; and ensuring strict enforcement of immigrants’ civil liberties and civil rights” (Apostolidis,
2010). Shaw (2011) contends that the IWFR played a critical role in “reenergizing and broadening America’s immigrant rights movement setting the stage for the mass marches of 2006” (p.90). In support of this point Bloemraad, Voss, and Lee (2011) point out that two-thirds of the cities where the immigrant rights freedom rides stopped, had immigrant rights manifestations in 2006. Shaw (2011) goes on to say that, “a critical aim of the IWFR was to boost working relationships between labor unions and the many community, civil rights, religious, student and immigrant rights groups that collectively comprised the nation’s immigrant rights movement” (p. 90). One of the organizers interviewed, was part of the coordinating body:

I worked on the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride. I was national staff. I had the route from LA to New York. Two of the buses went kind of North and others went down through Phoenix and all that and I had that 12 cities. Although the beginning and end cities did not need me as much because they have bigger committees so I was there for a little bit but especially the 10 cities in between I spent a lot of time driving up and down and flying back and forth to those places helping the committee's get ready. Our buses were stopped in Sierra Blanca a little east of El Paso. They were the only buses stopped in the nation. We had people come across from all over the nation and converge in DC and then in New York but in Sierra Blanca the buses were stopped.

After the IWRF he continues to work as a consultant with various unions and a IFWJ, before ultimately becoming the director of the Chicago Workers Collaborative in 2008 where he drives the organization in a new direction taking on the growth of the temp industry in Chicago. In many ways, his experience mirrors the developing alliance between unions and the immigrant rights movement as it continues down a path of shared struggle and the new role of worker centers as the share space of engagement for vulnerable workers in an ever-changing economic landscape. The third wave of the worker center development in Chicago begins the
story of the impetus of the immigrant rights movement into the development of the present-day worker center movement in Chicago.

Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project, emerged as a direct result of the mobilization efforts in the southeast corner of Chicago. The following historical telling of its development is recounted by the researcher with the collaboration with input from the other two co-founders that participated in this study. The southeast corner of the city has been a community that was left reeling from the direct effects of deindustrialization when the region lost its economic engine after the closure of the four steel mills beginning in 1980, which served as a hub for immigrant migration since the start of the steel industry (Sellers, 2006). Given its place as a historic entry point for immigrants given the ease of access to work in the steel industry and its remaining multigenerational Mexican population, the community responded in force to the immigrant rights mobilizations that developed in response to the HR 4437 Sensenbrenner bill in late 2005, a bill that sought to criminalize anyone assisting undocumented immigrants which passed the House of Representatives.

From the southeast corner of Chicago, the mobilization was led by community residents, who sought to turn out the community for the March 10th rally. The residents mobilized 62 school buses funded completely by a grassroots fundraising campaign with local small business owners. The mobilization efforts continued for the subsequent mobilizations of May 1st 2006 and 2007. Efforts also included mobilizing community resident to lobby for immigration reform in Washington DC and driver’s licenses for the undocumented in the state capital, as well as
conducting know-you-rights workshops and citizenship registration workshops for the immigrant community of southeast Chicago.

In 2008, community leaders involved in the mobilization efforts sought to continue to organize within the immigrant community and formed Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project. The organization developed largely in response to the identified need of workplace rights, after the workplace campaigns of Jay’s Potato Chip Company when immigrant workers were not receiving the proper representation by their labor union, as they were being attempted to be laid off with the utilization of No-Match letters\(^4\). This initial campaign was an attempt to restructuring by Jay’s to lay off permanent workers and replace them with temporary workers, prior to ultimately declaring bankruptcy and culminating with the acquisition of Jay’s by Synder’s-Lance Inc. and subsequently transferring production to Jeffersonville, Indiana. The campaign and organization received support from a historic Catholic Church under the leadership of its pastor, Father Carl Quebedeaux who also saw the need of supporting immigrant workers. Coming from this shared experience, the leaders and workers developed a worker center with a mission to develop a community-oriented organization to protect and empower immigrant workers given their experiences of the failures of union representation and understanding of the limitations of state and federal regulatory agencies.

\(^4\) Letters sent by the Social Security Administration to employers as they attempt to reconcile social security numbers with names in order to ensure benefits are correctly assigned; many employers/employees mistakenly understood them to be verification of employment.
In 2009, Chicago Community and Worker’s Rights formed after splintering from the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative, as the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative sought to focus on the temporary industry, while the Chicago Community and Worker’s Rights wanted to maintain a broader community-oriented perspective that tied worker rights with immigrant rights. The following organizer, recounts the initiation of the organization and its continued vision:

We began to offer the following [training] and from there we continued until for certain circumstances we left the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative. It’s like everything, if you don’t like something well you are better off leaving. So they had their vision and we had another. [The three of us] with another vision, so we agreed the three of us, and so I remember that one time I told [him], “If someday you want to start an organization count on me.” He never told me, but I saw there were problems. So I said the day that you decide we can start an organization. And so [the three of us] decided that, why not start an organization and we spoke to the volunteers, we asked them, who would like to stay with Chicago Workers’ Collaborative and who would like to come with us, and so they all came with us… it was 15 or 16. And so that is how we began to develop Chicago Community and Worker’s Rights.

And so here we are after 7 years, after last year we began to receive the recognition for the success of… there has been a lot of recognitions with little resources. Now there begin to be more resources there are 5 staff, after a lot of struggle without anything. So then I think that it is a great satisfaction and that this organization has done a lot, because we have held onto that compact and we have utilized democracy.

Our vision is to help the community, allowing the community to come and offer them a service. Not just give them a service but also to re-educate them. Because if we are able to re-educate them, they will support us in the companies [they work for].

Empezamos a dar el siguiente [entrenamiento] y de allí seguimos hasta que bueno ya por ciertas circunstancias salimos de la Chicago Workers’ Collaborative. Pues es como todo, si no te gusta algo pues mejor te vas. Entonces ellos con una visión nosotros con otra. [Los tres] pues con otra visión que entonces nos pusimos de acuerdo los tres. Y yo recuerdo que una vez le dije a [el] “mira si tú quieres hacer una organización cuenta conmigo.” Porque nunca me dijo, pero yo vi que había problemas. “Entonces el día que tú quieras sí hacemos una organización o lo que tú quieras.” Y ya si estaba con [los dos] y yo y decidimos que, porque no hacíamos una organización y con los voluntarios.
Hablamos con ellos, quién se quedaba en la Chicago Workers’ Collaborative y quién se venía con nosotros y pues todos se vinieron con nosotros. Eran como 15 o 16 y fue como empezamos a proyectar hacer la organización de Chicago Community and Worker’s Rights.

Y mira allí estamos después de 7 años, del año pasado se empezaron a dar los logros de... hay mucho reconocimiento con poco recurso. Hoy empieza a ver recurso te decía ahora hay 5 del staff verdad después de una gran lucha sin nada. Entonces yo creo que es una gran satisfacción y que esta organización ha hecho mucho, pero por qué, porque habido esa compactividad y se ha manejado la democracia.

Nuestra visión es ayudar a la comunidad, que la comunidad venga y darle un servicio. Pero no nomás darle un servicio si no reeducarlo, porque si nosotros lo reeducamos él nos va servir en las compañías.

In 2009, Warehouse Workers for Justice began its operation after a progressive labor union, United Electrical Workers sought to emulate the worker center model in order to attempt to organizer warehouse workers in Chicago’s warehouse and distribution center. The organizer speaks to its development in the following way:

But in any rate, we had sort of because we had been doing organizing jointly with worker centers, we’d build up a certain level of trust. The mega marches that happened during that, you know 2006, 2007, and that was really the time where Centro de Trabajadores Unidos was coming together there was sort of a growth of workers center movements in some ways, there was some new folks on the scene. We had done a project to organize around No-Match letters, so 2007 there was going to be a new wave of No-Match letters going out and we thought that a lot of workers would be fired. There had just been this strike at the soap factory on the south side, where people had struck over No-Match letters and we said well, what if we did that all over the city. Well the only people crazy enough to look at that with us were worker centers, you know who actually were like okay, yeah maybe we can actually do some interesting things like this, you know, so let’s train a bunch of workers on their rights on No-Match letters, let’s look for those opportunities to where instead of just being fired one by one, workers would all used their own power together, to force an employer to not fire them, because you know, with No-Match letters and immigration enforcement generally, it is to the employers benefit to get rid of people one by one, to get rid of the vocal workers first, the workers who are standing up for their basic human rights, but if everybody
walks out together, or threatens to walk out together then the employer can't get its orders out, you know the employer loses large customers, right and teaching workers that they actually have leverage, even though it seems like they don't. And so we did a whole big project which we did some crazy strikes, we did one out in Aurora and we did a lot of education but we worked closely with the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative with Centro de Trabajadores Unidos, somewhat is ARISE, I don’t think it was ARISE then, but whoever they were. At any rate and so when the Republic Windows occupation for example happened, like to strategize I would call worker center organizers because you have... because they were thinking outside of the box and they were understanding that, maybe they did not understand all the ins and outs in that particular fight but they were people that I could bounce ideas off of, right.

So it was a natural next step to look at worker centers as a piece of building real strategic power within what we called the logistics sector, so goods movement, distribution, warehousing sector, so we had been looking at this for a while because Chicago is the distribution hub of North America. These are workers that if they don’t show up to work for one day can cost the biggest corporations in the world millions of dollars, because these are the workers that distribute goods for all the major retailers and manufacturers. Yet that are mostly temps, a lot of immigrant workers, a lot of African American workers, very difficult to organize but we saw it as a place where workers could use their economic power despite the fact that they were temps making minimum wage or less, but the only way we were going to try to organize this group was through partially through a worker center model. So we went to our worker center allies and said, ‘what would you think if we started a worker center that was to organize this big warehouse hub most of which is out in the southwest suburbs. Would you see it as competition or would you see it as a good idea, if you do see it as a good idea would you help us use your experiences to help us set it up.’ And people were like yeah, you know we did it in a way where we would not be viewed as stepping on anybody's turf. So we did not do it in Little Village, we did not do it, it was not particular to Latino immigrant workers for example, because that is a space where some worker centers already exist and we did not want to be competing with them. We wanted to be doing something new that would add to the worker center movement, not create a new conflict. So we started that when launched in 2009, it was an effort to find a new way of organizing workers who are not going to be organized through traditional means.
In 2009 Just Pay for All was formed as a collaborative effort that built on the work of the Working Hands Legal Clinic. The following bio developed in recognition of the work of Just Pay for All outlines their development and success:

The Just Pay for All Coalition was created in 2009 to take on the growing epidemic of “wage theft”—the failure to pay workers their earned wages, or paying substantially reduced wages. This vast problem targets low-skill, language-challenged and other vulnerable workers and ultimately costs them $7.3 million in wages each week, as estimated by the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Wage theft perpetuates poverty by interrupting the economic stability of families and neighborhoods. To fight back, several organizations formed the Just Pay for All Coalition, including Latino Union, the Chicago Workers Collaborative, Centro de Trabajadores Unidos, Immigrant Workers Project, and Working Hands Legal Clinic.

Under the unified banner, Just Pay for All organized to amend the Illinois Wage Payment and Collections Act (IWPCA). With its collective decades of organizing experience, the group knew that policy change could only occur as a product of dedicated and multifaceted outreach. They undertook community-based, culturally relevant education and outreach activities, hosting trainings and partnering with like-minded organizations.

As a result of the organizing efforts, in 2010 the State Legislature passed five sweeping amendments to the IWPCA that dramatically increased penalties to deter wage theft and created an administrative small claims process to allow victims to prosecute their own claims efficiently. Just Pay also played a key role in the passage of a new wage theft ordinance for Chicago in 2013, one of the first municipal ordinances of its kind in the nation. For two years after passage of the amendments, Just Pay collaborated with the Illinois Department of Labor (IDOL) to ensure vigorous implementation and enforcement of the hard-won laws.

This combined victory of policy change, enforcement, and community organizing has made a dramatic impact. IDOL reported that $6.2 million dollars were successfully recovered in 2012, including $2.8 million recovered through IWPCA—representing a 50 percent increase in total wages recovered since 2011.

In 2009, Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) United entered Chicago to establish a local office. ROC-Chicago forms part of a national organization that developed worker centers
throughout the country currently in 10 cities after its successful origins in New York City when it began in 2001 and launched the national ROC-United model in 2008. Information from its website describes its history and work in the following way:

ROC-Chicago is a member led local restaurant workers’ organization founded in 2009 that has 700 (and counting!) restaurant worker members. We build power and voice for restaurant workers in three major ways:

Workplace Justice Campaigns – We support restaurant workers in the Chicago area who face injustice in their restaurant workplace.

Promoting the High Road to Profitability – We partner with responsible restaurant owners in the Chicago area to promote best management practices. We also partner with them to offer our restaurant worker members with FREE restaurant training and job placement services, to help restaurant workers advance to livable wage jobs in the industry. We offer the following classes (call us for the schedule): Introduction to Customer Service, Advanced Bartending, Advanced Fine Dining Service, English for Restaurant workers

Research & Policy work- We have conducted the most comprehensive research available on the local Chicago area restaurant industry. Our members were trained to conduct more than 588 surveys of their fellow workers. We also conducted more than 30 employer interviews. We published all of this information on our local policy report, Behind the Kitchen Door: The Hidden Costs of Low Road Jobs in Chicagoland’s Thriving Restaurant Industry.

Through this report, our members discovered that two priority issues for restaurant workers in the Chicago area is the need to both pass paid sick days and increase the statewide minimum wage.

Other services for members: Becoming a member of ROC-Chicago has its privileges, including: Free training classes, Free industry Workshops, Worker’s rights and organizing training. Other opportunities to get involved: Arts and Culture Committee, Women’s Committee, Training and Career Development Committee, Policy Committee. (Staff & Locals Chicago, n.d.)
Worker Center for Racial Justice was formed in 2012 with a vision to develop a worker center model to address the needs of the black community in Chicago. The development and vision for the organization is described in the following excerpt:

There wasn't like... there a void that needed to be filled here in Chicago and just nationally as it related to black workers so like the worker center movement had got huge at that time. But again when I started this organization there were only three black worker centers out there. Again Mississippi, North Carolina and then my girl Lola had started the LA black worker center and so we were just the fourth one out the gate. We knew we had to have a different type of model, we couldn't kind of have the same model as traditional immigrant worker center simply because the job crisis facing the black community you had this multi-dimensional component to it that we had to address. So we knew we couldn't just focus in on one kind of workplace safety issues facing black workers and we couldn't just focus on wages, we had to focus on kind of everything. We had focused on access to jobs because a lot of black folks you know are unemployed and the focus on you know access to higher paying jobs because you know a third of all black workers are in low-wage job sectors. So we have to approach it a little bit differently than the way other worker centers have approached their work.

So when I actually started the work center the leaders that I've developed over those few months before I left [Organization] and started this, those leaders I developed we were they were all black temp workers and San Lucas had folded at the time and so what I wanted to do was kind of pick up the mantle that San Lucas had had when it comes to addressing discrimination is black workers in a temp industry. And so that's kind of how I thought we would get started we would you know work on the client companies and the temp agencies to get them to stop discriminating against black workers well as we started organizing further I found out that a lot of folks like I can't even get access to a job I don’t even get discriminated because of my criminal record and so that's how we got into the whole Ban the Box issue because a lot of the brothers and sisters we talked to said this criminal record is what is keeping me back. And so that kind of led to that part of the work that we do now which is a huge part of our work around criminalization and stuff like. But yeah, on top of the fact that the workers who we've been working with and identified have said the criminal a criminal background was a big barrier to him getting employment. There was also the Chicago Worker's Collaborative out there. They were also doing work around discrimination of black workers in the temp industry. And we were just like OK there's another organization that's already doing this work, doing it well. You know let's just kind of figure out what
our niche is going to be. And so that's how we got into the Ban the Box work. And looking at other ways that black workers are kind of excluded from the job market or stuck in kind of marginalized or low-wage job sectors. So it's been. It's been slow trying. It's been a slow road in trying to figure out kind of what our real niche is because we focused in on discrimination against black workers in the temp industry we focused in on discrimination against people with criminal records. We focused in on you know access to child care for black workers, black women specifically who need quality affordable child care in order to be able to get a job. And we focused on wage theft for black workers and health and safety. So I think in my mind moving forward I really want us to kind of zero in on not necessarily one particular industry so to speak, but one area of work as it relates to marginalized black workers and kind of stay there. I think we're always going to do the dual stuff around like criminalization and how that is a barrier to employment for black workers. But I really want us to find one area that really is just focusing on what's happening with worker kind of on the job or trying to get a job. And I think we found that now, the work that [Organizer] is doing around these factories discriminating against black workers on the West Side of Chicago, specifically those ones getting tax subsidies. So really trying to push on them to do two things, one is to stop discriminating against black workers and hire them but also to do direct hires and stop hiring through the temp industries so that that's another. I mean obviously that's a huge fight due to the fact that the temp sectors are fastest growing sector in the country. Shit everyone's a temp worker nowadays.

In 2014, Raise the Floor Alliance was established as a coalition that integrated all the worker center organizations in Chicago. The following respondent lays out the development and vision of Raise the Floor:

I always say Raise the Floor is like the third iteration of worker organizing, worker center organizing. So back in 2007 [Organizer] and a few others they founded the Working Hands Legal Clinic and that had sort of always had... That was sort of founded on this idea that, legal strategy can support community organizing and that you know... Especially for workers who are coming into a worker center for a particular problem. You know organizers job is to talk, is to relate what they think is an isolated incident to a much larger trend, right. And say that you know ‘actually what you're experiencing, the fact that your wages have been stolen is not just because the boss has an issue with you. It's actually part of the business model and its part of a much broader economy where people in power think that they can abuse our communities because we're seen as disposable and the only way to fight back is by building relationships with your co-
workers and organizing’ right. You know and so there was this idea right that the legal strategy can support that, can provide real immediate support to a worker for immediate legal representation. But then can contribute to the sustainability because while that workers getting that immediate relief, they are also in relationship with the worker center and again building a long-term relationship with the organizers and hopefully being part of a leadership development experience and committing to the long haul work of organizing. And then that sort of, that you know, that was organizing with two worker centers Latino Union, the Chicago Workers Collaborative and then 2009-2010 is when Centro de Trabajadores Unidos you came into the mix and the worker centers and Working Hands Legal Clinic ran the Just Pay for All Coalition campaign to win one of the strongest anti-wage theft laws in the country, the seven amendments to the Illinois Wage Payment and Collections Act and it was sort of like you know only three worker centers and a legal clinic can come together, just these small community organizations can pass the strongest anti-wage theft law in the country. There's a real organizing opportunity here. Imagine what could happen if all eight of us were in community with one another and in a deep collaborative effort, which is how Raise the Floor was born was seeing all these amazing victories from the Just Pay for All Coalition and folks sort of were like let's open up to all eight worker centers and let's talk about what, you know what are the shared issue campaigns that all low-wage workers are experiencing whether they're a domestic worker or they're in temp staffing or they're in restaurant industry. There are some issues that all low-wage workers experience whether that be wage theft, or discrimination, or retaliation for organizing on the job, or some of these industries are just the most unsafe and unhealthy industries because they're so under-regulated. And so Raise the Floor was sort of meant to be on the one hand a space for collective action and a space for those shared issue campaigns to really scale up. But then also, what I think is really interesting and what I see is the potential for larger, the worker center movement is this idea that union density is really low in the private sector and the labor movement especially, now with this recent presidential election, it's really scary that the labor movement feels like it's shrinking and I think so much of the revitalization of the labor movement is going to fall on worker centers because worker centers they're operating in industries and in communities where employer... where sort of, employers are coming up with new schemes on the backs of their communities, right. They are in the leading edge of the changing nature of work towards contingency towards uncertainty and precariousness, right. Those words that we love to use. And so in order for the labor movement to bolster itself to continue to grow, worker centers it's going to fall on them to try and find new organizing models new ways of doing things that are innovative and bold. And in order to be able to test those new models they need organizational slack. They need
to be able to focus on things other than fundraising and keeping the doors open. And they also need core campaign components that any good campaign needs, right. You need a communications shop that can come up with a narrative that is compelling for every community that should be, you know, that is a stakeholder in our fight. And you need a communications narrative that really centers workers as the experts of their own lives and elevates their voices as leading the solutions, right. You need a research shop to be able to collect the data behind the campaigns we know, behind the issues we experience every day. And we need solid data to be able to go to decision makers and say “look these are the real trends that we know are happening on the ground. Here’s the data to back it up and this is why we need change.” You need the legal services, because they have the technical expertise to look at the law and analyze where are the gaps and where are the loopholes and how can we close those. And then you need a shared policy shop to be able to collectively advocate and to be able to monitor what's happening, you know, in city hall or in Springfield. To be sort of the ears on the ground and again to build relationships with legislators and so they know that this is who worker centers are, these are who these workers are, and you need to be in deep community with them. You need to be willing to take on their campaigns. And so that is the other sort of core function of Raise the Floor it is the capacity piece. It’s about building up worker centers, strengthening them. So that they can grow and they can be sustained. So we sort of see it as a new model and it's unlike anything else in the country. So there's a lot of pressure on us too to get it right because we are testing something new here. And you know so far we've seen that it's been incredibly effective and we've been able to move beyond... You know we've been able to capture the interest of beyond just local supporters. You know a lot of national groups are interested in what's happening in Chicago. A lot of other worker center collaboratives and partnerships that are in San Francisco or Seattle or L.A. or whatever, they're all watching Raise the Floor and they're sort of saying like if it can be done in Chicago, it can really be done anywhere. So it's really exciting too.

During the course of the study, there was a splintering of one group leading to the creation the Domestic Worker and Day Labor Center of Chicago. A post shared in November 22nd, 2016 describes the organization in the following way:

There is a new group forming called the Domestic Worker and Day Labor Worker Center of Chicago, the founding board members are all Day laborers and domestic workers. We have more than 40 amazing, fearless and active day laborers and domestic workers and family as founding members, the members will be growing every week as we formally
start our outreach. We have no permanent home, or funding. We have been meeting in borrowed spaces for now. We have huge plans and are currently working on several labor and immigration cases and are a part of several local coalitions that range from stopping deportations to developing worker owned cooperatives in order to build economic development in our neighborhoods.

Our mission: To collaborate with day laborers and domestic workers in a collective manner in order to develop the tools necessary to improve social, economic and labor conditions.

D. The Worker Center Movement as a Response to Local Realities and Global Forces

The creation of each worker center and their integration as an emerging movement within Chicago is a response not only to the needs of vulnerable workers dealing with local realities but also being impacted by the conditions created by structural forces. Sassen’s (1998) conceptualization of the global city as a site of analysis to understand the elements of exploitability and challenges for “low- or medium-skilled workers” in Chicago serves as a framework for understanding the emergence of the worker center movement. The following description reflects the realities of Chicago.

A multiplicity of formerly important manufacturing centers and port cities have lost function and are in decline, not only in the less developed countries but also in the most advanced economies. This is yet another meaning of economic globalization. But also inside global cities we see a new geography of centrality and marginality. The downtowns of global cities and metropolitan business centers receive massive investments in real estate and telecommunications while low-income city areas starved for resources. Highly educated workers employed in leading sectors see their incomes rise to unusually high levels while low- or medium-skilled workers in those same sectors see theirs sink. Financial services produce super-profits while industrial services barely survive. (p. XXVI-XXVII)

The worker centers enter a space of support with this group of low- and medium-skilled workers within the context of Chicago as a post-industry city. This may be best exemplified by
Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project a worker center created two decades after the region was ravaged by deindustrialization to support low- and medium-skill workers. However, as this research will show, the worker center is more than a reactionary service center for those workers left out of the benefits of the globalization in their lives. Even though services and social support are an element of the worker center model, the findings of this study confirm the active role of challenge and contestation of not only the employer, but also the state. Worker centers not only advocate for reforms in legislation and improvements in state regulatory agencies, but they also identify contradictions within the foundational ideologies of our global society, as viewed through the lens of Chicago’s socio-political and economic landscape. Once again Sassen (1998) contextualizes this position within her construct of the global city:

Globalization is a process that generates contradictory spaces, characterized by contestation, internal differentiation, continuous border crossings. The global city is emblematic of this condition. Global cities concentrate a disproportionate share of global corporate power and are one of the key sites for its valorization. But they also concentrate a disproportionate share of disadvantage and are one of the key sites for their devalorization. This joint presence happens in a context where globalization of the economy has grown sharply and cities have become increasingly strategic for global capital; and marginalized people have found their voice and are making claims on the city. This joint presence is further brought into focus by the increasing disparities between the two. The center now concentrates immense economic and political power, power that rests on the capability for global control and the capability to produce superprofits. And actors with little economic and traditional political power have become an increasingly strong presence through the new politics of culture and identity, and an emergent transnational politics embedded in the new geography of economic globalization. Both actors, increasingly transnational and in contestation, find in the city the strategic terrain for their operations. But it is hardly the terrain of a balanced playing field. (p. XXXIV)
Worker centers develop in response to the effects of structural oppression experienced as part of a social order that is shaped by prevailing neo-liberal economic forces. Worker centers are therefore developed to prop up vulnerable workers by supporting vulnerable services sector laborers such as domestic workers and day laborers who are left out of labor laws and receive limited state protections, a population organized by ARISE, Latino Union, and Domestic Worker and Day Labor Center of Chicago. They organize low-wage work in Chicago’s manufacturing and distribution hub that has increasingly become fallen into the arrangement of precarious employment that is temp work as organized by Warehouse Workers for Justice, the Chicago Worker Collaborative. They organize low-wage work in low- and medium- skilled employs of service and manufacturing sectors, sectors that often facing extreme pressures on maintaining profitability often leading to exploitation of workers, as organized by ARISE, Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project, Chicago Community and Worker’s Rights, Restaurant Opportunities Center of Chicago. They have also sought to organize those who have been deemed as unemployable and excluded from the labor force relegated to find work in the informal or illicit economy or forced to compete at the sites of work where undocumented workers rely for sustenance, temporary staffing agencies, as organized by Chicago Community and Worker’s Rights, Worker Center for Racial Justice, and the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative.

The worker centers as their connection to the lives of the workers and their accompaniment in their struggles allows them a vantage point that permits their understanding of their evolving nature of the labor market. Worker center organizers are uniquely situated to be the early observers of trends in the labor market, management, and employment evolves.
The following excerpt highlights an example of an organizer witnessing the changing nature of the economy in real-time and the need for the worker center to adapt:

A lot of these factories closed down, moved out of state, they moved far away, way out to the suburbs to break the union. Or if the workers would go on strike they would bring in temp workers to take over. And then the other thing that happened that was really big, was that in 2002 which was after 9/11, No-Match Letters started to rain out of the sky.

So in 2002 almost all the factories turned over from direct hire to temp. Okay, like in a matter of months. It was just like this amazing change in the whole workforce. You know where you will see it, you would see it on Univision when we would do a protest in front of a company that fired workers and then here would come like the [temp agency] vans roll in. Like the workers walking out and the [temp agency] vans are bringing in the new workers. It would be right there on TV. And we decided that no we are going to start focusing on the temp workers and organizing against the temp industry because that was undercutting every single campaign that we had. But what happened was that in 2002 after all the No Match letters hit, the temp industry they decided that they would promote themselves as taking over the entire production with their workforce. So they became a permanent staffing service that became the employer for the workers at the factory. And they would take and so what they gradually did was they ended up taking over the entire facility, right. Especially the parts that were low-skill, they just took it over and it just became staffing, not day laborer, it became staffing. So we started back in 2003 we started the campaign to exposed to abuses and there were some horrible abuses I mean really bad stuff.

The following chapter will explore the role of the worker centers in assessing and understanding the forms of oppression present in the lives of the vulnerable workforce they encounter as understood by the worker center organizer.
VI. FINDINGS II: UNDERSTANDING PERSONAL, CULTURAL, AND STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION IN THE LIVES OF VULNERABLE WORKERS

The history in the previous chapter outlines the formation of worker centers, and their creation in response to the needs of vulnerable low-wage workers reeling from the structural violence inflicted within an evolving economic landscape in Chicago. The organic development of each of the organizations within this study, speaks to the necessity of worker centers in addressing not only the workplace experience but also the social needs of exploitable labor. Without exception, every participant in this study spoke of their perception of oppression in the lives of the workers they organize. This chapter will utilize the voice of the worker center organizers to articulate the understanding of oppression and exploitability in the lives of vulnerable workers.

In assessing oppression, particular attention is paid to the understanding of, and interrelation between personal, cultural, and structural-levels of oppression. Beyond being a social experience that requires identification and attention to alleviating oppression, Mullaly (2007) contends that in fact oppression serves a societal function: “Oppression exists and persists because of the number of positive functions it carries out for the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups” (p. 285). Structural Social Work contends that workplace exploitation is a dynamic better understood through an exploration of dominant-subordinate relationships.

The Thompson's PCS Model (1997) (see Figure 3) serves as an analytical model for understanding the interaction of oppression at the personal, cultural and structural levels of
society. The interrelation of these areas in the lives of the vulnerable workers was a key component of the research questions and directed in the development of the interview questions. The interview guide was designed with a series of questions aimed at capturing the perspectives of the worker center organizers of their understanding at each of the three levels. The analysis followed Mullaly’s (2007) differentiation between personal, cultural, and structural oppression:

Oppression at the personal level comprises those thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours that depict a negative pre-judgement of a particular subordinate group. It is usually based on stereotypes and may be overt or covert. Oppression at the cultural level consists of those values, norms, and shared patterns of thinking and acting, along with an assumed consensus about what is right and normal, that taken together, endorse the belief in a superior culture. It acts as a vehicle for transmitting and presenting the dominant culture (i.e., the culture of the dominant group) as the norm, the message being that everyone should conform to it. Oppression at the structural level refers to the means by which oppression is institutionalized in society. It consists of the way that social institutions, laws, policies, and social processes and practices all work together primarily in favour of the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups. At this level oppression is given its formal legitimation. (p. 262)

The findings demonstrate a heightened level of awareness and participants did not have a problem identifying examples of each level of oppression and the interrelation among them as formulated by the PCS Model. As one participant succinctly put it, “trabajador pobre, casa barata y pobre, barrio pobre, por lo tanto, trasnportación pobre, por lo tanto, educación pobre, sí y es un círculo que nunca termina y esta designado así. (Poor worker, poor, cheap house, poor neighborhood, thus, poor transportation, thus, poor education, so it is an endless circle that never ends and it is designed that way)” (J34). The two most cited experiences of oppression as identified by 14 of the 18 organizers in the lives of the workers were poverty and
the interrelation of social issues present in the lives of vulnerable workers. The following respondents describe the link between poverty and the workers position of vulnerability:

Yeah those that are vulnerable to exploitation. What makes you vulnerable to exploitation, like a need to survive. Yeah poverty. Poverty is a definite incentive to vulnerability, so yeah I think that makes a lot of sense, a vulnerable workforce. (J71)

There's a connection there, it's because our communities have historically been pushed out of traditional work and we have to pay our bills. We have to feed our families and so the way we do that is by entering into alternative economies that are deeply exploitative. (J95)

The vast swath of issues present in the lives of the workers that organizers engage with vary to a great degree. Note the varying issue areas identified by the following organizers:

So it is like the school system, right. Let's talk about it and how your children don't have enough laptops and you know they're behind in school because, you know there are not enough resources. So it's just the oppression that your family is going through within the education system. You know even some of the children, older children who say, now they want to go to college and then you also throw in there their immigration status on top of that you know. So yeah we cannot separate, which I don't think in any kind of organizing, we cannot separate all these systems from what you do because they... people come in with them, you know. That’s what I was saying like these people are not just workers, they're human beings but they are also mothers, they are also immigrants they are also... some of them may be part of the LGBTQ community. So there's all these... there's other things, right. So once you start peeling off the layers and they come in as a worker, you know whose wages were stolen and then you help them with that and then you start pulling off the other things. You know, they're also an immigrant and they have these issues. Oh and also ‘my daughter who's undocumented and wants to go to school and can't’ and you start peeling off all these layers. You know it's complex. And that's when we go back to this fine line of even just defining what your organization is going to focus on right and we cannot take care of everything as much as we want. So it is like you know. I think what we for example [our organization] decides to focus on these two industries and we do some immigration work and we can hook you up with other services and things. But it is like, you know... mental health, that's a huge other one that we've been talking about and we're doing actually a health surveys to see where people are at and our organizer is bringing up a lot of substance abuse. So
our day laborer organizer brings up that a lot. He’s like we cannot organize when there is substance abuse at the places where I'm going to. (J36)

She just starts opening up about like every issue you can imagine. Domestic violence from her husband, harassment in the workplace. They got robbed which is kind of surprising where she was working and like these gang bangers at gunpoint had them and were stealing from them. This was not so long ago actually and I forgot what other stuff... I think she got injured in the workplace. (J91)

Chicago has grown and is different in a lot of ways, but lack of access on one hand. So I know a worker who has cancer and obviously can't get Obamacare because he is undocumented and we worked really hard to figure out what to do with him and how to get him what he needed. Before Obamacare even existed, it was more of a question of language access and like if he was trying to get special treatment, could he find the clinic to go to... all of that sort of stuff. So I think one area of that, is access to services. Another is, and super prevalent one, is contact with the criminal justice system.

Whether that is the DUI and in Chicago DUI checkpoints are almost all in black and brown neighborhoods. Whether that is the ways that individual crises mix with poverty to create criminalized communities. You know, like I grew up in an alcoholic household and I also grew up in the suburbs, so you did not see police on a regular basis. So the ways individual crises and class intersect often leads to calls to the police because there is a fight or DUs or drinking in public, all of that sort of stuff. Not to mention the direct attack on the workers and the direct racialized policing and that sort of stuff that you know... you are on your way home and a cop forces you up against a wall just for no reason. You know with day laborers a lot of them were living in homeless shelters and a lot of those shelters were getting closed down too. So similar access to service stuff but even more directly. (J45)

Particular importance to the respondents in the study was an understanding of oppression as related to the interrelation of race and class, 11 organizers (61%) highlighted this connection. The organizers described both the awareness of race and class as elements of cultural and personal oppression with acute awareness of the structural elements present in relation to labor organizing, as the following two excerpts highlight:

To add this element of a chaotic and contingent workforce that some traditional unions and maybe other traditional social services neither could quite do completely, and I am
not sure any worker center can do it but I think it is an attempt to improve by sector organizing or geographic organizing. Mixing in the realities of you selling your labor every day with these other social forces, that make you sell your labor and make you go to work very suspicious of anyone who does not look like you. Even though they are poor like you are and need work, you are not really wanting to join because you have not had an experience where when your ethnic group works with another ethnic group, you and your family is better off. (J85)

I think that worker centers have always had a very strong class analysis and a race analysis because the nature of the organizing is there in black and brown communities primarily. I think that what [our organization] is trying to push now is like, let's have those analyses intersect. We can't have a class analysis that separate from a racial justice analysis and vice versa like we cannot. And if we don't, then we won't be able to scale up our work and not be able to make massive impact. We have to talk about those two things together. And so, I think worker centers are really well positioned to have that conversation as well, by the nature of their analysis of the economy and the nature of who they organize. I think that they're really well positioned to say actually, this is the way forward are campaigns, that like I said, center on the working class people of color, immigrant folks and so. I think that's something we're trying to grow into. (J95)

Not lost in the conversation is the additional cultural element of gender, specifically on the role of gender discrimination within the low-wage sector.

I think one place where it is actually a really good example is with the domestic worker movement. Because there is just this strong affirmation of the role of women as powerful, as heads of household, as the people who do the work that makes all other work possible, and they do not get their due and they are harassed and they face this and they face that. So there is this real rescuing of the value of women and women’s work and then putting that in contrast to the way society undervalues it and then saying that that contradictions is why we need to organize. So I think that is actually a really good example of where that discussion around it [oppression] happens. (J45)

So I think [our organization] has been a space where we're trying to say like how do we talk about economic violence and how that, sort of, how do we sit at the intersections of economic violence and racial justice and gender justice and how about the people we see uniquely experienced those things at the center of those intersections. (J95)

Gender discrimination in temp staffing particularly in warehouses where women go ask for work at the temp agency, they are often sent to the manual labor jobs, the picking
and packing and men are sent to the forklift operator jobs which typically pay about two or three bucks an hour more, because it is viewed as woman’s works versus men’s work. (J39)

Oppression as a structural construct, outlined in Figure 2, is captured in the interviews through an understanding of the interplay of the various structural elements of society as solidified by laws and policies and their impact on the lives of vulnerable workers. This example captures organizers’ keen understanding of structural oppression by way of a very concrete example, the fact that domestic workers are left out of federal and state labor protections:

Well it is super oppressive, you know well like from whatever angle you look at it unfortunately, you know, the labor one is very clear. With our domestic workers they have no rights, which is completely insane. This is like something that is just mind blowing. Every time we tell even employers of people, they are like, ‘what?’ And it is like ‘I know.’ It just seems common sense... anyways so that is the labor, right. The immigration system is completely... Most of our folks are immigrants, so our commitment to immigration is also there just by default. It is what it is. You know them being victims of wage theft because there is retaliation because of their status. You know, so it’s like ‘o si reclamas o no me pagaste, o no me estas pagando, me debes $20 o me debes $1,000’ [if you complain or you didn’t pay me, or you are not paying me, you owe me $20 or you owe me $1,000]. It’s like ‘you are undocumented I can just call ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] right now and I’m just going to like you know.’ Or even call the cops and they could call la migra [immigration] and you know like and a lot of people, you know they... se hacen submisos [they become submissive]. And they are like ‘ok’. And then another abuse comes and another abuse comes, and you start being more quite, more quiet and you are like... So you start normalizing it. So a lot of workers and a lot of people start saying like I thought it was normal that I was getting paid three dollars an hour. I thought it was normal that I was verbally abused. Like that's normal. They just started normalizing this oppression. (J36)

A. **Personal and Cultural Oppression**

The dimensions of personal and cultural oppression generally follow the five forms of oppression as delineated by Young (1990) including exploitation, marginalization,
powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. It is necessary to cite specific examples of personal and cultural oppression in order to personalize the experience of the vulnerable workers as they are understood in this theoretical framework. This will provide a clearer picture as to how worker center organizers intervene as a space for activating resistance at each of the aforementioned levels of oppression. When examining oppression in the context of organizing it can be easy to overlook the profound psychological impact of oppression on individuals, in seeking to engage those same individuals to organize for social change. The following quotes allow us to understand the extreme levels of distress as manifested in workers as witnessed by the organizers:

We have had some workers who have gone through so much stress and they need help, they don't need to be agitated or to be organized, they need help, like they are mentally beat down. They are not thinking correctly; their mind is on something else. So it is trying to connect them to social service agencies but then the social service agency has a different model on how things are done. So it is a little difficult and I can't say that I have experience with that. But we have had workers that have come in and they have faced severe stress, like really hardcore abuse on the job and so it is trying to get them some self-care trying to get them rehabilitated before we proceed with an action or a legal proceeding or other things like that. (J99)

So Chicago is home to one of the highest murder rates in the nation right. There's no services for the trauma that exists for survivors of gun violence. I've actually watched a young brother go from like taking care of his family to like reverting to a lower self. That bar none, is walking around with a 45 every time I see him. You know getting in the car and he has his pistol with him. He is paranoid. I'm like, "what are they doing for you, what are the services." He's walking around with a colostomy bag. “Did the police come?” 'Nah.' So the paranoia that someone tried to kill you and no one cared. And no one's going to rectify this for you. And also he got shot eight times. He was left for dead. You know he lost so much blood. So to answer your question, those issues have to be addressed. That stuff has to be address. Those things are what are affecting our members the most... the questions like ‘am I going to live or die today?’ If we can't provide any assistance or knowledge on those issues than we can't really address the
whole of our membership base. So we often like... We have to work with our members around trauma and trauma support. (J71)

It's hard coming in and there is a lot of trauma. There's a lot of hardship, you know. And that's something that we talk a lot and [our organizer] talks a lot about too. But it's like understanding the trauma of immigrating. So there's a lot of... you can also see there's also substance abuse because of that. You know and to me it's always been like drugs are not bad, alcohol is not bad. But is the root of the problem. Why are you using these things to medicate yourself? And it's like... And then of course you know because of all the traumas of all that we already talked about, you know it's like you don't have a family, you don't have anybody. You just came here, like, it's hard, it's hard in general, you know. And then also you know it's hard work, its construction, landscaping. It's hard work, it's very physical, very demanding, all day. And then on top of that you go find some unscrupulous employers who doesn't pay you, who pay you less than what they said, leave you stranded without pay. (J36)

One organizer shares how impacts of psychological distress often impede efforts to organize workers, even those who may initially seem motivated to do so.

There is a social worker who got his PhD doing a case study of [our organization] and he was doing additional work with [our organization] and it was like so mind-blowing, you know the thing with organizing which is really hard, is like... We have the easier form of organizing. I am not knocking on doors and I'm not trying to agitate people on something they don't care about. They come to me agitated, right. Like it is great! But at the same time, there is a certain attrition rate, like people who I thought were... Somehow it is counterintuitive like, the people who I thought are super ‘I have a 110%’ are the ones who stop, don't come in, and I keep calling and calling and calling and "what is going on" and I send a letter. Anyway he did a study on people who experience wage theft, he has been doing two, one is the quantitative study, like how much is actually stolen and how does it affect... what can we be doing in our neighborhood, in our communities if we had this money? Because we are all paying for it in a different way. And now he is doing qualitative study. How did you deal? What did you cut first? Where did you seek additional support? Did you go to the church? Did you go to friends? How did you feel during that time? And he did a depression index. And we only have the preliminary results because it was only halfway done. It was like 85% of the people were clinically depressed, 60% of them were at least passively suicidal. I mean things were huge and I am like, I'm meeting these people in the moment and what I thought was “what am I doing wrong? I am not organizing correctly.” Was like obviously
depression! They are unable to get out of bed, they don't have any interest. I mean people say this all the time. I just stopped eating, I just been so stressed, I mean like classic line-for-line diagnosis of Major Depressive Disorder. (J19)

Given the complexity and breadth of a concept such as oppression, Young’s (1990) conceptualization provides the necessary framework to examine the experiences of the vulnerable workers. According to Young, exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness have a particular significance to the realm of employment. Exploitation takes various forms as reported by the respondents, however the majority of respondents (61%) mentioned wage theft as a persistent problem with the workers they organized. The experiences of wage theft varied from the egregious to the minimal. However, as organizers understand it the intention is always the same, the exploitation of the worker in order to increase profits. The following quotes highlight this fact:

It's kind of interesting, like I did not realize that in the last 6 months or in the last grant cycle of this one grant, we recovered the most in the year that we have in the years past I think we are at $279,000 and that's from small stuff, that's from small cases. (J91)

Most workers, they just look at what is on that card [employer issued debit card] and they stick it in the ATM or they go to Walmart with it and they buy stuff and they never know whether they are being robbed or not. And if they're being robbed it will be 1 hour here, one half hour there. But if I am a temp agency and I have 90,000 employees in the state of Illinois, one hour here and one hour there is millions of dollars a year. So the staffing agencies make their money that way and as the worker center push up from the bottom, they [the temp agency] find other ways to try to cheat. (J39)

Beyond the three elements of oppression that more immediately connect to the social relational space of labor, the two other elements of Young’s (1990) conceptual model of oppression, cultural imperialism and violence also surfaced in the interviews.
This is the first time that I was in a space where a bunch of the people who hire them [domestic workers], the employers. So they're all white. They really, some of them will say very hurtful comments and a lot of them are quote-unquote innocent comments in the sense that you don’t even understand who these women [the domestic workers] are, what they are. You don't see them at the same level you know. They are like ‘she is just the one who cleans my house’ or ‘oh no, I’m not going to leave her alone in my room like I'm just going to be there while she is cleaning’ or something or ‘oh I don't even know her name’ like simple things. Like that we were bringing up to them like, you know they're your employees but they are also human beings so let’s start with that. (J36)

I'll drive past construction sites that generally have all Latino workers. There's like the assumption that Latino workers will work harder than black folks, and I'm like that is something we will have to address right. But it's not like the racism that was in the hearts of those white folks [he witnessed] it wasn't there because they naturally had it right. It was actually true visually... being conditioned to feel that way by seeing black people getting bussed in to take a job. So we were in the wrong for trying to survive, and we didn't have the knowledge to know that we are literally displacing workers through this process. I didn't know that, I'm like shit $15 an hour, let's go. And I believe that some of the same tensions are present between black and Latino workers in Chicago. (J71)

As Young (1990) emphasized the theoretical understanding of violence includes not only the harm inflicted by acts of violence but also of the present fear that violence may occur.

Examples of both we present in the interviews, as highlighted by the following interviews:

And it was really scary for me to think of these women, walking into these people's homes by themselves. You know and they're on their own and you don't know what you're going to encounter. You know the kind of attitudes or dangers that you are going to be in, because you face a lot of physical verbal abuse sexual harassment. (J36)

This whole racism happening, like if you go to the suburbs and we had some cases where an African American male worker aside from being sexually harassed by the white employer, he is being discriminated too and so it particularly happens in suburbs, like there's a lot of racism. (J91)
B. **Structural Oppression**

Interviews with the organizers provided for space for an examination of the structural elements that directly impact the lives of the workers. The following structures listed in the order of mentions received within the interviews: labor regulatory (100%; governmental regulatory and enforcement agencies, labor unions, labor policy), immigration (72%; lack of immigration reform, threat of deportation), economic (67%; neo-liberal capitalism, the fissured workplace, temp staffing agencies, the informal economy), criminal justice (56%; incarceration, lack of rights for ex-offenders), housing (56%; lack of housing assistance, limited affordable housing options), political (38%; established political parties), educational (33%; school system), welfare (11%; social safety net programs), and healthcare (11%; access to healthcare). Many of these structural elements were not only understood through the interconnection of structural elements which tie together to create exploitability but also added to contentious relationships of workers often along racial lines.

Latino workers, immigrant undocumented workers, are the preferred group for many of these factory owners. They do not... and if you think about why right. It is not knowing regulations, it is not knowing laws, it is like a very obedient workforce that does not cause problems for the boss. People do what they are told right. And it because a fear of retaliation right, fear of deportation, a fear of, if you lose your job you do not have a safety net. You cannot file for unemployment right. So on the other end, native born people, if they lose if they are at a place for you know a certain amount of days then they can file for unemployment right. And then the unemployment insurance goes up for the temp agency right. And then you get the factory owners and just say I don’t want any black people I want Mexicans, you know. (J13)

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5 These percentages should not be viewed as representative of the actual occurrence of different experiences of structural oppression instead only as a ranking of how the themes ranked within the interviews, nor can these ranking be seen as generalizable to all worker center organizers since this was not a representative sample of worker center organizers.
So it is how to keep not just Blacks, but in some cases how to keep black folks from... who again just smoked a reefer and then one thing lead to another. Suddenly he is in a gang, whoops now he went back in as a felon and so now they are not sure what to do. They go to the temp agency; man I am going to try to clean up my life. I do not want to sell drugs anymore even though I don't know how else I am going to survive but I want to see if I could get some work because everyone says I should work. (J85)

One key element of structural oppression that every respondent shared was the challenge posed to the workers of limited protections provided by the labor regulatory system. This not only had a direct impact on the lives of worker but required that the worker center play the necessary function of acting as an agent for enforcement of workplace standards. The following excerpts speak to this interplay:

You know somebody said to me once, ‘you know the bad news is it's really bad out there and workers are getting beat up pretty badly, the good news is it is pretty bad out there and workers are getting hit pretty badly.’ So why is it good news? Because people are ready to organize, they are ready to fight back. So part of me and I tend to be a little cynical and so forth, and so part of me feels like yeah we have had impact and you know we have had impact in structural systems and so forth because it got so bad. Because workers, you know because labor just generally lost so much power that workers were in such bad shape. (J17)

To me it is like you know because I feel like the worker center movement fails if all we are doing is enforcing the legal minimum standards, like we have to figure out... Because then we are just enforcing the law and the government should be doing it anyway. In fact, this is just neoliberalism, the state devolving itself to a bunch of nonprofits to do their jobs right. (J21)

When assessing all the challenging structural systems that the worker center organizers confront as oppressive to the lives of the workers, one in particular stood out in the findings, the worker center as a 501(c)3 non-profit with a heavy reliance on private foundation support, as opposed to other sources of funding such as membership dues, large individual donors, or
government funding. The following respondent outlines the challenges to funding the worker centers through the other funding sources mentioned:

So funding you know is obviously difficult, figuring that out. It is not going to be through dues. It is limited through foundations. I mean individual donors in other fields is the growth area, like most consultants and like fundraising folks will say ‘individual donor is where it’s at’. Which like I think it makes sense for some things if you are doing like a more charitable cause. You know it is a little bit tough when you are like talking workplace struggle to get wealthy individuals to like say ‘oh yeah’. There are so many wealthy liberals that we have access to, because that is really the key thing, it is political. So you have to find not just a wealthy individual, but a wealthy liberal, you know to give to us and we are competing with like way more causes, that have way more currency right now.

If you look up commentators on the worker center movement, even Janice Fine, if you look at first book I don’t know if you read her book, one of the things that she ends at the recommendations or weaknesses saying, you know one thing that they have to become dues sustained. If you look at like Nelson Lichtenstein of UCLA and other important figures on worker centers. That is sort of a theme that a lot of people have taken Steve Early who is a writer who has commented on worker center sort of writes us off, ‘unless their dues funded they are nothing, it can’t be fully democratic’. Basically they want us to be more like a union and I get where they are coming from, but I think they are wrong because first of all there are many unions out there that are all exclusively dues funded and aren’t that democratic to their membership, right. So that is a problem, just because you pay dues doesn’t automatically mean it is democratic, right.

Researcher: But is the expectation that it is more sustainable because it is dues funded?

Respondent: It is sustainable in that sense, if you have a dues check or whatever but I ran the numbers, right. So our budget is over half a million dollars right, over $500,000. Our members paid $30 a year. We would need something like 18,300 and something members all paying a hundred percent of their dues to be fully, to have our operation fully funded by members. Like it would be great to have 18,000 members fully paying their dues right but get this. What kind of… our cost would be so much more to collect, process, manage all those dues that our budget would then increase significantly which means we would mean we would have to have an even larger pool.

Researcher: Well yeah, but you are right because even the symbolic dues is hard to collect, in itself.
Respondent: Even symbolic dues are hard to collect, right. Look and I don't say that in a disparaging way, symbolic dues are very important. Dues is a requirement for us. It is very important because it shows up front commitment you know, because we never require the full amount upfront. You can pay partial up front or all of it at the end of the year at our party. We do an annual party but there has to be a sign of commitment for that... because it just shows that you have skin in the game. You know because $30 is a lot for a low-wage worker.

Researcher: Would you say then the other expectation of the membership that they engage in other people's campaign, would be more valuable?

Respondent: Totally! Look I mean if it means we are more dependent on foundations, so be it. If I have a lot of members that are actively engaged, that is the name of the game. That is what gets stuff done. You know if I have another $700 at the end of the year because they all paid their dues, I cannot do anything with that, you know. How are we going to advance structural change with like $600 more dollars? Versus how are we going to advance structural change when we have 60 more active participants, that choice is easy.

Although some credited the existing funding structure as a positive attribute, in that it allowed the worker center the freedom to organize and be creative in their role as labor organizers outside the bounds of regulations established by the National Labor Relations Act and Taft-Hartley Act. It also allows for the freedom in funding a variety of worker-related initiatives within individual worker center and within the movement. Many more respondents spoke to the constraints imposed by the 501(c)3 model with this extreme reliance on private foundation support for two main reasons. First, this funding structure limited the funding available, given that labor organizing is not a high priority for private foundations. Respondents shared how reliance on this funding also brings with it various measures of control imposed by private foundations, as foundations become increasingly outcomes driven. The following quotes captures the general idea shared by respondents:
So when we’re talking about the not the oppression of the system is like because you're trying to do all this stuff and compliance and all that stuff it's like you barely have time to build this sort of things, because you’re trying to survive with the *migajas* [scraps] that they [foundations] are giving you because they are *migajas*, because some of these foundations have a lot of money and they could give us millions and they choose to give us $10,000 a year and it's ridiculous. I’m like if you’re actually going to... They keep you like, *con la zanaoria* [with a carrot], like the *burrito* [donkey] *con la zanaoria*, that’s what they do. And they don't give you the time to go out and work on alternatives. And there's the co-op people trying to come up with the co-ops and it's like. Yeah we do that but you know again, besides, of organizing this and that, now we have this too. You know and it just adds to the workload of the organization and it adds to everything. And it's like, the balance of it. So when we talk about the non-profit industrial complex, that’s the oppression of the actual organization that I actually see that. You know how we as an organization as an entity are being oppressed by this system. (J36)

This ultimately limits the ability for worker centers to reach the scale necessary to address the structural oppression in the lives of workers. Relying on foundations also places worker centers in direct competition with other non-profits. This establishes a challenging dynamic for worker centers in that they are placed in competition with community-based organizations, community development organizations, social service organizations, and human rights organizations. Although these organizations may also attempt to alleviate the harm inflicted on the lives those that are suffering from structural, cultural, and personal oppression they do not focus on the challenges in the workplace and necessity for workers to organize in the workplace. Respondents articulated this as an important distinction that may possibly not be respected by foundations. The following organizer points out the conflict this causes:

> Anybody could wake up and get out of bed and call themselves a worker center in this town and it doesn't matter what they are doing, some foundation is going to fund them. And so the problem that creates in now you have all of this sort of new divisions, you are not actually organizing, you're not helping workers, you're just creating more problems. (J39)
Finally, there seems to be a fear that foundation funding does not provide the stability required for the time necessary to actively engage in the work necessary for structural change and the risk that poses to the sustainability of the work.

...a distrust for the foundation funding system. I mean the people from foundations, you know, that is a very scary prospect that that is the driving force behind the worker center. I think generally speaking they tend to stay out the way, they are supportive, they are onboard. But the fact that some right-wing group can send a letter to some conservative foundation board members and convince them to pull funding, makes me very nervous right, because you know the more effective you are, the more backlash that you're going to get and there's more efforts to do that. (J21)

Aside from the funding limitations of worker centers as established within the social institution of the 501(c)3 it also established clear legal requirements that limit its ability to engage in direct political action. Even though 501(c)3 statute does allow for limited lobbying for policy changes by worker centers and other non-profit organizations, political engagement is required to be non-partisan. Ultimately this constraint does not allow for direct electoral accountability work by non-profits of politicians or political parties. The following quote reflect this reality which is set within the context of a highly contested mayoral election in 2015:

If you look at all of the paid organizers that there are in the city of Chicago we would have to have, all the non-profits combined probably have at least 200 paid organizers if not more, but we could not keep Rahm Emanuel from being reelected. And what is the thing that is going to improve workers lives in the city more than anything... Show me the organization whose strategic plan for the months of the Chuy [Jesus “Chuy” Garcia] campaign was going to have a larger impact on their members lives than getting Rahm Emanuel out of office and getting someone like Chuy in. But the way that legally everything is set up and everything, even though you have this enormous opportunity that would have incredible outcomes, like imagine if there was a ‘worker center mayoral advisory council’ right now, which we probably would have if Chuy would have gotten elected. But no, we are over here doing this thing or that thing because that is what is in the grant and because we are not allowed to be involved in electoral works. I do not
think that our organizations are necessarily structured to have the outcome that we want to have. (J45)

Included within the oppressive social structures mentioned in the lives of worker, the worker center organizers bring a clear understanding and awareness of capitalism. The views on the interrelation of capitalism with the other social structures are captured by the following quote:

Capitalism cannot function without unemployment. In fact it needs higher unemployment to function really well and so, but who does that really help and so I think when you look at the criminal...you can look at the criminal justice, immigration all these things and sort of just like they are disconnected but they are actually in my opinion very closely connected and we have tried to work on those when we have worked on Blacks, Latinos and others but obviously for many Latino immigrants, the immigration system keeps people, many people from complaining about working conditions, and other things, but just working conditions. Criminal justice is the same. Many people get out of Cook County or a federal prison or state prison and if they did not have work for a while or after a while they can get in trouble with the probation officer so they might not want to say something. (J85)

So why are you going to get out of the shadows, figuratively speaking 10 million people that you can exploit and over-exploit. That you can have them living in a ghetto. In Pilsen or Little Village or in Humboldt Park and you do not need to get out of there, what for? The main reason is that they work for you, that they produce for you at the cheapest possible price. That is the structure and that is the superstructure designed for those populations. Then there is no interest in resolving the situation. It has no case. From the point of view of the government, of the companies, of the right, why would you resolve it. There is no real, important motivation. So yes, I believe that everything is designed so that that population, either with papers or no papers, will remain subjugated, will remain productive, but that does not advance, who is interested that they advance? There will always be more. Particularly within health at work, for example, we have always said, the worker is one of the cheapest commodities for the employer. There will always be another worker.

*Para que vas a sacar de las sombras hablando figurativamente a 10 millones de personas a las que puedes explotar y sobre explotar. Que las puedes tener viviendo en un ghetto. En Pilsen o Little Village o en Humboldt Park y que no necesitan salir de ahí,*
¿para qué? La razón principal es que te trabajen, que te produzcan al precio más barato posible. Esa es la estructura y esa es la superestructura diseñada para esas poblaciones. Entonces no hay interés de resolver la situación. No tiene caso. Desde el punto de vista del gobierno, de las empresas, de la derecha, para que lo resuelves. No tiene ningún motivo real, importante. Entonces sí, yo creo que todo está diseñado para que esa población, tengas papeles o no tengas papeles, se mantenga subyugada, se mantenga productiva, ¿pero que no avance a quien le interesa que avance? Siempre habrá más. Muy particularmente dentro de la salud en el trabajo, por ejemplo, siempre lo dijimos, el trabajador es una de las comodidades más baratas para el patrón. Siempre habrá otro trabajador. (J34)
VII. FINDINGS III: ORGANIZING THE VULNERABLE WORKFORCE: CREATING A SPACE FOR RESISTANCE

So what does that alternative look like right, like dreaming of alternatives with our members and our base and then trying to figure out how we can erect those alternatives. Along with doing the traditional OSHA [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] filings, EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission], discrimination. So all of those things. (J74)

This quote illustrates the worker centers as a site of resistance, in both the practical sense of the term, as well as holding a space to what is possible in the lives of the workers, the communities, and in society. The emergence of the worker center movement has developed in reaction to the evolving economic landscape in Chicago and the ongoing experiences of oppression as felt by the vulnerable workforce. The previous two chapters speak to the development of the worker centers within the recent historical past and detail the oppression being faced by the working class. However, the present-day economy continues to evolve and so do the challenges to organizing vulnerable workers. The following respondent speaks to this reality:

I mean the hard part at the same time you know with really low-income poor people is they are transient, they become homeless, they lose jobs, or their phone goes off. You know with temp staffing, people finally get a full-time job and then they leave the temp staffing, or they are seasonal, they go to landscaping this part of the year and that part of the year. And so it is more... When we were organizing, everybody worked over there in that factory and you knew they were going to go to work tomorrow and the day after and the day after and that was their job, right. But the world doesn't work like that anymore. Now it is Uber and how do you organize Uber, right. Everybody is on an app and nobody's home. So there are challenges to say the least and in some ways it is little like holding sand, as soon as you think you have a handful it starts slipping, people move on. (J21)
This chapter will examine how worker center organizers are committed to creating a space for both resistance to structural oppression present in the lives of vulnerable workers, as well as personal development and support for the individual seeking assistance. An analysis of the interviews paints a vivid portrait in which organizers engage with individuals by conducting an assessment of the challenges present in their lives, support the personal development of the worker, develop and implement innovative strategies aimed at both personal growth and structural change, draw from lessons learned as they respond to an ever-changing economic and social landscape, and above all else are driven to carry out the challenging work of organizing vulnerable workers by drawing on their vision for an anti-oppressive and economically-just world. This research contends that the worker center model not only provides the space to offer support and development for individual workers, as well as providing an opportunity for that individual to actively engage in working for structural change; but whose emergence as a movement, with a collective vision and shared ideology have the potential to drive a dialogue of what kind of changes are necessary if we are to have a more just society in this new era.

A. Connecting the Personal and the Structural

Respondents from every worker center participating in the study identified their worker center as a resource to the community they serve. As one respondent put it, “the worker center itself has been thriving for a number of reasons, one is, workers are really exploited in this industry and by temp agencies generally as you know, and people want to fight” (J39). As established organizations within the city and their respective communities, referrals and
Intakes are generally as a result of word-of-mouth and outreach efforts by the organizations, in some cases minimal outreach is required, the following respondents speak to this:

It’s not unusual like 50 workers call or walk-in in a typical week here, new workers. So like we barely have to do any outreach we just have the momentum for members telling other people. (J17)

The truth is that over time and being in the struggle for workplace right, people get to know who you are, and they begin to pass around your phone number by word of mouth. They say look they helped me out.

La verdad es que a través del tiempo y estar batallando con la cuestión de derechos laborales, pues la gente ha llegado a conocer, y ya muchas veces el teléfono mismo, el número de teléfono se lo pasan de mano a mano le dicen esto, así, mira ellos ayudaron. (J67)

Worker centers are not only engaging with the hardest sector of the labor force to organize, but as the previous chapter illustrates, they are also working with a vulnerable population that has to contend with and survive all the hardships associated with poverty. As pointed out by various worker center organizers and reviewed in the previous chapter, workers are often sought out by employers for their ability to accept and tolerate exploitable workplace conditions. The following respondent describes this situation very vividly with the following example:

So the news came out yesterday that for the first time in 15 years the average income rose in America. The medium income rose to $55,000 that is the median. So many people are poor in this country, are so poor all the time. Like my class warfare side of me is like “oh my gosh how is this still happening?” Like so many people are so poor and they are constantly dealing with that and it is, it can be truly demoralizing. I mean the decision that people are making as they are trying to raise kids, they’re trying to do all these things and so... Do they have a safe neighborhood? Do you feel comfortable in their house? Is their house crumbling with asbestos paint, you know what I mean? Especially the social work ‘person in environment’... their environments are so
complicated, they might have these health concerns. Every normal, you know worried concerned that anyone else has in their lives like health, safety, food, except it is augmented. And then so many of our workers, due to their immigration status it adds a complete other layer. ‘Will I be separated from my family? Can I find another job?’ They are willing... not willing, they are forced, to deal with so much more bullshit, because they are so scared to rock the boat, and it can have dire consequences and especially as policies are changing and people's experiences and what they are hearing in the news, it is like constant fear mongering. And then there is like the guilt factor, this is like my new crusade too is that... So we have one leader who is, not that I pick favorites but she is my favorite [laughs], and since I have been there this is her second campaign with me or third campaign with [our worker center] overall, and every time it is like almost has her tail between her legs like ‘you’re going to be so upset with me.’ I'm like “why... why would I be upset?” I know... I knew better I knew he was not paying the minimum wage but I took it anyway because he was actually nice to me and my other job they were calling us like wet bag dogs.’ Like horrible things, you know what I mean. ‘I should really know better.’ I'm like “listen no one asks for this to happen; no one asks to be a victim of any crime let alone wage theft. Like you are not responsible, the owner is responsible. Furthermore, let’s just face it, you have limited options. It is not like you can go and get any job out there, right, like the pool is limited and you are doing the best you can and you make the decisions that you can and so that is your reality and it is a shitty reality and it's unfair and I do not like it, but that is what you are dealing with and if you wanted to take a job because the boss is nicer to you, take the job! You know I want you to have a nice boss, too. This is not your fault.” (J19)

The primary role of the worker center organizer when confronting the realities of workers facing exploitation in the workplace is to engage in a process by which the worker can receive the supports they need to address the injustice. Engaging with the worker in the organizing process requires special attention and follows some necessary steps that, by and large all organizers spoke to as essentially being the same across organizations. They all involve some form of workplace rights training which in many cases includes providing information to legal resources, information on state or federal labor regulatory agencies, or labor unions. Information provided included leadership development training, referral to resources, and was coupled with a commitment to providing support in confronting the employer if the worker is
willing to do so, in which case there is a process to develop a public campaign or legal strategy to address grievances of workers’ dependent of the circumstances. Conversations about values and ideological dialogue is also tied into the process of engagement with workers. The following quote highlights the balance each of the worker center organizers referenced as both the central function of the worker center as a space of support and resistance, and the organizer themselves as the agent of structural change:

So I think it became a lot less of that sort of like a purist individual, I need to be the different standard, to how do you move people together. I think something that has been consistent is understanding that there’s three, like to me there is three legs on a stool of social change. One is leadership development, popular education, people getting the skills themselves to lead, you look at Amílcar Cabral and others who talk about that. The second is when you take oppressed people and they find their power in leadership, that puts you in opposition to the state and so you have to be willing to have direct confrontation and you have to be willing to do that sort of militant level of organizing but you can’t just fight against what is, you have to also build the alternative, you have to also create what you want to see in the world. So I think to me that’s like... those are the three pieces of a theory of change for me and then when you think about what campaigns are doing, because I see campaigns as the vehicle that those things happen in. And that is the difference between like if you are creating a commune or if you are just focused on creating a worker co-op or something, that’s great, but it does not necessarily have that contestation with the state. It does not have the challenge of power and so the campaign is the place where that challenge happens and so campaigns are places where people get to actually practice their skills. They get to develop speaking at a rally, they get to think as strategist, they get to talk to the press, they get to create art, they get to invite friends to rallies. It’s the place where you’re concretely improving someone’s life, you win a wage theft bill that makes it easier for day laborers to recover their lost wages. You create a worker center [hiring hall] where the minimum wage goes up. What we are living in is a battle of ideas, but people don’t eat ideas, people eat the food on the table, and so you have to be doing both. And then I think the third is that ideological piece of where we are advancing values. So the campaign is the place where you get to say that people get to deserve $15 and a union. People don’t deserve to be in poverty, we all should be able to have a roof over our heads, schools that have books, access to medical care, all of that. So I think there is the
theory of change of what you are doing and understanding that a campaign is a vehicle to try to do those three things at once. (J45)

Both respondents speak to the complexity and challenges in engaging with vulnerable worker towards structural change, yet as the analysis of this chapter will demonstrate there is process of engagement where the worker center actively engages in all three levels as defined by Structural Social Work: the interpersonal, structural and ideological. At first glance, Structural Social Work may appear static, a tool for solely meant for understanding structural oppression, however Mullaly (2010) contends that in practice it is anything but. Structural Social Work also serves as a prescriptive tool for understanding the areas of engagement needed for structural change and allows for a more complete picture of the interrelation among the three spheres of society and between the social institutions that tie to the central issue.

The challenges are numerous when addressing individuals in the complex social environment in which they exist and the within which the worker centers operate. This chapter will largely focus on the labor regulatory system, which includes governmental regulatory and enforcement agencies, labor unions, labor policy. An analysis of the mission statement of all the organizations participating in the study identify structural change as a shared priority among all the worker centers. They all seek to engage workers in an active process of social change to improve social and economic conditions for the specific vulnerable workforce they target (either by sector or geographic location), through improving workplace conditions and standards. Worker center organizers therefore become the resource for workers seeking to support in addressing workplace injustice. Yet the absence and limitations of the labor
regulatory system are not immediately clear to the worker that seeks support from the worker center. The following three excerpts from the interview with one respondent speak to the distinct challenges present to low-wage workers requiring the supports of the labor regulatory system:

I think so many workers... it is almost like this savior fantasies that we all have, like I know I'm getting taken advantage of, I know I'm getting exploited, I might not know what the terms are or what the words are or how I am getting exploited but like you obviously feel exploitation right, like you know it is happening to you, and so many workers think like, 'well I just came here to report it.' Report it to who, what do you want to see happen. ‘Well I just came in to report it’ and it’s like well what do you think is going to happen with that. It is literally they think the Feds, like essentially what ICE does, like break down the door and come in and say ‘let me see your books and who is paying who’ and then they will be vindicated in one day.

This is the thing that I always explain to people, is they come to me and they have 95 different problems in their workplace and it’s like “well here is how it's going to be resolved, you go to a lawyer for this, you need to go to EEOC for this.” They all want you to pick it apart and when you are sitting at the NLRB they want to hear about retaliation, they don't want to hear about how you discriminate against, they don't care about that, right. You have to learn how to compartmentalize your life and your story and your experiences even though you all experience it together as a shitty job, do you know what I mean. So it is like picking everything apart.

We have had some workers who choose to unionize because the laws are so weak, the only way to have a quality job is through unions and the stats just speak for it, you have greater pay, you have greater benefits, there's much less pay wage disparity based on sex in unions because there's a contract that says this job starts here. There is no negotiating, it is easy and it is enforceable in a way that nothing else is because the union is, theoretically, on the ground listening to their member’s etcetera, etcetera. So it is like in theory unionization is the way to go. (J19)

As the excerpt mentions the collective bargaining agreement is the best model for labor protections and wage standards given the failings of the various governmental labor regulatory bodies, this opinion is not unfounded. A recent report by Rosenfeld, Denice, and Laird (2016)
assesses that wage stagnation and growing income inequality are in fact due to the decline of unions in the private sector. Their statistical modeling approximates wages if union density remained at 1979 levels and factors in wage loss of employees due to trade with low-wage nations. The majority of the organizers interviewed (55%) reported an absence of desire by labor unions to organize the low-wage worker they were working with. It appears by their account that the closeness of labor unions to worker centers is often overstated, at the very least in Chicago historically that has not been the case. In many cases it has actually been adversarial especially in the early history of the worker center movement, as the following quote highlights:

[Our organization’s] organizers have stories of union organizers chasing them with bats. It was more than just contentious; day laborers were seen as just scabs to trade unions. But then when the garbage workers went on strike, maybe 2004, the way they tried to break the strike was that they went to the temp agency and they hired temp workers. So you can say okay those temp workers are scabs, fuck them or you can say those temp workers are workers and if we organize them then they won’t be available to break a strike, because they will be organized. And so we started working to do education and say “hey yo, don’t take this job this week because blah, blah, blah.” (J45)

As this quote highlights this relationship between worker centers and unions has changed throughout the years and are complex. This is underscored by how many organizers through their examples spoke to their relationship with labor unions as both positive (50%) and contentious (61%).

About 2 months ago, we were at home and a colleague that was there told me that when he came to Chicago he asked who were the most anti-union people in Chicago and they told him, me and J13. But looking back at it, we actually helped start four unions.
Pero hace no mucho tiempo, hace 2 meses, estábamos en la casa, y uno de los compañeros que estaba allí me dijo cuando yo llegue a Chicago pregunté quién eran las gentes más anti-union en Chicago y me dijeron J13 y yo. Y haciendo recuentos hemos ayudado formar cuatro uniones. (J67)

The story that is not really understood by like business or general public is that is that worker centers are not union fronts. There is a sense that the worker center movement is somehow a manipulation of labor... of like of unions and a lot of business owners that is what they think. You know they do not understand that it is not that at all that, it is really it is an incredibly disrespectful perspective, right. It is people that are really like hurt trying to stand up for themselves in different places. (J13)

1. **Developing leaders.**

The development of leaders and supporters as actors in not just workplace struggle but as elemental parts to structural change is of primary importance to the worker center organizers and to this study. Every participant made reference to leadership development and this was among the most frequently cited element in the study. Still, 11 organizers made special emphasis on the necessity of developing strong relationships with workers seeking support. The following two quotes highlight this element:

There’s baby steps... You know again, because I come to talk to you about oppression when somebody just verbally abused you, and told you that you are nothing, and you’re not going to get paid, and you’re nothing, because you are undocumented, you know it’s like, “let’s talk about that first. Let’s talk about. What can we do right now?” Take care of the immediate stuff and then yeah... Then that’s the role of organizing, right. How do you start moving those conversations to like the larger picture and talk about oppression, systems of oppression and like start talking about why we need to change laws, why we need to go to the march, or like speak at events, or do this to change the stuff. (J36)

For me, it goes in depth. How do you really build a relationship with someone and gain their trust and then where they allow you to help them. And then it is not just help but like where they allow you to get close to them to try to find solutions for what they are dealing with... I mean for me it would be about relationship building like getting to know
someone and building the trust and then from there if you can really gain someone’s trust you can move on any issue. (J91)

The process described by the respondents mirrors the social work process of engagement towards building a therapeutic alliance and exemplifies the social work axiom of meeting people where they are at. The following two quotes exemplify the essential processes of assessment and building the therapeutic alliance necessary to engage alongside with those affected in the challenging work of social movement building:

In order to be a good organizer, I think the primary skill is listening... I am constantly assessing someone. What are they saying, what are their body language, what are their goals, what state of change are they in? It is a lot of motivational interviewing; it is following up. (J19)

So we do like storytelling and I know that's probably not something you can write a diffused evidence based intervention on... but at the same time that's what works. You know often times the people most affected need to be the people that are organized and the people most affected. And that a lot of those resources that we don’t have then we become, from picking up the members on a regular basis, showing them consistency and behaviors, shit like that. It's changed for a lot of my guys, a lot of the guys that I have been working with and I see the men particularly and some of the women that I've seen that know me. To me, they believe in me first and then the movement second. So I think it's less about the politics of the movement, and more about the principles that you're actually working on yourself. (J71)

However, developing these relationships could be a challenge or source of tension given the amount of need faced by this vulnerable workforce and the limited resources of the organization. The decision of balancing the personal demands of the workers, while engaging in the work necessary for structural change is what one organizer termed “bleeding power” (J17). The challenge is best highlighted in the following quote:

It’s like you have the person whose wages were stolen, but since you [they] are not receiving a check this week, they are going to go homeless, or they will be without food,
so you have to connect them to social services. Then you have a person who comes to
you 3, 4 times because they stole their wages 3, 4 times so it becomes more of an
interaction as a friend, and you see he wants you to talk with him outside of work. And
again, you see, the question you asked in the beginning, that’s how you know that you
are organizing. So since you are organizing you have to do the follow up to create and
build that relationship, but at the same time it is based on a case. And probably, I mean,
you are going to help [the person] get back the $100, but are you going to end the
exploitation at that jobsite? Probably not, right? You would have made better use of
your time organizing to change the whole structure, than taking one case. But generally,
organizers are case managers at the same time, because how do you say it, because of
lack of staff, lack of resources and that is what the foundations ask for.

Es como tienes la persona que la robraron el salario pero como no vas recibir un cheque
esta semana se va quedar sin vivienda o se va quedar sin comida si tienes que
conectarla con servicios sociales. Después tienes una persona que viene 3, 4 veces
porque la robaron 3, 4 veces su dinero. Después se convierte en esta interacción de
amigo y ya vez quiere que hables con el fuera del trabajo y de nuevo. Como, ya vez la
pregunta que hiciste al principio es, como sabes que estas organizando si como estas
organizando tienes que dar seguimiento para creer, expandir esa relación pero a la
misma vez está basada en un caso que lo más probable, I mean vas ayuda a recuperar
$100 pero, ¿vas a terminar la explotación en ese lugar de trabajo? Lo más probable es
que no, verdad. Hubieras usado mejor el tiempo de verdad organizando para cambiar la
estructura entera, que tomando un caso. Pero por lo general organizadores son case
managers al mismo tiempo porque como se dirá, porque falta de staff, falta de recursos
y es lo que piden fundaciones. (J10)

The tension between developing an organization seeking structural change while also,
tending to the associated socio-emotional needs of the workers leads to a necessary element of
case management and referral. Every organizer referenced this role. The development of
referral networks and the necessity for support was vital for addressing the social realities of
the worker.

They are unable to get out of bed. They don’t have any interest. I mean people say this
all the time, ‘I just stopped eating. I just been so stressed.’ I mean like classic line for line
diagnostic of major depressive disorder. So I have mentioned therapy to a few people,
and have looked for therapy resources for people. It is obviously a cultural thing you
know some people... I had a meeting with a Polish worker and he was like, ‘well I'm not crazy I don't need that.’ It's like “no, no, no, a lot of times when life is more stressful we just need more support and it could be a short-term...” Like really trying to sell it, because it was like... not to armchair diagnose people, but he definitely had depression, you know what I mean. (J19)

There is a group of Will County social service providers that meet every month. We are there, because we are one of them and our services are labor rights training, worker rights you know, send them to us, because if you are a social worker you're always dealing with somebody who comes in and has a workplace issue, right, and you don't know where to send them. You would know, but most people 99.9% of the social worker are not going to know where to send them. So that it is us right and then we actually have some idea of where to send other people when they have particular issues if we can't and some accountability because we are meeting with them and so there is a feeling that they have to take care of our people. (J39)

When the resources are not immediately available the worker center organizer takes on the role of case manager, as highlighted in the following two quotes:

The other half [of the time] is going around, making phone calls, having patience, finding the answers. Many times you do not know it and the worker does not either, and then you have to investigate and you become a bit of an investigator.

La otra mitad [del tiempo] es dar vueltas, hacer llamadas por teléfono, tener paciencia, encontrar las respuestas. Muchas veces uno no la sabe y el trabajador tampoco y entonces hay que investigar y se vuelve uno medio investigador (J34)

Our vision is, no matter the problem you might have, if it is in our hands to help, we will help. It does not matter if it is a small, big, medium problem, or if you just come for a service. If we can give you the solution and we know that there is someone who can provide the solution, we will make that referral.

Y nuestra visión es, no importa el problema que tenga, si está en nuestras manos ayudarlo, los vamos ayudar. No importa pequeño, grande, mediano, o simplemente viene por un servicio. Si nosotros se lo podemos dar y sabemos que hay quién se lo puede dar ósea vamos a referirlo. (J12)

Another area of consensus among all the worker center organizers was the necessity of providing information on workplace rights to those that seek assistance. As one respondent
stated, “Tienes que educarte para saber que usas y como lo usas y cuando lo usas y yo creo que ese es el papel fundamental de un organizador. No puedes organizar si no educas” (You have to educate yourself to know what you use and how you use it and when you use it and I believe that is the foundational role of an organizer. You cannot organize if you do not educate; J34).

The trainings serve the function of not only informing the worker on their workplace rights, independent of their immigration status, but also allows workers to understand the limitation of the laws and labor regulatory system.

It is very difficult to organize, convince, and re-educate people, therefore, I will not convince anyone. I’m going to give them the tools. We have always thought in this way. We have to give them tools so they can defend themselves, because we are not going to be in their workplace. Then, I will give him the tool and he will have to decide how to use it. Then, the workshops... the courses are for this. So that they can have the knowledge and know how to defend themselves.

Es algo bien difícil organizar, convencer y re educarse con la gente, entonces yo no voy a convencer a nadie. Yo le voy a dar las herramientas. Siempre hemos pensado así. Hay que darles herramientas para que ellos se defiendan porque no vamos a estar nosotros en su centro de trabajo. Entonces le doy la herramienta y él sabrá cómo utilizarla. Entonces los talleres los cursos son para eso. Para que ellos puedan tener conocimiento y se sepan defender. (J12)

I think that half of the work in organizing is education. Educate them, teach them about every step of the process so that they, themselves, know what to do, why to do it, when it is better to do it, what laws favor them, what laws do not favor them and so on. And, here, it is much more complicated when you combine labor laws with immigration as well as with the mentality of the immigrant worker.

La mitad del trabajo de organización yo creo es educación. Educarlos, educar a cada paso del proceso, para que ellos mismos sepan que hacer, porque hacerlo, cuando es mejor hacerlo, que leyes te favorecen, que leyes no te favorecen etcétera. Y aquí es mucho más complicado cuando combinas las leyes laborales con las leyes migratorias porque entonces y bueno con la mentalidad del trabajador inmigrante. (J34)
They want their job back so they just assume that this is incorrect, this is injustice, and something has to be done about it. ‘My boss fired me because he said’ and they get into a he said, she said, this is what happened incident, but they don’t know what is the correct route to take. They think that a magical agency is just going to come in and bring the hammer down and get them their job back or change whatever injustice they want. A few of them do want to organize and they realize some of the power in organizing but it is very rare, the vast majority of them have this legal remedy for their problem [in mind]. (J99)

Understanding the limitations of workplace rights and the enforceability of policies, requires that organizers address injustices in the workplace as opportunities to develop collective action as opposed to solely addressing workplace issues on an individual basis.

Respondents spoke in detail about the many challenges to workplace organizing with the vulnerable workers they attempt to organize.

Even then like getting people to feel comfortable to open up about their own case and being able to challenge the employer is a big step because in that there is a fear that people have, you know whether that is a threat of being physically harassed, sexually harassed, being fired, like a lot of issues that happen if you challenge the employer. (J91)

But I think the organizing process is really fucking hard because that is a very foreign experience from what daily life is and from what the world tells us, just get by, just get by. And I think for people who have no money, literally I think what day laborers average wage was $8,000 a year maybe. And much of that is being sent home. So the decision of getting on a bus and going to a meeting is often also a decision of also not eating something that day. And the day starts, you get up early as hell, you are on the corner usually by 6 a.m. if you get work you then work till 6 or 7 p.m. doing backbreaking construction. And then there is the meeting that night at 7 p.m. that maybe you’re going to come to, and then you’re going to have to go to bed and get up to do it all over again. The disincentive to organizing is really high. (J45)

As the previous quotes identified, there are many challenges that exist to developing collective action in the workplace, not least of which includes the inherent divisions in the workplace. One respondent describes the challenges posed by the employers or who according
to this example, can utilize division within the workplace as a method to prevent organizing efforts:

I mean the bigger problem is the division in the workplace. I mean that is a clear strategy by the employers. So you have temp agencies that focus on Latino workers, undocumented worker, Latino documented workers, women, men, formerly incarcerated workers, formerly incarcerated black worker, white workers, you know you have temp agencies that market themselves as offering a particular type of worker, at a particular time and place. That is a marketing point for these temp agencies and of course the code words get used to order a particular type of worker, right. ‘We want lights,’ which is women. ‘We want heavies,’ which is men. We want the Spanish speakers, we want... or they will have number ones, number twos, number threes. You see these codes that these temp agencies use to send workers to particular places at particular times, because women are paid less. We are about to release a report on gender discrimination in temp staffing particularly in warehouses where women go ask for work at the temp agency, they are often sent to the manual labor jobs, the picking and packing and men are sent to the forklift operator jobs which typically pay about two or three bucks an hour more, because it is viewed as woman’s works versus men’s work. And if you're a temp agency and you send 10 women to work the forklift, the warehouse manager is going to be like ‘what the hell are you doing? I am going to hire a different temp agency.’ They just have this instant reaction; the temp agency is not going to do that. So it works the same way with race, so you know you have some clients where they don't want black workers, some client companies that only want black workers, you have some client companies that don’t want undocumented workers because of whatever enforcement stuff is going on with them. So you have that division. But the real division is around workers coming together in the workplace to fight for change, and it is really about keeping unions out. It is one of the major issues. So the reason Walmart has so many different temp companies, is because they want to keep unions out of their warehouse. If you go to the South, you'll see the same warehouses, they're all direct hire Walmart workers because they are not worried about unions organizing those workers in those states, here they are. So the racial divisions get used very skillfully by employer's and it is not hard to do, you know, maybe you promote a Latino worker to supervise all the black workers and maybe his or her English is not that great. And maybe you just decide ‘ok you know what, we are going to give raises to the black workers today’ it is that easy and all of a sudden you have war in their warehouses. The lunchroom is a battle zone at that point and so you can forget about
organizing because... and half of the time you cannot communicate with your co-workers, so it makes it so difficult to organize. (J39)

Organizers point out that workplace division is not solely a making of employers, who seek to utilize divisions to their benefit. Workers themselves segregate themselves from other workers. The following two quotes highlight this as an issue in the workplace:

In a place of a thousand people you have 500 people of one race on one side and 500 people of another race in another side, and the people say, ‘Oh, we are better off this way, we are much more comfortable working with the people that we know, than with those that we don’t.’ So this type of ideology also prevents talking about creating better standards for all.

En un lugar de mil personas y tienes 500 personas de una raza, de un lado y 500 personas de otra raza en otro lado y que la gente diga ‘o, así estamos mejor, trabajamos más a gusto con gente que conozco que con otra gente.’ So ese tipo de ideologías previenen también el hablar de crear mejores estándares para todos. (J10)

We essentially lost a union campaign because it was Latino workers and then they hired a bunch of African American workers during the holiday rush, it is like seasonal workers and who were then able to vote for the union and they did not talk to them, they just did not talk to them because they said we that we can’t communicate. And then they were like they won’t understand what we are going through or, you know what I mean, and they lost the union. It is like you can’t just ignore people or assume we are different they are going to disagree with me. (J19)

2. **Addressing the interrelation of race, immigration, gender and class.**

Given that workplace divisions are a key barrier to collective action, the development of leadership among the vulnerable workforce often requires that the organizers are able to facilitate discussion about discrimination and oppression based on race, immigration status, or gender in order to work towards economic justice. The following quote captures the essence of this view:
A lot of folks in the labor movement get all of those connections, the reason we have to defeat racism, and sexism, and homophobia, and other things, and how we have to come together is just because there is no other way to be effective. Because the advantage we have... You can argue one advantage is moral and that is important, but strategically, kind of logistically, during our life as humans which is material, the advantage that we have are in the numbers, right. There are so many more of us, sadly, we wish there weren’t but since there are... so then therefore the divisions have to be broken down, to at least agree on the goal for economic stability. (J85)

The worker center organizers participating in this study maintain a particular view on understanding race, gender and immigration. The majority of the worker center organizers (61%) spoke to the necessity of understanding class when addressing each one of these issues.

The following respondent explains the significance and necessity of incorporating a class analysis:

I feel like the dominant frame for a lot of new social movement work is through an anti-racist one and so I think that there is a lot of backlash to class talk. But you know I believe though that it is false to separate the two because like we cannot define class... the class composition is of a particular racial pattern. So to me it’s false to say is it race or is it class it is a losing argument. (J17)

The following excerpts encapsulate the understanding of class dynamics for gender, immigration, race:

I think worker centers have a clear understanding that a worker is not just a worker, right. If they're undocumented, they're part of a community that is experiencing real fear. If they are women; they're facing a lot of violence everywhere. If they live in a low-income neighborhood they're probably facing rent increases and everything else in their life is, the prices going up right. So it's like I think worker centers have a clear understanding that a worker is not just the worker, they're a whole person and they already have that orientation. (J95)

And that also has made me go away a little, without losing interest, but moving a little away from the pure immigrant movement, because, I say, we are first workers, the number one reason to migrate is work. So, the reason for immigration is not family
reunification; the number one motive for immigration is not to be on the path to citizenship, no, it is to work. Then, how do we make those workers identify themselves as workers with the other workers that are already here, whether or not they are citizens? And how do we present it as a common struggle to fight, resolve, or improve working conditions? That is the universe in which I move.

Y eso también pues a mí me ha hecho irme alejando un poco, sin perder el interés, pero irme alejando un poco del movimiento inmigrante puro, porque yo digo en primer lugar somos trabajadores, el motivo número uno en la inmigración es el trabajo. Entonces el motivo de la inmigración no es la reunificación familiar. El motivo número uno de la inmigración no es el path to citizenship, [camino hacia la ciudadanía] no, es trabajar. ¿Entonces cómo hacemos para que esos trabajadores se identifiquen como trabajadores con los demás trabajadores con los que ya están acá, sean ciudadanos o no? ¿Y cómo se presenta una lucha común para pelear, o resolver, o mejorar las condiciones de trabajo? Esa es el universo en el que yo me muevo. (J34)

Respondent: I don’t really think that there’s much of a class analysis in the process, more or less like Black Lives Matter. But what does that mean? What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be Alton Sterling black?

Researcher: Poor and black?

Respondent: Yeah, poor and black. You know what I mean, like what does that mean? What does it mean to be like I’m selling loose cigarettes? Like that’s my only means of survival. And that’s not an easy hustle. You know. So they’re doing that to survive, because you need wages to survive. And unless we broadened our analysis of what a worker is, we'll miss the mark and unless... Like the Movement for Black Lives broadens their understanding of what... who is needed for black liberation then they won’t survive. So there’s a need for both to come together and kind of push these margins. (J71)

The worker organizers spoke to the necessity of developing leaders to understand dynamics of race and poverty. Organizers from 6 of the 7 worker centers participating in the research spoke to the necessity of integrating some form of racial justice training within their model of leadership development. The organizers report being intentional due to the need to directly challenge internalized racism and racial tensions within members of the organization
and those within the communities they serve. Both of the following quotes serve as an example:

I want to see if I could get some work because everyone says I should work. I am going to be here at 4 in the morning 3 or 4 days in a row. All I see is Latinos going into a van and they all got here later than I did. Man you can just see how that works. I have been there... I have seen black folk like I am going to go out and kick some ass. I am going to see them Latinos and I am going to knock one of them. But the question is, did they really decide that they were going to work or did someone else decided it who also is going further up the chain, opposing immigration reform so all these folks can’t have rights, oppose, you know making sure there is a criminal justice reform. (J85)

Then all this animosity and tension and like even these whole systems that we have of oppression, where they have the two minority groups fighting against each other whether they take your jobs or whether they take something... *como se dice, criminales* [how do they say, criminals], like the *Mexicanos* [Mexicans]... There is so much racism even with our own freakin’ leaders, even recently where you know our organizer was door knocking inviting them to the picnic, the residents around the building and she came across these three men, *Mexicanos* and was talking about the picnic and so forth and then this one *Mexicano* says if there is any African-Americans there I am going to shoot them, I am going to kill them. It is like really?! You are going ... you are in an African-American area also and then here you are *Mexicano con estas canijas* [with these damn] ideas... and it is like my God you know there is all this internal racism within our own communities and even racism within. Because I remember at one point one of the founding members from this company we organized was working at a new... some other worksite and she was having issues with this other worker who happened to be undocumented so then our leader was like, ‘I felt like calling immigration on her’ and it is like what? What? Just because you have documents you can’t treat this other person less and who are you to be calling immigration on someone else because you have a difference of opinion. (J91)

Despite the challenges present in developing conversations about race or discrimination in their work, most organizations (75%) shared about their attempts and approach to challenge racist perceptions among their membership.
But anyways, when I met with [potential partner organization] last week, it was really interesting with [executive director of the organization] and so we were, I wanted to explore with him about the ability to be able to do these sessions again where we are able to bring the two communities together using some of their techniques and trainings which [partner organization’s organizer] does. And to be able to bring in our Mexicano, like parents in particular or like the leaders that we work with, who happen to be the majority of them adults, to sit down in the same room with African-Americans and also non-African-Americans too, it doesn’t just have to be African-Americans, but where we just start having open dialogue about racism and oppression and then just start letting it all out, like venting and seeing how we can move forward and become a stronger group as one. (J91)

Our first conversation with workers who are not Latino, sometimes it is with workers who are Latino, is about immigration, so it is often the first or second or third thing that comes up. So you might be talking to a minimum wage temp worker who is totally being ripped off, really wants to fight for a change in their workplace and their issue would be all the supervisors are Mexican and all the workers are Black and ‘the way they talk to us is messed up and they don’t do anything while we do all the work.’ And then you talk to the Latinos and it is the exact opposite, ‘they don’t do anything while we do all the work and they get paid more than we do, blah, blah, blah,’ and so getting people to sort of fight together and say no that is not what is going on actually. And part of it is challenging, like you have to directly challenge that as an organizer, because they have to see that our organization it’s not about that. So it is one of the few areas where we will actually as organizers, go in and challenge workers directly. We like to have workers come to conclusions themselves without saying “no this is what you should think.” But this is an area where we found that you really have to take head-on because people need to see... Because it is funny, a lot of people know in their mind somewhere that we need to have some measure of unity as workers and ultimately we are being exploited because of these divisions, but they’re not taught in our society to think that way so, you have to kind of show that the worker center is not the space for racism. It is not the space for xenophobia and that we will have the conversation, but we have a particular viewpoint on this and there's certain things that we'll sort of accept as rational viewpoints, there's other things that we are just not going to. (J39)

I think it is kind of difficult because a lot of these issues sometime come up in a giant workshop where there is 30, 40 people and so someone will start sharing their story about how the lazy black workers didn't want to do the job so they did it and now it is part of their responsibilities and now they're not getting paid anymore for it. So they always look at the other workers as being lazy and then having them having to pick up
the slack for them but not getting compensated for it. So in that instant it is a little bit difficult to stop and say “well you are wrong, you know, they are not doing it, because they are lazy.” It is kind of hard to have that kind of conversation at that moment. So in some instances there is nothing you can do about it. But when we are developing the members and leaders further than the initial workshop, that is when we talk about those identities in the workplace, particularly around race, gender, sexual orientation a lot of things that people might have biases or other just have other tendencies against these groups. So we have once a year, trying to do it twice a year, leadership institute where we talk about these issues and we dive in and actually talk about why things are the way they are, because we think that people should understand gender… not gender, but identity in the workplace, so that they don't hold prejudiced or other things against other workers. (J99)

Respondents, however, accepted that despite their best efforts there was much more need to do racial justice work that stretched beyond their capacity. The barriers identified by the organizers ranged from the personal, to the limited integration into the work of social justice organizations, to the limited amount of racial justice work being done at all. The following quotes highlight the elements identified by the worker center organizers:

A lot of organizations I think don't really want to talk a lot about how racialized our society is and how we all are victims of racism and we are all twisted and we all probably need decades of psychotherapy to not see darker people as inferior, you know, including those of us who are Latinos or lighter skinned black people… and kind of like an alcoholic realizing that it is not that big of a deal, I mean it is hard to admit you have those racist tendencies or sexist or whatever, but regarding race… But it is also liberating, it is a weight off your shoulders, we are not bad folks if we think that, but we do not want to keep thinking that either, and how to break that cycle and how to build that unity so that poor and working people can have what they need. (J85)

I think we need more racial justice organizing let's put it this way. Like we need a Black Lives Matters in every one of these suburban towns for example. We need immigrant youth organizing in Joliet like we need explicit racial justice organizing. It is not necessarily going to be the worker center… The worker centers can be an incubator for that and worker centers can support it, but I sort of feel like we need to foster that, we need to foster more explicit racial justice organizing. So there is certainly a big part of worker organizing is about racial justice in the workplace and in the community. That is
how things play out in the workplace so... but I think the opportunity that we foster is getting people, getting people past the initial divisions. (J39)

Finally, worker center organizers identified the very real limitation of engaging with multiple issues. The tensions that are created as a result of the numerous elements that worker center organizers engage with are captured in the following quotes:

You can also be pulled in so many different directions that you become very ineffective, right. You become ineffective at many things rather than effective at a few. So there's always a balance there and that is where I struggle because I do come out of that labor movement mentality, you got a campaign, you focus, you have your target, you don't stray from it. And I don't think it is necessarily right. But I struggle with that personally and I struggle with that with some of the worker centers and it's like “you guys are all over the place and you’re...” And you know to an extent that is right, but you know to an extent that is good, there is nothing wrong with it. (J21)

But I think sometimes as organizers we like to think of our organization is going to deal with gender inequality, our organization is going to deal with immigration, our organization is going to deal with police brutality, our organization is going to deal with voting rights and civic engagement, and worker organizing and we are going to take down the biggest corporations on the face of the Earth. So at a certain point, yes there is intersectionality like human beings are not just workers and so we need to understand that, but we also need to understand that like our organizations have a certain role to play and we need to do that job well. We owe it to our members to figure out how to do that job well, while fostering the other organizing that needs to happen and making the connections with... connecting the dots with people and putting... It is about developing a movement right, not thinking we are at the movement. So that is the way I see it. (J39)

3. **Personal development through the struggle.**

Worker centers view their principal function as fighting for economic justice and resisting structural violence and the harm it inflicts on vulnerable workers as established by the economic system in which workers are employed or excluded from employment. The primary function of the worker center model as described by the respondents is to organize this
population in order to actively engage in challenging the established structures as they relate to structural violence against low-wage workers. Every participant in the study explored the importance of developing workers who are willing to take a stand on the issues they are seeking support for. The following quotes capture this idea:

One of the other ways of measuring it [outcomes] is also when you have workers who are very intimidated and scared to actually stand up and challenge the employer or challenge like whatever it is you know immigration or lo que sea [whatever] being able to take that step to you know ya decir [to finally say] no more, you know and actually do something. (J91)

The critique of Maslow [hierarchy of needs] ... people are like, ‘they need a house first’ it’s like you know sometimes they don't, you know, don’t get me wrong housing is really important but sometimes people just need to have an outlet to seek justice, to stand up, to fight back, that you are not able to get in other ways. (J19)

One of beautiful things of one of our members, domestic worker members, we went to Springfield and she came in because she is like, she came to a training. You know she's one of those, the ones that I was talking about that she normalized this abuse. You know it’s like, ‘I thought it was ok, I thought that is how it was.’ Who now is a spokesperson for the [Domestic Worker] Bill of Rights. And we are in Springfield with the legislator and then she is like, ‘my name is so-and-so. I'm a domestic worker and I'm here not just because of me. I'm here representing all domestic workers in the state of Illinois and we need this law because a, b, and c.’ And that just kind of gives you this kind of like, when you get to that sense of like... I’m depressed, I’m tired, of being abused to that place where it is of a strong person. You know I’m speaking on my behalf like there's a bunch of women and I’m representing and demanding something. That is the most beautiful thing you can think of. (J36)

Within each one of these excerpts are elements of empowerment of the vulnerable and marginalized that are central to the ideals of social work. The worker center itself is also the site for resources for the community and workers, and well as a shared space for involvement, personal development and shared commitment to the struggle. As Structural Social Work suggests the worker center organizer perceives their role of supporting the development in all
areas at once; interpersonal, institutional, and ideological, with the initial engagement being with the presenting problem. As one organizer puts it:

The leaders that have developed through the organization that continue to be with [our organization], even people who have lost their campaign technically, you know are amazing spokespeople and they readily volunteer, ‘like this transformed my life and I look at myself differently.’ We had some worker yesterday saying ‘oh the person who I was when I came here, I am a different person. I left that person behind, it is restored my dignity as a worker, it has restored my dignity as a person.’ I mean it is very much like self-fulfillment, self-actualization that you hope to get through therapy just through a different means. It is like I am more active. (J19)

The worker center model is one of developing a space for self-actualization in a social-political space. One in which personal development is encouraged and actively developed as the population is engaged within the struggle of workplace and social justice.

That is [worker]. [Worker] was sitting on a crate working out in front of a liquor store. And I had a conversation with him and from there he was like 'alright let me see' and I told him about some street stuff that I know as well and from that conversation, he ends up on a bus going to Springfield had his first time experience in Springfield. And from there he was like ‘wait what you can talk to these people.’ These politicians that you hear about like you can talk to go up them, going up to the governor and alderman. He's like, ‘bro I had no idea’. He had been out of jail like six months. That was [in support of] SB 47 at [other worker center]. Now he's the organizer at [other worker center]. (J71)

Organizers highlighted how important self-actualization and empowerment is, especially for women workers. Cultivating a space for women to gather and speak about their unique challenges in the workplace, as well as creating a space for social support was essential to addressing experiences of oppression as related to gender.

Yeah but they [women leaders of the organization] come together in a group and supporting each other and say ‘hey ok you know x grocery store, the guy there is a
sexual predator. He is the owner’s brother you know. He can do anything he wants to any of the cashiers, to any of the women. Let’s go and flyer them all and let’s publically shame this guy’ and you know... damn man that is a powerful thing. The woman is like [demonstrates by hunching over] doesn’t want to participate... Now she is like talking like this, you know. [demonstrates by straightening up and speaks loudly] It’s like this transformation, right. I mean it takes a couple of months right, but it is not... It is also resource efficient too. You know it is not like having a bunch of professional people trying to help her figure out how to deal with her problems. It is her compañeras [colleagues], you know, taking on some guy. (J13)

We have made the consistent effort of incorporating more women than men into the leadership of [our organization]. Very consciously more women than men, to develop them more, to develop them better and it surfaces the subtheme of women at work and the rights of the women in the workplace. So it is no longer the rights of workers, but particularly the rights of women in the workplace and so then, we are starting to go on that side and work on that. With what intention? With the intention of creating a large group of prepared women who are not in the same condition as men. If women are more exploited than men, then, it is not the same to speak of the rights of the FMLA to workers than to speak of your rights when you are pregnant in the workplace and to know what you can expect for, what you can demand, or what you can request. How often can a woman go to the bathroom is not the same as how often a man can go to the bathroom, it is not the same as how many times a pregnant woman can go to the bathroom, it is not the same as how many breaks she can take to breastfeed, no, it is not the same. It is a special category so we are starting to work on that. And we have all this group of women members who say, ’right, but we have problems at home too.’ There are problems of domestic violence, there are problems of machismo... and so on. Then, the members themselves are beginning to create a fantastic universe, where their rights as a woman are respected in their house, in their work and on the street. If we are talking about a feminist perspective of a working women; “worker feminism” that is not the same as ideological feminism or of that of a white woman, middle-class professional upper-class, no, this is another reality. This is a very concrete reality. You are an immigrant woman with problems of interfamilial violence and problems at work. Then we are starting to give a lot of impulse to these groups of female members with ideas and possibilities. “You know what, we are going to buy a television for here and we are going to do a cinema club and we are going to show films about the women’s working class struggles at the worker center. What examples exist of other women’s struggles.” And there are a lot of movies. And so you have fun, eat popcorn, drink Coca-Cola, and discuss the movie, and learn, and you continue your process of development.
Nosotros hemos hecho el esfuerzo consciente de incorporar más compañeras, que compañeros al liderazgo de [nuestra organización]. Muy conscientemente más mujeres que hombres, prepararlas más, prepararlas mejor y surge el subtema de la mujer en el trabajo y los derechos de la mujer en el trabajo. Ya no es solo los derechos de los trabajadores sino muy particularmente los derechos de la mujer en el lugar de trabajo y entonces estamos empezando a irnos a ese lado y darle. ¿Con qué intención? Con la intención de que bueno allá un grupo grande de mujeres preparadas que no están en la misma condición que el hombre. Si, la mujer está más explotada que el hombre entonces no es lo mismo de hablar de los derechos de los trabajadores de FMLA que de hablar de los derechos tuyos cuando estas embarazada en el lugar de trabajo y que puedes esperar que puedes demandar, que puedes solicitar. Cuántas veces puede una mujer ir al baño no es lo mismo de cuantas veces puede un hombre ir al baño. No es lo mismo de cuantas veces puede una mujer embarazada ir al baño, no es lo mismo de cuantos breaks puedes tomar para amamantar, no es lo mismo. Hay es una categoría especial entonces estamos empezando a trabajar en eso. Y tenemos todo este grupo de compañeras que dicen claro, pero es que en la casa también tenemos problemas. Hay problemas de violencia intrafamiliar, hay problemas de machismo, hay problemas etcétera. Entonces las compañeras mismas están empezando a conjugar un universo fantástico en donde es mis derechos como mujer en mi casa, y en mi trabajo, y en la calle. Si entonces es una perspectiva feminista de trabajadora, feminismo obrero que no es lo mismo que el feminismo ideológico o de una mujer de blanca, de clase media profesionista de clase alta, no, este es otra realidad. Es una realidad muy concreta. Eres mujer inmigrante con problemas de violencia intrafamiliar y con problemas en el trabajo. Entonces allí estamos empezando a darle mucho impulso a estos grupos de compañeras y con ideas y posibilidades. “Saben que, vamos a comprar una pantalla de televisión para aquí y vamos hacer un cine club y vamos a pasar películas de las luchas de las mujeres obreras en el centro de trabajo. Qué ejemplos ha habido de las luchas de las mujeres. Y hay cantidad de películas.” Y entonces te diviertes, comes palomitas, tomas Coca-Cola y discutas la película y aprendes y sigues tu proceso de aprendizaje.

(J34)

Finally, organizers acknowledged that the process of development is as much for the organizer as it is for the workers they support. The following quote speaks to this experience of personal growth:

Sometime you do a lot of work and then you don’t see them again. But you say, there’s a satisfaction, because I learned from them. I did other things I never thought to do,
organize differently. Then each fight gives you a different experience and you are learning. It helps you to push yourself or force you to prepare better. To make a better person, to be human, to raise your intellectual level and knowledge in the matter... it is a total satisfaction.

_Y a veces dices haces mucho y a veces ya no la vez. Pero dices es una satisfacción porque yo aprendí de ellos. Hice otras cosas que nunca pensé hacer, organizar diferente. Entonces cada lucha te da una experiencia diferente y vas aprendiendo. Te ayuda esforzarte o te obligas forzarte a prepararte mejor. Hacer mejor persona, ser humano, a elevar tú nivel intelectual y de conocimiento en la materia... entonces es una satisfacción total._ (J12)

4. **Understanding trends.**

Worker centers as organizations embedded within the communities they serve, stay engaged in understanding economic shifts and trends in real-time. Organizers shared how their observations have been crucial to developing their organizational priorities. Interviews highlighted worker centers identifying industries that yield high levels of exploitation, consistent failings of the labor regulatory systems, communities or suburbs that are lacking resources for workers needing support with workplace issues, new hiring sites for day laborers, responding to the realities of the ‘fissured workplace’, identifying discriminatory hiring practices by factories embedded within communities with high-levels of unemployment, challenging the practices of the temp industry, responding to evolving immigration enforcement practices (such as No-Match letters and E-Verify), and exposing discrimination and sexual assault tied to temp agencies. These examples are drawn from interviews where organizers speak to the necessity of understanding the elements of oppression in the lives of workers as outcomes of structural violence embedded within evolving economic and business models designed to increase profits and the persistent limitations within the labor regulatory.
As one organizer stated, “the benefit of being of the community in which you are organizing... because you know you are closer to the workers and the workers are closer to the issues” (J21).

B. Structural Change: The Strength of an Emerging Movement

Given all the constraints placed on worker centers, some of which were captured in chapter VI, and the enormity of the systems present in the lives of the vulnerable workers the worker center organizers seek to organize, the role of worker centers as actively engaging in structural change work is undeniably necessary and difficult. Organizers from every worker center interviewed reported an understanding of their work as serving as a vehicle for structural change. The findings outlined in this section serve to develop an understanding of what structural work looks like within the playing field of a global city.

1. Building worker power.

When asking about what ideals drives his passion to engage in the difficult work of worker center organizing, one respondent answered in the following way:

It is that top down organizing does not work. It never works because it is not deep enough, it is not building a movement, it is not building resistance. And you know, I think whether it is a communitarianism model where you are sort of building with a community... this idea of pockets of resistance. I believe building something creates the environment in which people fight more because they fight to protect what they built as opposed... Where as in the union, it is about we are fighting to have another quarter raise, right, we want 25 more cents, we want 50 cents. We want more of what is yours. We want a bigger piece of what is yours. And people don’t get that excited about fighting for that. So I am excited about... where people are trying these co-op ideas, people are trying different approaches. But also where people are digging roots and are saying like we are here and we are going to be here. (J21)
Not only does the excerpt speak to the uniqueness of the worker center model, but it also engages with the issue of what it takes to build models of resistance. Every one of the worker center organizers understood the necessity of building power as elemental to structural change. Their understanding of serving as the conduit for developing worker power in order to increase workplace standards and policies that favor workers was echoed throughout all the interviews conducted, as exemplified by the following quote:

So for me it is like I don’t care what kind of worker you are and what kind of industry you are working in, if you want to fight in your workplace and you are willing to spend some time invested in getting trained by us and like doing that, be a member. We are happy to and we will put resources into your campaign, right, not just because there is a goal of ending the abuse in that workplace or improving wages in that workplace or whatever. We also see that as a means towards recruiting, it is a recruiting ground, right. It is a means toward moving you into the structural change piece and that is how we can be a powerful organization and that is why too like on paper or whatever from a distance it looks like, well we are at this crazy group because we do policy here and we do like workplace stuff, here.

We want to have that flexibility because like Piven and Cloward, we want to basically have a roving mass of people that can like cause hell and disrupt and does not to me matter where they work, geographically or where they work industrially. Because all we want is to make sure we can turn them out and that they have already had an experience of fighting the boss because if you had an experience of fighting the boss fighting a legislature is a lot easier. Do you know what I mean because the legislature has no power over your daily life the way your boss does. So that is our theory of like that is why you know because some people see it as a weakness or will ask me about it, ‘well you guys got to focus on something’ ‘like no, no, no you don’t get it’ like lack of focus is better and it also it is our contribution to the ecosystem. (J17)

All the worker center organizers spoke to the importance of developing the connection between the worker’s personal experience and the other elements necessary for structural change. The following quote expands on this point:
One, it is to make it so that the personal problems that you face are understood as systemic. So the fact that you are not able to afford a truck and start your own company actually isn’t your fault. It is not that you have not worked hard enough, it is not that you did that last job bad, it is that there is a system in place that has you where you are in the economy. Two, is that the organizer opens up a sense possibility... it doesn’t have to be this way. That is how it is but it does not have to be this way. And then three, is creating a sense of agency, of you can be part of making it what it should be and what it could be. So your personal problem is not yours alone, you’re actually part of a group and that groups is in that situation because of a system. Those systems are not invincible and they are not permanent, they can change and you can be a part of it. That is the retelling of the story of self that organizers have to do with people. (J45)

Connecting the individual worker, or workers from an individual workplace with other low-wage workers and building a membership base was also of central importance to every worker center, as it came up as a priority for every organizer interviewed (100%).

Everyone comes with a direct action that they want to take against their employer. I mean that is why they call us. That is why they come to the [worker] center and they come to the workshop, because they want to go after their employer. I would say 8 out of 10 workers immediately, they always want to ask ‘how do I sue my employer?’ That is their course of action. So the idea is to talk about it and say “we can sue your employer, it can be a long process, you might not win, and there's no guarantee that it is going to stop happening. So if you want to take that route you are free to take whatever route is best for you.” But the way we tried to explain organizing is “we want to try and change the system for all low-wage workers because you can work here, you could work there, or you can work all the way over there, you are going to face the same issues.” So it is really trying to help them identify their issue and show how it is not isolated and it is a pretty common experience, from workers that come from the same socioeconomic status, whether they are immigrants or colored folks, they face very similar issues. (J99)

As this excerpt points out, what differentiates worker centers from other social justice non-profit organizations is that, independent of their organizational focus (i.e. labor sector focus or geographic focus) they all view the economic sphere as elemental to achieve social change as they are serving witness to the impacts of structural violence on racial minority groups.
So worker centers view themselves as making fundamental changes, while they are providing basic services and so... While they are relating to those institutions, you know, so in some ways worker centers kind of touch on, we are sort of trying to shift that ideological ground. (J39)

So for me what is radical about our model is that we have a trucker, a domestic worker, and a restaurant worker who are looking at each other being like, ‘we have the same mission.’ Because it is fostering class solidarity. For me what this is, is it allows people to develop some class consciousness and relate to one another to say, ‘we as a class of workers need to seek class-based solutions’, right. So to me we are forging class identity across all these different boundaries. They are uniting as a class and moving forward structural change based on a bit of a class analysis. (J17)

Worker center organizers shared in their interviews how they are approaching structural change work with a shared vision of developing power in three arenas, in the social, economic, and political.

For us [in the Mexican labor movement] it was important [to understand] organizing socially, the economically, and the politically, if you handle all three, you move where you want and you have power. If you do not handle all three you will not have power as an organization. And here [in the American labor movement] there is no power. The unions have the economic power but not political or social because in the political they are dominated. In the social they do not do work, they do not care.

*Para nosotros [en el sindicato en México] era importante la organización social, la cuestión económica y política, si tu manejas las tres, te mueves donde quieras y tienes poder. Si tú no manejas las tres no vas a tener poder como organización. Y aquí no hay poder, los sindicatos tienen el poder económico mas no político, ni social porque en el político están dominados. En el social no hacen trabajo, a ellos no les importa.* (J12)

a. **Social power.**

Worker organizers spoke to the importance of public pressure in the support of workers facing exploitation in the workplace. This strategy was reportedly the first course of action for organizers in support workers willing to engage in this manner with their employer. The following quote shares how this social pressure, also known as direct action, is
one of the first approaches as a way of circumventing the institutional channels for wage
recovery and is a method that is commonly used by all the worker centers.

I remember that specific case because it was my first one, but it was like meet with him, get all the stuff down and be like what I want to do is take the first plan of action, is to reach out to the employer directly and be like “this is not just [worker] any more, my name is... and I work for me a community organization [worker center], we’re working with him to resolve this issue right now.” You know it is like, from the get go, direct and kind of being like, “we don't want to escalate. We don't want to take it to the Department of Labor, we don't want to file a complaint. We don’t want to reach out to our network of lawyers. Let’s just figure out this together” A lot of times he was like, ‘alright, let's do this and go from there.’ All those strategies like going to their job site and knocking on people’s doors and talking to the owner of the house and being like “this guy is actually not paying the workers.” To even process stuff some of the same tactics that a lot of other worker centers are still using right now. (J36)

I believe that all the workers' centers and I have noticed it by talking to some colleagues, we all have more or less the same methods; the first is to give them the chance to stop doing what they are doing and for them to pay the people and, if they do not, then you know there are ways to press. Then, either you go with the lawyer or, if it is about organizing, you have to do the picket line or make a public complaint, at the end, depending on the situation and the environment that exists, along that path you walk. And we all do the same.

Yo creo que todos los centros de trabajadores, y lo he visto a través del de estar platicando con algunos compañeros, todos tenemos más o menos los mismos métodos; que el primero es darle el chance de que no lo sigan haciendo, verdad, y de que le paguen a la gente y, si no lo hacen, pues ya sabes que hay presiones. Entonces, o te vas con el abogado o si se trata de organizar hay que hacerle el picket line [una protesta] o hacerle una denuncia pública, en fin, dependiendo de la situación y el ambiente que exista, por ese camino caminas tú. Y todos lo hacemos igual. (J67)

Worker center organizers also shared how the mere threat of social pressure supported finding resolution to the workplace injustice, even where there were no laws being broken.

Given the limitation of legal protections, worker center organizers rely on social power as a way of supporting workers who would otherwise never find support addressing any grievance. For
workers who are often marginalized and left without support a simple demand letter from an organization is able to go a long way. The following quotes exemplify the importance of the support of the worker center for vulnerable workers:

So for us to use public pressure and to tell a different side of the story which is the moral side, where you can say “well, well, well it is not against the law to make workers to come at 5 a.m. on Christmas. Yea it’s not but you look like a real asshole.” We can tell that side to the media and we get a priest to come in. (J19)

The other thing that we have achieved is that the community is getting educated and there are several triumphs that we thought would be lost, some big and some insignificant little ones, that with a simple letter to the employers would return their job or pay, or when they said: ‘I’m not going to pay you. Do whatever you want.’ And when they went to see lawyers and the same lawyers told them ‘no’ and correctly because there is nothing [they could do legally], right. “Well, the lawyer is right, but ok let’s try.” It’s when we told them, “well, we are going to help you in some way” and a resource is to write a demand letter. Which, at the end of the day, is a piece of paper that they can grab, throw away and that’s it, or they can see that ‘yes.’ And it is a satisfaction when they say: ‘you know, I did achieve this, thank you’ and you say, “well it was not much, but we did it.”

La otra es que hemos logrado que la comunidad se eduque y varios triunfos que hemos visto como perdidos, unos grandes y unos bien pequeños insignificantes, que con una simple carta al patrón les devuelven su trabajo o les pagan, o cuando les dijeron: ‘no te voy a pagar. Hagan como quieran’ y cuando fueron a ver abogados y los mismos abogados les dijeron pues no, ósea, y correctamente pues no hay nada… verdad… “pues tiene razón el abogado, pero ok vamos a intentar.” Es cuando les dijimos nosotros: “bueno, vamos ayudarles de alguna manera,” y un recurso pues es una carta. Que, al final, es un papel como pueden agarrarlo, tirarlo a la basura y ya; o pueden ver que sí. Y es una satisfacción y no cuando te dicen: “pues sabes que si logre esto… pues gracias” y dices: “pues bueno no fue mucho, pero lo hicimos.” (J12)

Social pressure requires support from other actors and the worker center serves as the convener of allies and supporters in the defense of vulnerable workers. Worker center organizers discussed relying on partnerships with labor unions, the religious community,
community-based organizations, social service providers and the media, specifically the Spanish press.

I'm partnering with these other group who are becoming my allies ... [Baptist Church], [Community Coalition], [Community Development Organization], [Social Service Organization] and so I think actually those are the groups that I feel like I can really rely on because and it came from the candidate’s forum now that I think about it... from the first one, where I feel like we were united together. I feel like out of the five of us are the ones that are most invested in partnering in where we can actually trust each other and actually support each other when we need to, to help our own organizations grow.

And the media, of course. It is not that the media supports... although at times they are willing to present the news in a way that favors the workers. That is part of educating the media too.

Y los medios de comunicación por supuesto. No es que los medios de comunicación apoyen, aunque en algunos momentos sí están dispuestos a presentar las noticias de forma tal que favorece a los trabajadores. Eso es parte de educar también a los medios de comunicación. (J34)

b. Economic power.

Economic power was defined by one worker center organizer in the following way:

One is through economic [power]. So as workers our labor is one of the few ways that we do have power, either withholding our labor, slowing it down and stuff like that. And so but you need have a critical mass of workers to be able to have enough economic power to do that. (J74)

In workplace organizing, economic power is indispensable; by organizing in the workplace, workers are in a position to negotiate for improved conditions and higher wages. The following excerpt captures this understanding held by worker center organizers:

If you want to double your wages, we will run a campaign with you for it. It is a question about how much worker power you have, because of the convenient thing when
something is a legal [issue] the convenient thing is that you have a legal angle, right. That is the pressure point. If people have an extra-legal demand. You are not entitled to any right to it but you want it... if you have 75% of the workplace, you are going to get it. It does not matter if it is a legal right. It is sheer power. (J17)

Within a city of such economic importance as Chicago, worker center organizers also understand the role of economic power in a global city. They view the workers they organize as what bolsters the industries and services sectors that allow this global engine to function.

Chicago, it is the second largest factory hub in the United States, next to L.A. and it is the first or second largest warehouse of hub in the United States. It is incredibly important for capital. We often think of factory jobs as all gone from the United States but the reality is, it is still the biggest driver of the regional GDP... in our area it is manufacturing. And a lot of those workers, if not most, are immigrant workers. (J39)

So the west side is home to the second largest manufacturing cluster the nation or the second largest in the nation. It's humongous. Ridiculous amount of revenue. Over like 70% of the companies reported good standing. (J71)

There is a realization by the worker center organizers of the economic power of low-wage workers to have a significant impact on industry and sectors within this economic engine.

Respondents seek to organize workers in order to develop the necessary collective economic power to address the scale of the economic violence facing vulnerable workers. This is how one organizer captures the view:

We really want to focus on building power and economic power of workers because we picked this industry because of these groups of workers, if they were united could change the world. Literally these are workers that if they are united, could turn off profit like a switch of half of the Fortune 500 and so that kind of power, is necessary if we are going to deal with, you know... the fact that social service agencies are... are we even going to have social service agencies in 5 years in the state? (J39)

They also are aware of the enormity of the task, given the size of their organizations compared to the industries that they are looking to challenge. The largest worker center in
Chicago employees six organizers. Their limited organizing capacity does not allow worker centers to build the economic power necessary to effectively challenge the labor sectors they are targeting. The following quote captures the moment where the organization was seeing a shift in the labor industry and was receiving request for support from an overwhelming number of workers, the organizer highlights how this was a lost opportunity to develop economic power:

I mean we could have organized at that time tens of thousands of workers if we had the capacity to do it. We just didn’t have the capacity. And so after that, the workers were asked to meet and almost everyone had been fired, ‘okay who did not have any papers’ right. And we decided that no, we are going to start focusing on the temp workers and organizing against the temp industry because that was undercutting every single campaign that we had. And that is where everyone started working. And that is how we started with that.

We would target companies that use that strategy [the use of No-Match to target immigrant workers], like specifically target them to try to stop that and make examples of them. So we were trying to limit the growth of the industry and the industry did. Like it stopped growing somewhat like around 2004, ‘05, ‘06. But then after the recession, it went way down. In the recession in like 2008 and ‘09 and then in 2009 it started to explode again and now it’s because I think because companies shut down a lot in the late 2000’s in the recession. A lot of manufacturing shut down in Chicago. And when it started up again they did not hire people directly and it was not just the undocumented folks it was like almost anybody looking for work. (J13)

Maximizing their organizational power when it came to workplace organizing was a critical consideration for organizers from all the worker centers. Given the limited staff size of worker centers, limited to 1-6 staff organizers, each with a variety of assigned roles, prioritizing where staff time is allocated becomes critical to maximizing economic power. The following quote captures the challenge in the following way:
So this is where the line is drawn a little bit between organizing and service provision for [our worker center], is that somebody might have a really compelling case but if they are not willing to come to a workshop and get trained up, get exposed to organizing, get agitated and everything else and commit on paper to be an member [of our worker center]... you know it hurts sometimes “aw man that would be a fun one to take” but we have to remain disciplined and say “no, we are not going to meet with you we're not going to intake” because we just have to... As soon as we start like investing in something without knowing that there's going to be an investment back. We start to lose capacity. Which means we are going to fail our other members who have already committed to us that we already promised, “yeah we are going to fulfill our end of the bargain with you.” So that is the sort of the discipline piece. So we lose potentially strong cases but ultimately you know we maintain we continue to build power and that is just because we have so many workers coming.

If you have one person out of 400 in a factory that says I am not going to getting paid overtime and nobody else is and we say to them come back with more workers and they don't, we are not going to work with them. It does not build power, it bleeds power because I am going to have an organizer spending time tracking that case, accompanying them to the hearing, translating for them, right. Meanwhile we may have a hot shop with like 60 workers at a plant that are willing to do a walkout over you know paid sick days or... you know what I mean. So it is like takes the same amount of time maybe to be tracking one guy in a DOL [Department of Labor] complaint or working with a committee of 30 at a franchise. (J17)

c. Political power.

Worker centers have been able to drive policy change at the city, county, and state level. However, as the worker center movement continues to mature and business interest react to pro-worker policy being put forth, worker center organizers shared the importance for the worker center movement to establish sustained political power. One organizer offers an example of what a sustained political power could look like by utilizing the 2015 Chicago mayoral elections:

I think that in Chicago in particular, we have an amazing thing happened during the municipal election and you had a progressive running Chuy Garcia running and it
really energized people from all over the city fighting all sorts of things, in an electoral campaign. But electoral campaigns end and when that ends it stops. So I think that if the Chuy campaign, which is never going to happen, but if it were to keep running forever and ever and ever, we would have some amazing power right now. But that is not the way electoral politics works, it ends and it goes back to being nothing. That machinery that organized the city for x amount of months, just disappears overnight. So that is the problem with electoral politics but I think what electoral politics is able to do, is bring all these other entities together, bring all these interests together, to fight for a collective change and I think that is what we have to strive for it because otherwise we do have xenophobia or other people taking advantage of that for their own benefit. (J99)

In their effort to build political power, two initiatives within the worker center movement stand out; the creation of a Social Welfare Organization 501(c)4 by one worker center and the collective strength of The Coalition as a vehicle to build political power. The following quote speaks to the decision for his organization to create and operate a 501(c)4, which allows it to actively engage in political lobbying and campaigning:

I mean it is just basic power analysis or organizing 101 like you can't you can't fight with... it's like going into the boxing ring and trying to fight with one arm tied behind your back or something like that. And you need to be able to wield power in every venue. You know I think direct actions help and can help shift the dialogue and shift the narrative. But there comes a point where you know... if a politician or someone can stomach having a thousand people in their front yard for 45 minutes or an hour like if they can endure that, there's not much else you can do when it comes to direct action. You can shame them as much you want, but for some people, a lot of people just don't have shame anymore. And so you have to be able to get them in other ways. So it's either do kind of economic sanctions or if they are an elected official get them out office.

The Coalition also serves as a space of building collective political power. Every worker center organizer interviewed was actively aware of and engaged in the operations of The Coalition. The following excerpt captures the vision of establishing The Coalition as the creating a collective voice for the worker center movement in the political arena.
I think we can do that more as worker centers. I think there is like a ‘well we work with the most oppressed and we are a tiny community organizations and we come from a place of powerlessness’ as oppose of this vision of what would it look like for worker centers to be actually leading and running the labor movement as a whole. If we understand that we are doing innovative work on the cutting edge with a population that is really the future of the labor market in general. What is keeping that from becoming something that scales or become something that actually sets the terms of these relationships as opposed to the like ‘well we are just a tiny little group that can't really get things done because of funding x y and z.’ We often take away our own power. (J45)

The creation of The Coalition in 2014 as an alliance of all 8 worker centers operating within Chicago allows the entry into the politic scene in Illinois as an organized player on the issue of low-wage labor. Although barely at a stage of establishing itself, The Coalition has the potential for impacting state legislation based on the collective history of worker centers passing legislation. Participants in the study shared their excitement at the potential. It is to be seen as to how this new found collective voice can contribute to building political power. One organizer points to the challenges and work required for the worker center movement to create the sustained political power that only a movement can generate.

[The Coalition] has that possibility. And I've been talking with [organizer] about that, but I'm not sure if everyone within [The Coalition] is there. Because again what that requires is kind of a movement mentality. So you know, very few of the worker centers I think do direct actions. And so you need to be able to like, you have to be willing to do direct actions. You have to be willing to do a shit ton of base building to have a critical mass of workers and then you also have to be willing to do the political work. (J74)

2. **Addressing the limitations of labor regulatory system.**

Worker center organizers all spoke about the importance of the workplace campaign as a site for not only addressing workplace abuses but also providing the ability to identify the limitations of the labor regulatory system. The challenge facing worker centers in
addressing workplace exploitation includes a multitude of factors, however chief among them is the inadequacy of labor regulatory enforcement of workplace protections. Respondents all recognized that the labor regulatory system and its limitations were a form of structural oppression to the vulnerable workforce they organized, which favored the dominant group, business owners, at the cost of the subordinate group, workers. Each of the worker center organizers recognized the value of spotlighting examples of the failings of the labor regulatory system as a crucial component of working towards structural change. The need to address those failings in order to strengthen the existing labor regulatory system was a key element of the interviews with the organizers. The following respondents highlight the limitations of policy and governmental enforcement:

At the same time the reality on the ground is like yeah, it's also illegal to not pay people minimum wage and I know that happens all the time. So even though people have quote unquote access to this benefit the rules and regulations are still being written so if employers are not doing this, what is the penalty? Okay who is enforcing it? Okay how are they in forcing it? You know what I mean, it is the street level bureaucracy total nitty-gritty side of things, that you are like, well, policy work we can celebrate but it is not as effective as it should be.

The closest we can get to that is like OSHA in that they can go to a workplace... eh, right. They have to tell an employer who they are, it takes about an hour for them to get processed and everything to get on the floor, in which case everything has been cleaned up quickly ‘and here put your mask on, put your mask on’ people are like, ‘wait we have masks.’ But everyone else like it is... there is no enforcement there is nothing, it is laughable and it changes... this is the thing that is also frustrating, where people are like ‘it doesn't matter who you vote for, for president like it is all, left to right everyone is screwed’ no it really does, really, really does because you get you put in the head, in charge of all these departments that effect every single person’s life every single day. One of them being the Department of Labor, the Department of Labor is awesome right now, Thomas Perez is doing amazing things. I like obviously love him. But it is also one of those things... where like before when people used to work the USDOL under the Bush
Administration literally said ‘this is the first day I got to do my job when Obama became president. Like we were told don’t enforce, look the other way, take your time, drag it out.’ So again even though we have laws on the books, the actual practice of the laws, just people have so much huge discretion in everything, we are seeing this in prosecutorial discretion, everything right. (J19)

So at the [Illinois] Department of Labor and how the [Illinois] Department of Labor has always been known as the entity to protect workers, now I don't even think any of the worker centers send any cases, or if they do very few to the [Illinois] Department of Labor because now you have a new administration that refuses really to protect workers and being run by this Republican governor so then now we can’t even rely on that. (J91)

Some respondents identified that the challenge of enforcing minimum workplace standards kept them from actually producing higher standards for workers than the minimums afforded by the law. The following two excerpts capture this point:

To me it is like you know, because I feel like the worker center movement fails if all we are doing is enforcing the legal minimum standards, like we have to figure out... Because then we are just enforcing the law and the government should be doing it anyway. In fact, this is just neoliberalism, the state devolving itself to a bunch of nonprofits to do their jobs right... This is actually, this is reactionary, you know. So forget law... otherwise you are just doing law enforcement. Like so to me enforcing the law is a means towards advancing worker interests.

I think that is a sort of... it is a shortcoming as well because if you are not thinking about improving conditions, if you’re only thinking about enforcing the minimum standards, the minimum standard suck. The minimum standards are insufficient. The minimum wage is not enough, right. Not being sexually harassed is not the victory, like you know what I mean. Like not being sexually harassed should be taken for granted and then you should be demanding some degree of respect above that. You should not be settling for the fact that you could go to work expecting not to be harassed by your superior. That should be taken... that should be the bottom, right. And if you are an organized worker you should be in a better position than that, not at that position, right. That is the whole point of organization is to make things better not to simply catch up with every other worker out there. And we fail as an organization if all we can sell people on is we are going to bring you up... we are going to bring you up to the absolute bottom floor that like other privileged workers take for granted. (J17)
a. **Policy solutions.**

One approach worker center organizers have taken has been to promote policy initiatives as a major element to the overall work of reforming the labor regulatory system. This was a major convergence point in the interviews, with 94% of respondents addressing this strategy, this was also referenced more than any other element. The organizers all highlighted the fact that advocacy for policy changes must incorporate the voice of the affected workers. Their approach to doing so included having workers educated their elected officials, share their testimonial in public hearings, and contribute to development of the policy itself. The following respondent speaks to the importance of this level of involvement for the worker:

The other side too is that it develops leadership in workers who think that you know so many people would say ‘they come here and they want to keep their heads down and not rock the boat and not get involved in anything,’ you know what I mean. It is very much because they don't want to be seen, they want to like remain invisible because invisible feel safe, when invisible isn’t safe actually the more visible the safer you are. That feels counterintuitive, right, so it is the organizing piece around that but then you know you are emboldened to say “you have a representative they have their supposed to be representing you. Talk to them, they are literally, you are their boss.” You know and people are saying like ‘I talked to an alderman, like I talk to a state senator’ and said ‘this is why this is important’ and like how that is such an amazing experience there's this ownership of like this bill. I helped pass this bill. You know I was a spokesperson for this bill. I helped other workers. Like that is really satisfying to so many other people so that is also a part of this process of policy-making is that, it is the leadership developing and changing the lives of people in different ways. (J19)

Policy changes were see as necessary given the structural oppression clearly established within the law in regards to protecting the workers. Worker centers as content experts on workplace exploitation and linkage in the community to workers facing exploitation and
exclusion from the workplace allow the organizations to play an important role in shaping policies that can better protect vulnerable workers and well as continuing to monitor conditions on the ground. The following two quotes reference the creation of five amendments aimed at strengthening the Illinois Wage Payment Collection. The first quote lays out the rationale to the development of the amendments and why worker centers needed a policy solution to addressing the massive scale of wage theft in the state. The second quote shares how even after introducing and passing state policy, continued monitoring is necessary and new policy is needed to be developed to continue to provide protections for workers.

Just Pay for All really was like [Organizer] sitting down with us and being like, ‘this is what you do for wage theft!?!’ He is like, ‘this is the prevalence of wage theft, these are the systemic, like small claims court and all these things totally are inadequate for dealing with it.’ He’s like, ‘if you get a ticket on your car and you do not show up to court you are automatically assumed guilty, right. And you automatically owe the court money, and if you do not pay they put a boot on your car, they send a lawyer's letter, blah blah blah. But if you do not show up to court for wage theft there is no ruling against you and there’s no collection system and there is no cost to you. So the employers that get punished are the employers that respond to Department Labor rulings and you all are like three organizers, the worker centers as a whole are liked 10-12 organizers dedicated to wage theft for the entire metropolitan region of Chicago. This is insane, what are systemic solutions that give the organizers and the workers more leverage and more tools to make it easier and make the government do the work that nonprofits are currently doing.’ And so I think that is an example of looking at what the situation is, looking at the systemic failings, and looking at the requirements and strain that it places on civil society and figuring out how a law can make that different. (J45)

And so after the 2010 amendments worker centers continued monitoring the new law and realize well actually, even when workers are able to prove their cases for wage theft they’re still not getting paid. They're still not able to actually recover those wages. There’s another loophole here that we need to close. So we ran a campaign for something called a wage lien, which basically gives workers a collections tool to be able to actually recover their wages. And it's quite a controversial bill. What it would do is if
an employer declares bankruptcy which we see happens all the time, employers will declare bankruptcy to avoid their debts. It prioritizes workers in the bankruptcy process so it gives them super priority status over banks and over other debtors that the employer owes and it basically says to the decision makers, which side are you on, are you on the side of businesses who are, it is known that they are committing a crime by stealing wages it's built into their business model. Are you on the side of banks or are you on the side of workers, right. Are you on the side of bad corrupt employers or are you on the side of workers. (J95)

Worker centers have been had a significant impact on the policy of the city, county, and state in which they operate. They have engaged within coalitions for policy changes as well as independently developing and passing legislation and amendments that strengthen workplace protections for workers. Throughout the past 15 years, in the 2nd and 3rd wave as outlined in chapter V, worker centers have been able to pass a variety of policy measures including (listed by year of passage):

2002 - City of Chicago Day Labor Ordinance to regulate temporary staffing agencies

2005 - Amended the Illinois Day and Temporary Labor Services Act to strengthening enforcement and increasing registration requirements for temporary labor agencies (HB 3471)

2006 - Four amendments to the Minimum Wage Law and Wage Payment Collection Act which included increasing damages against employers who commit wage theft and giving and gave the Illinois Department of Labor (IDOL) stronger authority to enforce the minimum wage, overtime and wage payment laws (SB 2339)

2007 - An amendment to the Minimum Wage Law that closed a loophole which would have enabled temporary agencies to pay their workers $.50 less per hour (HB 3752)

2007 - Two separate amendments to the Illinois Human Rights Act (HB 1743) and The Right to Privacy in the Workplace Act (HB 1744) to protect workers against discrimination by misuse of the Basic Pilot Program of the Employment Eligibility Verification System (E-Verify)

2008 - Cicero Safe Space Resolution to prevent collaboration between police and ICE
2010 - Five amendments to the Illinois Wage Payment Collection Act (SB 3568) that increased enforcement of wage theft by creating an administrative process for workers to file wage claims within the Illinois Department of Labor, increasing the capacity of enforcement by the IDOL and increasing penalties and other deterrent mechanisms, also allowing workers to circumvent the IDOL and pursue civil action.

2013 - City of Chicago Wage Theft Ordinance allowing for the city to revoke the employer’s business license if found to have violated wage laws by either the Illinois Department of Labor or civil suit.

2014 - Separate city and state (HB 5701) “Ban the Box” legislations aimed at curbing discriminatory hiring practices against people with criminal convictions.

2014 - An amendment of the Illinois Wage Payment and Collection Act to regulate the use of payroll cards by employers and allowing employees to voluntarily agree to their use (HB 5622)

2015 - Passage of the Cook County Wage Theft Ordinance which allows for the repeal of the employer’s business license, as well as making them ineligible for contracts with the county or receiving tax incentives.

2015 - Food Cart Ordinance in the city of Chicago which legalizes and regulates food cart vendors.

2016 - City of Chicago and Cook County Earned Sick Time Ordinance allowing workers to accrue 40 hours of paid sick leave every year.

2016 - Passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights which allows domestic workers the same employment protections as other workers by including them within the Minimum Wage Law, the One Day of Rest in Seven Act, the Wages of Women and Minors Act, and the Illinois Human Rights Act. (HB 1288)

2016 - An amendment to the Illinois Wage Payment and Collection Act (HB 3554) which created a special fund within the IDOL to hold the money collected from employers instead of being sent to the Comptroller’s Office.

Currently, the Coalition is seeking the passage of legislation that would provide more collection tools for workers to recover owed wages through a wage lien (HB 1290). A separate measure titled the Responsible Jobs Creation Act (HB 690) introduces in 2017, seeks to create a temporary workers bill of rights. Worker centers have also been involved in other policy
initiatives such as legislation to increase the minimum wage, driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants, a non-cooperation ordinance within the Cook County jail, the passage of state and city legislation that would allow recognition of worker cooperatives, among many other policy initiatives that directly benefit the membership of the worker centers. Worker center organizers have also engaged in advocacy efforts on work-related issues such as their participation in the 2005 governor’s state panel on Latino workplace injury and fatalities. Organizers highlight the importance in their policy work to protect both the policies that have successfully passed, as well as established policy. Examples cited by respondents include the successful defeat of HB 1631/SB 1314 in 2007, an attempt by the temp industry to water down the protections of the Illinois Day and Temporary Labor Services Act, and the continued attempts by Governor Rauner to reform worker’s compensation laws in the state (Rauner, 2016).

b. **Legal strategies.**

Making the connection between legal supports and the workplace campaign to address a larger systemic issue is what makes the use of legal strategies elemental to the worker center model that goes beyond merely referring workers to receive legal representation. One respondent explains it in the following way:

That [Organization] was sort of founded on this idea that, legal strategy can support community organizing and that you know... Especially for workers who are coming into a worker center for a particular problem. Organizers job is to talk, is to relate what they think is an isolated incident to a much larger trend, right. And say that you know ‘actually what you’re experiencing, the fact that your wages have been stolen is not just because the boss has an issue with you. It's actually part of the business model and its part of a much broader economy where people in power think that they can abuse our
communities because we're seen as disposable and the only way to fight back is by building relationships with your co-workers and organizing.’ You know and so there was this idea right that the legal strategy can support that, can provide real immediate support to a worker for immediate legal representation. (J95)

So our model has always been to use the legal services to test for the gaps in the law. And as we identify those loopholes, that informs our policy campaigns, and then when we win those policy campaigns, we continue monitoring the rollout and enforcement of those new laws and through that, it's like a cycle right and then we identify the new loopholes and again it's like a spiral that gets bigger and bigger.

For example, we filed these Race Discrimination Class Actions against the temp industry alleging that black workers are completely shut out. There is a whole row of temp agencies along Roosevelt Road and on one side of the street is you know 87% Latino and on the other side of the street is 97% black and you get who is assigned and it is 99.9% Latinos, right, no blacks assigned at all. This does not make any sense and the unemployment rate is higher among blacks and so you know we file those suits and all of a sudden all of them started hiring like 25% are black right away. Just because of that little bit that we did, but it is only because they were 0 before and so yeah that is a huge improvement. (J21)

Once again one respondent utilized the example of the amendments to the Wage Payment and Collection Act passed in 2010 and the subsequent challenges workers have had in collecting owed wages as business owners adapt and find different ways to skirt the new regulation. Utilizing legal strategies as a method to spotlight the situation of exploitation, when no individual attorney would take on a losing cases, speaks to the necessity of incorporating this type of strategy as a necessary element to structural change.

You know we had a case that we did knowing we were not going to win, because we couldn't get individual liability and the company had been closed and they had sucked all the money out and so they personally had it but the Wage Payment and Collection Act didn’t allow us to go after them individually and that was one of the big changes. (J21)
Worker centers continue to find innovative legal strategies to support workers in workplace organizing. The use of the powers of the National Labor Relations Board as a legal support to worker organizing has been on the increase by worker centers across the country and in Chicago (Cancino, 2014; Greenhouse, 2015). One organizer explains the importance of this protection for workers attempting to organize in the workplace for better workplace conditions:

We have done several years now and ... NLRB is stronger than the other agencies and that law is like the secret weapon of worker centers and I think a lot of workers centers including some that are part of [The Coalition] don’t realize; it is all about the NLRB it is section 8 Protected Concerted Activity that is where... that is the secret weapon. So we can ask for something that is not a legal right. We can demand paid sick days and strike over it if we do not get it and if we get messed with the NLRB can reinstate us with back wages. You know in a way that OSHA and Department of Labor can’t mandate that stuff NLRB can. (J17)

c. **Engaging with capital.**

In a capitalist society in which regulation and checks and balances against employers through the labor regulatory system are eroded, worker center organizers are clear about the essential role of their organizations to be a voice for the low-wage worker in challenging capital. This understanding is shared in the following passages and places worker centers in direct confrontation with capital interests:

So it is really about how do you foster the development of people who can take the reins of deeper societal change to me I think that is a role that worker center organizing and labor organizing generally plays and that is harder to do in other contexts because really the fight in the workplace is about capital. I mean it is a very clear fight is the domination of capital within society like happens everywhere but it definitely happens in the workplace. It is very clear in the workplace. (J39)
It is that capital has organized itself in various ways... and basically and in most main industries have their industries association and industry lobbying team and all this other stuff. In order to replicate the structures of power and like and there's no countervailing force except for the labor unions right, but in non-labor unions sectors or non-labor union areas... That is sort of the worker center space. (J17)

The efforts to revise legislation and utilize the law to develop a challenge to structural oppression has been has not gone unnoticed by business interests. The worker center organizers identified examples of how the various industries reacted to their initiatives and organized to resist these efforts. The following two quotes provide an example of the challenges posed by capital interest in the resisting policy initiatives that benefit vulnerable workers:

The Day Labor Act got passed before the day labor industry was organized. They created an association after we passed the law. So we really got in there and snuck that in and you know we've been fighting to protect it for years. But we got in there without a lot of resistance. The Wage Payment and Collection Act law everybody knew about, the wage theft law, everybody knew about, so there was going to be the opposition to it. (J21)

That [policy initiative] was like railroaded by the Staffing Services Association. I had no idea who the opposition was until I went to Springfield. Wow that's powerful. Within one month we had a state rep that was in full support in the first meeting. The lobbyist hit him. The opposition’s lobbyist hit him with a number of benefits and perks. And he literally looked at us when we were in Springfield as was like ‘what bill.’ So I was like, “oh that's some power of capital.” (J71)

Given the amount of resources at the disposal of capital interest to challenge the initiatives of worker centers, including legal challenges towards worker centers, worker center organizers spoke about having to be resourceful and rely on allies in defending themselves from industry attacks. The following quotes speaks to the experience of one worker center.

It has caused one [staffing company] to, they became... the staffing industry basically got behind them and they became kind of like the front for fighting against the
discrimination stuff and so what they did was, they filed a lawsuit against me, they filed a lawsuit against [organizer], they filed a lawsuit for the [worker center]. They started suing our members. We were basically being subpoenaed for all our emails about our relationships around the issue of discrimination with [attorney]. We had to file a lawsuit against [staffing company] which had this very aggressive legal strategy against us right, I believe was funded by the [staffing industry]. We had to fight back with like legal defense. We had a temporary restraining order against us which meant that we could not go protest in front of their facilities or in front of their client companies or we would be in contempt of court. And so what we did was we used our allies with [unions] and with the local and regional director of the NLRB and we filed an unfair labor practice against [staffing company] which had this very aggressive legal strategy against us right, I believe was funded by the [staffing industry]. And we won. The NLRB found cause and it was unfair labor practice against us okay, against our members, against the workers who they sued and now what we have done was carved out a space under the National Labor Relations Act for us to do concerted activity as a worker center, not as a labor union but as a 501(c)3 non-profit. It was just precedent-setting. Yeah I mean it was it was the attorneys who came up with the idea of how to do that right. They came down about four or five months ago and then the minute that that happened the [staffing company] dropped all their suits against us and against the workers. (J13)

d. **Challenging unions.**

Even though labor unions are essential to improving workplace conditions for workers and worker center organizers viewed certain unions as strong allies, they also highlighted some of the challenges and limitations of labor unions, including their perceptions of the lack of democracy and corruption within certain unions. Worker centers seek to be the voice of workers within all spaces of the labor regulatory system and labor unions were no exception.

Unions are very protective over their image and over their power and so it is difficult to challenge them in a way that appeases the worker but does not piss them off as well. So I think that is the most prevalent relationship is unions and workers especially when the workers are not happy with their union. (J99)

The following excerpt provides an example of such efforts:
We decided to take on the AFL-CIO directly for like having all these really bad unions under the umbrella of the AFL-CIO. So the AFL-CIO did I think in 2000 or 2001 they organized like this big meeting in Chicago where they were bringing all the union presidents, all their members to support amnesty. And so we wrote a letter to the head of the AFL-CIO and said that unless the AFL-CIO would guarantee that union contracts in the future would be translated into the language of the workers, that the workers would have the right to vote on the contract, that the workers would have the right to elect their own stewards, that workers would have that basically, you know, that they would democratize the union movement to include immigrant workers then we would march on their AFL meeting, supporting amnesty. Because they were supporting amnesty but they were turning their backs on immigrant workers. And so we sent them this letter and so they sent 2 of their representatives to Chicago to meet with us and so on the day of the meeting we told all the members of these different factories that we were going to have this meeting with the AFL-CIO and they poured into the [meeting location] about 500 workers to meet with these 2 people from the AFL-CIO and they had like this... they were so angry. And of course the women who came from the AFL-CIO was tremendous, it was [Rep 1]. Yes, so they came and [Rep 2] was the head of the organizing department and they just lambasted these unions okay and then afterwards [Rep 1] said, ‘you know I cannot guarantee you that we can sign off on all these things today and keep you from marching on our meeting but I guarantee you we will have a dialogue towards the future and to fix some of these things because I think they are all valid concerns that you have.’ So she listened to them and the workers were not happy with her answer because they wanted results and so they marched, they planned their march on the AFL meeting with all the media there, right, and I mean they saw 500 workers there. I am not exaggerating it was like packed like it was not enough space for everybody in this [meeting location] and because they mobilized all their co-workers, right. Imagine [factory], [that factory] can do that too. When they mobilize like a factory that is a lot of people, right. Now so that is what happened... and so we got, so she organized the meeting with [Rep 3] who was the secretary treasurer of the AFL back then and [Rep 3] spoke Spanish and so [Rep 3] met with the workers on the morning of the event so a delegation workers went to meet with [Rep 3] while the rest prepared to march and [Rep 3] said that they, that the only thing that they could guarantee was that [Rep 3] would denounce the corruption in the union movement okay in front of all the union presidents. Which was a big concession. [Rep 3] was secretary treasurer of the AFL-CIO. So it was crazy because all these workers showed up, you know and they wanted to go hear [Rep 3], saying what they promised to say. So they come to the doors and there are all these organizers from all these unions there, okay. Who did not want to let the workers in. So they were like pushing the workers out of the meeting and the
workers were pushing their way in and they push these organizers out of the way, and they went in and they sat down in the [hall] and took their seats and waited for [Rep 3] to say what they promised to say during the meeting. During her speech [Rep 3] saw all of them sitting out there so [Rep 3] said what [Rep 3] promised to say while they were all starting to go to the front. I mean every union president from [union] to [union]. Yea and then after that it was crazy because a lot of the locals where these workers came from. A lot of them got axed. I mean it was pretty crazy but that was what the worker center was doing at the very beginning it was like these confrontations of organized labor. (J13)

Not only does this passage highlight a vivid example of how worker centers directly challenge the labor unions but more importantly how the unions are forced to respond to the work of the worker centers in Chicago. As the worker center movement has grown and evolved in Chicago, local and national worker centers have continued to challenge unions to evolve in order to make the general labor movement much more inclusive of the immigrant community.

The following quote provides an example:

There has been an enormous evolution of the way that official labor sees immigrant workers in the past 16 years and that is both because of the rise of the worker center as an alternative force, as well as groups within labor really pushing. So the Immigrant Worker Freedom Rides in 2003 was a real moment of saying like ‘look unions, this is actually who your base is or who your base is becoming, you cannot be xenophobic anymore.’

In 2006 NDLO N signs an agreement AFL-CIO saying we are working together on immigration reform and that immigration reform is a commitment of the AFL-CIO. That was an enormous sea change for labor, making it more and more official to the point now where you have the Adelante We Rise program out of the AFL-CIO where union halls are getting trained to be able to do the deferred action and citizenship registration programs. I was at a training where the [Trade Union] and [Trade Union] and I think [Trade Union] from the Chicago area were at the table getting trained in how to register undocumented workers to get them their temporary papers so they can organize them into their unions. So you are going from 2000... these workers are seen as scabs and being targeted for violence, to 2015 these workers are seen as potential members and
the unions are starting to have to figure out how to do that. The demographic change the rise of the sector and then push within labor has really forced that to happen. (J45)

By responding to the push of the worker centers, the organizers contend the labor movement in this country can only be strengthened. As one organizer put it, “the unions are like, ‘okay now we really have to be more smart about it. We are closer with these community groups.’ But it is like at the end of the day we all need each other” (J91). The following two respondents highlight the shift as they have begun to see it:

More recently, going back like five years, the unions are seeing that, in fact, the work that the worker centers are doing is important and they are giving it more value; they are giving it a little more support. Before, no one would believe us, no one liked us, we were troublemakers.

_Ahorita últimamente, hace como cinco años que las uniones están viendo que efectivamente el trabajo con centro de trabajadores es importante y les están dando más relief; les están dando un poco más de apoyo. Antes, nadie nos creía, no te creas, nadie nos quería, éramos troublemakers [alborotadores]. (J67)_

I think there is... and I give the unions credit for sort of coming closer to that, right, SEIU doing Fight for 15. What is the strategy in Fight for 15? We don’t know. You know, you ask them and they say ‘we don’t know exactly what the outcome is, but we just know that we need to fight’ and so you know that is a little bit, they are making ties in the community and stuff. It still had a little bit of the union top-down driven kind of approach but you see good synergy in places like that so, I give them credit. But I think it is happening because you know they are in such dire straits and because there is this alternative that is real and is not going away any time soon, right, these worker center models. So I think unions are having to adapt to that, in a good way. (J21)

3. _The Coalition._

One major step which solidifies the worker center movement in Chicago is the creation of The Coalition. In 2014, the worker center movement evolved from eight organizations operating with loose coordination to a formal coalition that looks to improve
workplace standards for low-wage workers and increase access to quality jobs. The following quote speaks to the potential many of the respondents see in The Coalition:

There's a real organizing opportunity here. Imagine what could happen if all eight of us were in community with one another and in a deep collaborative effort, which is how [The Coalition] was born was seeing all these amazing victories from [a previous iteration of the coalition which only included three worker centers and a legal clinic] and folks sort of were like let's open up to all eight worker centers and let's talk about what, you know what are the shared issue campaigns that all low-wage workers are experiencing whether they're a domestic worker or they're in temp staffing or they're in restaurant industry. There are some issues that all low-wage workers experience whether that be wage theft, or discrimination, or retaliation for organizing on the job, or some of these industries are just the most unsafe and unhealthy industries because they're so under-regulated. (J95)

Respondents who spoke about The Coalition (72%) were excited about the newly established potential to find the common ground and organize collectively on issues that impact the vulnerable workforce is the space where organizers at a much larger scale than any single or a less inclusive coalition could achieve.

I think [The Coalition] is a table around which all these organizations can sit. And it does not mean that they are going to collaborate all the time and it does not mean they are going to agree on everything, it does not mean any of that. But the opportunity is always there. The possibility is there. And I have definitely seen more like interchange of ideas about potential legislation. (J21)

And so I think [The Coalition] has been a space where we're trying to say like how do we talk about economic violence and how that, sort of, how do we sit at the intersections of economic violence and racial justice and gender justice and how about the people we see uniquely experienced those things at the center of those intersections. And how do we center them in our organizing. (J95)

Various respondents (44%) shared that The Coalition also provides the ability to collective pursue funding and develop shared resources to strengthen the worker center
movement in Chicago and allow the worker center movement in Chicago to continue to
develop to its full potential.

And so [The Coalition] was sort of meant to be on the one hand a space for collective
action and a space for those shared issue campaigns to really scale up. But then also,
what I think is really interesting and what I see is the potential for larger, the worker
center movement is this idea that union density is really low in the private sector and
the labor movement especially, now with this recent presidential election, it’s really
scary that the labor movement feels like it’s shrinking and I think so much of the
revitalization of the labor movement is going to fall on worker centers because worker
centers they’re operating in industries and in communities where employers are coming
up with new schemes on the backs of their communities, right. They are in the leading
edge of the changing nature of work towards contingency towards uncertainty and
precariousness, right. Those words that we love to use. And so in order for the labor
movement to bolster itself to continue to grow, worker centers it's going to fall on them
to try and find new organizing models new ways of doing things that are innovative and
bold. And in order to be able to test those new models they need organizational slack.
They need to be able to focus on things other than fundraising and keeping the doors
open. And they also need core campaign components that any good campaign needs,
right. You need a communications shop that can come up with a narrative that is
compelling for every community that should be, you know, that is a stakeholder in our
fight. And you need a communications narrative that really centers workers as the
experts of their own lives and elevates their voices as leading the solutions, right. You
need a research shop to be able to collect the data behind the campaigns we know,
behind the issues we experience every day. And we need solid data to be able to go to
decision makers and say “look these are the real trends that we know are happening on
the ground. Here's the data to back it up and this is why we need change.” You need the
legal services because they have the technical expertise to look at the law and analyze
where are the gaps and where are the loopholes and how can we close those. And then
you need a shared policy shop to be able to collectively advocate and to be able to
monitor what's happening, you know, in city hall or in Springfield. To be sort of the ears
on the ground and again to build relationships with legislators and so they know that
this is who worker centers are, these are who these workers are, and you need to be in
deep community with them. You need to be willing to take on their campaigns. And so
that is the other sort of core function of [The Coalition] it is the capacity piece. It's about
building up worker centers, strengthening them. So that they can grow and they can be
sustained.
4. **Imagining a new economy: The worker co-op movement.**

The growing emphasis with the worker center movement in the development of worker-run cooperatives (co-ops) as a model for economic access for vulnerable workers was another important finding in their engagement with structural change work. These initiatives are tied to efforts to addressing the challenges of gender inequality, challenging capitalist ideologies, and an attempt to develop additional sources of revenue for worker centers. The co-op model is another space of resistance within the worker center. The following quotes capture the rationale behind these developing initiatives:

The model that we are trying to introduce with the cooperatives is that there's just equality, that everyone is thinking the best for each other. Even with the group of women that we are talking to, like when we were doing the vision like "what is it that you want?" 'What we want is self-development. We want you know like... we have always been brought down by the man, como nosotros superamos como mujeres, how do we actually stand up for ourselves [as women]? How do we get to support that we need as women?' So actually developing something different where it is not just about your... I honestly I feel the thing about if the leaders start seeing this as more money making van a fallar [they are going to fail]. You know as they start seeing it more as self-development, which I feel that’s what the cooperativas [cooperatives] should be, where you're developing yourself in different... yeah you are developing yourself as an entrepreneur but you are also developing yourself as a person and becoming a stronger person. That I think is the idea behind the cooperativismo [cooperativism] where it is more working in unity versus just starting up a business with a few partners. I think it is called sole proprietorship or something. Yeah that is just strictly focused on a business where this you're focusing on a social purpose and that social purposes whatever you want to make but there's something where you are going to give back to the community and they are giving back to themselves. (J91)

When we're talking about our co-op, when we’re talking about the co-op movement and stuff that’s a whole other side of it. And it’s like why are we doing that because we need to find alternative funding sources. And also what do we do, where we build worker power within that. (J36)
The concept of cooperatives, like the cooperative concept should be natural. Human beings before capital, that is beautiful... (J87)

Developing co-ops has been an additional responsibility in the emerging worker center model, which poses many challenges in the development of worker-run cooperatives. Nonetheless as the following excerpts demonstrate, the intention and potential for growth is there:

We are also participating in the issue of cooperatives. This next... at the end of July, we are going to a national meeting of cooperatives. We want to create a system of cooperatives here in Chicago, several systems.

Estamos participando también mucho en la cuestión de las cooperativas. Este próximo... a fines de Julio vamos a ir a una reunión nacional de cooperativas. Queremos crear un sistema de cooperativas aquí en Chicago, varios sistemas. (J67)

Bringing a consultant from Mexico to be able to organize mas que nada [more than anything] help me train community residents on the understanding of cooperatives, to actually now starting to form them, although I am actually doing all the work which is also killing me because it is all falling under me but I think I am in a very good place. Because last year I was able to connect with a state representative who was moving a state legislation to amend the Illinois 1915 co-op law which does not define worker co-ops it defines consumer co-ops to now moving with the alderman and actually drafting legislation for a cooperative ordinance in the city of Chicago which is going to be modeled from the New York one. To try and to request for funding for the formation of current and existing and the new co-ops and also provide technical support and trainings. And so just I don't know, like moving from one thing to another. And then and now where we are incubating a food co-op and that is going to be specializing in burritos to also another co-op that finally decided that they were going to do childcare. So now we are going to start to moving into figuring out how like the process of a childcare agency to trying to do on social enterprise last year when we started making salsa Mexicanas and now the exploring of the beer, potential beer possibility so it is like a lot of different things that we are experimenting as an organization to see where that can take us and how do we get financial stability from this with the understanding that these co-ops will eventually, once they are up and running give back to help the formation of new co-ops. (J91)
The following excerpts were shared during the member check, as worker center organizers emphasized the importance of the developing co-op movement within the worker center movement.

When we started doing the cleaning cooperative, we had no idea how to make one of those things, but with a lot of effort, the people wanted to join us in working on it, and we found other things, we found laws contrary to cooperatives, against us. The intention of the laws in the United States is not to give the possibility to people to participate, is that small businesses or large companies get created, everything is directed towards the private industry. And when you talk about cooperatives then you talk about the big farmers in Illinois, they join a cooperative to sell their products, but the workers are not entitled to anything, they are still slaves of the land then... And so, here we start to see the development of some initiatives towards developing cooperatives by several workers’ centers. I have found this issue about the initiative of the cooperativization, of entering into the cooperative movement, entering not only the struggle for labor rights but, also, to organize so that they [the workers] can produce and can do.

Cuando empezamos hacer lo de la cooperativa de limpieza, no teníamos ni idea de cómo se hacía una mugre de esas, pero muchas ganas, las gentes se unieron trabajando, y encontramos otras cosas, encontramos leyes contrarias a las cooperativas, hacía nosotros ósea. La intención de las leyes en los Estados Unidos no es de darle la posibilidad a la gente de que participe, es de que se creen pequeñas empresas o grandes empresas, hacia la iniciativa privada todo está dirigido. Y cuando hablas de cooperativas entonces hablas de los grandes agricultores de Illinois, se unen en cooperativa para poder vender los productos, pero a los trabajadores de ellos no les toca nada, siguen siendo esclavos de la tierra entonces... Y no sé, pues aquí ya empiezan a ver algunas cosas de varios centros de trabajadores. Yo he encontrado la cuestión de iniciativa de la cooperativización, de entrarle al cooperativismo, entrarle no nada más a la lucha por los derechos laborales sino también a organizar para que ellos puedan producir y puedan hacer. (J67)

The start of the Illinois Co-op Coalition started and really pushed by the worker centers, we have three. But it is a side note because we have been talking a lot of like what is our future for sustainability of all this. (J87)
C. **Importance and Limitations of Addressing Ideologies**

As the Structural Social Work model outlines, the sub-structural or foundation of society contains the ideological underpinning of society that govern the nature of our social structures and social relations. Mullaly (2007) contends that these ideologies are often hidden from view, regardless of their central function as the foundation on which everything else is built. Within his model of society built with a liberal paradigm, he includes the foundational ideologies of individualism, inequality, pluralism, capitalism, representative democracy, and limited intervention (p. 248). Even though the purpose of the study was not to test the existence of these foundational ideologies, the findings did in fact reflect their existence.

From the onset, the research sought to develop a better understanding of the role of ideologies within the worker center organizers. Without knowing what to expect, this turned out to be an area of great richness in the interviews. Worker center organizers were very clear as to their understanding of ideologies as every respondent engaged with this set of questions in a meaningful way, notwithstanding the differences in the extent and depth to which each organizer responded.

1. **Understanding capitalism.**

The understanding of the ideological for the worker center organizers seems to center around an ideological understanding of capitalism and its impacts on every level of society as observed through the individuals and communities in which the worker center organizers engage. Organizers (72%) from every worker center mentioned capitalism in the conversation of ideologies which was the most cited ideological element to surface in the
interviews. This may not be a surprising finding given that as one organizer plainly puts it, capitalism as a system is geared, “to lower labor cost, to get the most production for the least labor cost. It is just pure liberal economics” (J13). Capitalism and the role it plays in the lives of the vulnerable workforce they engage with is an essential ideological component for organizers in the worker center movement. The following quotes reflect the direct impact as seen in the lives of workers as well as those excluded from the labor market:

The people who are really creating this unfair system which is usually the one percent, the people who are profiting, the big corporations that are profiting and making all the money while the rest of us are fighting for it any little scrappy money that is left over... Like the problems of capitalism and how we are always made to compete versus trying to have benefits for everyone. (J91)

These are people that were forced out of the formal economy to survive to live in a wage based economy. You've got to have money to survive, right. You can't go to the grocery store and buy groceries on hope. You know what I mean you got to have some money. (J71)

2. **Developing a class consciousness: Tying the personal to the ideological.**

Developing dialogue with workers about the ideological appears to be essential to the nature of worker center organizing. Sixty-one percent of respondents made reference to it in some way, respondents referred to it as developing worker consciousness. The conversation is elemental to workplace organizing. Various organizers spoke of the uniqueness of workplace organizing in having the marginalized people naturally draw those connections to the harm inflicted on their lives by the liberal capitalist ideologies in society. As one respondent clarified, “Capitalism exactly, it is the domination of capital within society like it happens everywhere, but it definitely happens in the workplace it is very clear in the workplace” (J39).
The following quotes expand on this share understanding in the workplace being the most evident place to understand the impacts of capitalism:

There's also something different about fighting the boss on the job then it is about fighting the landlord or fighting the corrupt elected officials or something. There is something different about when you are engaging with coworkers in a collective way and you are dealing with capital, right. Or when you're dealing with you know your employer, because that I feel is where some ideological stuff happens maybe in an organic way. Like you know when you are confronted with the fact that your employer, by paying you illegally under the minimum is able to afford a lavish lifestyle or is able to do other things with the money, that instead of investing in your family, right. That is where you can see some contradictions that I feel like don't necessarily get highlighted in the same way and other parts of your life. There is something about the conflict with your boss that can like... I think it has the potential to open up some ideological space for workers. In a way that is really natural that resonates deeply with them.

I am not saying it automatically happens, but it is a little bit easier or more natural for workers to develop that kind of... getting to see the foundation through engagement and workplace struggle. In other areas of struggle, I think it might be a little bit harder or a little bit like less direct or a little bit more gradual. (J17)

3. **Driving structural work.**

When worker center organizers speak about the challenges of addressing the impacts of structural violence inflicted by capitalism, they understand that they are in essence fighting against the current of neo-liberal doctrine that promotes deregulation and a weak system of governance in the benefit of capital interest. The difference in the findings seemed to lay on the extent to which each organizer could articulate and elaborate on the subject. Nonetheless organizers all were able to operate in their function as an organizer, regardless of their level of sophistication in the discussing the ideological elements of capitalism. Without the ability to examine to what extent each organizer was able to integrate ideological conversation, it appeared based on the responses that ideological understanding of the
position of vulnerability and powerlessness inherit within workplace dynamic in the neoliberal capitalist paradigm it is a key factor to maintain engagement of the workers. The following quotes highlight the viewpoint:

Worker organizing as a particular way where workers can become conscious of capitalism and the impact of their lives and understanding that the government is going to support the employers and so we need political change in a deep way. (J39)

Somebody told me, ‘they just want you to fight for them’ and it was true! Like we were a space were we said we were going to go fight, we don't know what is going to happen but we are going to fight for you and you know we would go and do a protest or direct action and you know whatever and the workers would keep coming back even though we lost, right. Even though we did not get the outcome we wanted. And I found that to be true a lot, that some of the best leaders were not out of winning campaigns. They were out of hard-fought campaigns but not necessarily winning ones. (J21)

All of the worker center organizers touched on leadership development in some way during their interview. The leadership development model allows for an educational opportunity to support the development of ideological understanding for workers. It is important to point out that not all worker centers mentioned the ideological as part of their leadership trainings and this study was not able to verify the amount of material or effectiveness of those elements into the leadership trainings. The following quotes ties together the importance of this integration:

I view my goal is developing politically conscious working class leaders and that really only happens through struggle and through struggle in a particular way that is democratic, that is where workers own the struggle and they have to kind of come to grips with the consequences of their actions, they have to come to grips with the strategy themselves and through that process become aware and conscious of capitalism, of racism of the forms of oppression that they are facing and develop leadership over time. (J39)
Ideology also was reported to also be an important part for worker engagement and retention. The essential question to organizers is would boil down to, what would keep workers active in a campaign when they are often looking for immediate resolution to a workplace situation? The following respondent provides insight on this point:

That's just my personal thing I don't know people will probably have some kind of recipe for it. But I think what works the most is being able to share those similarities and people trust in you. And doing what you say you're going to do towards those people. You don't pull them into something that's not necessarily what it is. You know 'cause that is a slippery slope. Because once they realize it isn't what you said it is. They're only going to show up if you are paying them. It becomes work. It's the principle that keeps them there. People will show up on principle. You know and they will be engaged on principle, they may not be there all the time or consistent. But if the principles that they reflect are in that space they will be there. But if it is like that Alinsky-style 'we sit in a room together and we develop this problem and then we go get the people to reflect that problem' it doesn't necessarily work, not in worker center movement. In unions, yeah. In union people have more than... there are other incentives associated with their attachment to that space. Like they don't get any benefit necessarily from us. We don't negotiate contracts for them. They are coming to us because either trust us or they don't. (J71)

One example highlighted the importance and benefits of integrating ideological training into the work. The following organizer shared his experience from his time as an organizer and member of a progressive union in Mexico City comprised of 29,000 members. This experience highlights the importance of ideological training to the sustainability of a movement and are captured in the following excerpts:

The vision was preparing, educating the working class, because our vision or that of the leadership was to organize the people as well. Because we realized that normally the working class with unions are not being educated and that is a problem, that is ... if there is no education, movements are undone quickly. Instead, when you have ideological, philosophical preparation it is more difficult, when there is education. Why? Because you have a higher level of consciousness, right. That's how we viewed it.
It was there that I learnt democracy, union democracy in its pure form. Was there corruption... yes, it is true. That there were bad things...yes, it is true. But because we were... we were part of a system of government and where corruption is a struggle and so for them [the government] they couldn’t...there couldn’t exist something clean, so they had to corrupt and there is always a weak mind that allows himself to be corrupted, right. But it was strong [the union], we were 29,000 workers, of the 29,000 workers, I believe 10,000 became at some point became delegates [union stewards], route technicians, secretary general of each section, sectionals, each section was composed of 5 to 6 elements, we called them sectionals, secretary general of labor, social fraction, in other words each one... and each was democratically elected. That is directly, in direct vote in general assemblies. And if a leader did not work out, an extraordinary assembly could be held and there he dismissed, before the ordinary assembly. That were ordinary assembly every four months. But if it was necessary, there would be an extraordinary for the delegate, for everything. So democracy was practiced there.

Well, what happened was ... they [the government] could not find a way to end the union. There was no way to end it because it was democratically-run. So in '95 then... on that day we received a call at 2 a.m. I was still in the assembly when they told me that we had to evacuate the module, the worker center, because he had already arrived... the grenadiers [police force] which is the government's immediate reaction force to evict all workers, they had [the municipal government] declared bankruptcy. That is something illogical, a government's company cannot declare bankruptcy, that can't be because it is the people’s money... But, well, they handled it that way and they did remove my companions as delinquents. The grenadiers arrived and took them all out. Some still asleep without dressing and they were tossed out.

Well, I had to be hiding for two months ... three months because they grabbed 11 leaders there. The legal adviser was caught, imprisoned. Then, they thought that having the leaders was the end of the movement. But that is the other thing, for us, it was always that no matter who is in front, as long as you have your conviction, have a preparation, the fight continues. Then those who were outside, we were like 22... 23 representatives, we still had to disappear, while the lawyers did paperwork and everything. Then, until they were able to get us legal protection, which was after 2 or 3 months we were able to come out of hiding... and to start the fight and the fight continued, followed for two years. There were daily marches, rallies, occupations. For two years daily, daily. It was a great experience because the children of my companions at that time were 10, 11, 12 years old were good leaders and are good leaders. That is, many of them were leaders in the schools, they are more active because, in Mexico, in
high school they are more politically active. There is much activism, then, many of these youth became activists. So in the struggles that are taking place in Mexico, by the way: electricians, metal workers, several large independent unions have left a great lesson to their children. That is, they have ... they thought ... as they like to say: "chop off the head and the body falls alone" It was not so. We were able to fight because we reorganized ourselves. We knew how to organize.

Ósea la visión era prepara, educar a la clase trabajadora. Ósea porque la visión de nosotros, o de los dirigentes era organizar al pueblo también. Porque nosotros nos dimos cuenta que normalmente la clase trabajadora con sindicatos no están educados y es un problema, ósea... si no hay educación, rápido deshacen los movimientos. Entonces cuando tienes una preparación ideológica, filosófica es más difícil, cuando hay una educación. ¿Por qué? Porque tienes un nivel de conciencia más alto no. Ósea así lo consideramos nosotros.

Allí para mí se manejaba las… allí aprendí la democracia; la democracia sindical, pura. Que había corrupción, si es cierto. Que había cosas malas, si es cierto. Pero porque estábamos... éramos parte de un sistema de gobierno y donde... es pugna es la corrupción, entonces no pueden, para ellos [el gobierno] no tenia que existir algo limpio, si no que tenían que corromper. Y pues siempre hay las mentes débiles que se dejan corromper. Pero era fuerte, nosotros éramos 29,000 trabajadores, de 29,000 trabajadores creo que pasamos como 10,000 hacer dirigentes delegados, técnicos de ruta, secretarios generales de cada sección, seccionales. Cada sección se componía de 5 a 6 elementos, le llamaban seccionales, secretario general de trabajo, fracción social, ósea cada uno.... y cada uno era elegido democráticamente. Ósea directamente, en voto directo en asambleas generales. Y si un dirigente no funcionaba se podía hacer una asamblea extraordinaria y allí mismo se destituye, antes de la asamblea ordinaria, que había ordinarias cada 4 meses. Pero si era necesario, se hacía una extraordinaria, ya sea para el delegado, para todo. Entonces había la democracia allí.

Bueno lo que pasa era que... no encontraban la forma de acabar con el sindicato. Ósea, no había una forma de acabar, porque se manejaba la democracia. En el '95 entonces... en ese día nomás recibo una llamada a las 2 de la mañana, yo estaba en la asamblea todavía cuando me dicen que teníamos que desalojar el módulo, el centro de trabajo, porque ya había llegado el... los granaderos, que es la fuerza de reacción inmediata del gobierno a desalojar a todos los trabajadores que se había declarado en quiebra. Ósea, algo ilógico, una empresa de un gobierno no se puede declarar en quiebra, ósea jamás, porque es dinero del pueblo. Pero bueno, ellos lo manejaron de esa manera y si sacaron
a mis compañeros como delincuentes. Agarraron y llegaron los granaderos, los sacaron. Unos todavía dormidos sin vestir y así los echaron para fuera.

Bueno pues estuve que estar escondido como dos meses... 3 meses porque agarraron allí a 11 dirigentes... al asesor jurídico lo agarraron, estuvo encarcelado. Entonces, ellos pensaron que teniendo los dirigentes se acababa el movimiento. Pero esa es la otra, para nosotros siempre fue el que no importa quién esté enfrente, mientras tú tengas tú convicción, tengas una preparación, la lucha sigue. Entonces los que quedamos afuera, que éramos como 22... 23 representantes todavía entonces tuvimos que desaparecer, mientras los abogados hacían trámites y todo. Entonces, ya hasta que nos logran conseguir un amparo, fue como ya después de 2 o 3 meses salimos otra vez... y a dar la lucha y la lucha siguió, siguió dos años. Tuvimos diario haciendo marchas, mitines, plantones. Dos años diario, diario. Fue algo de una gran experiencia porque los hijos de mis compañeros en aquel entonces tenían 10, 11, 12 años fueron buenos líderes y son buenos líderes. Ósea muchos de ellos fueron líderes en las escuelas, son más activos pues, en México, en la cuestión de la prepa son más activos políticamente entonces hay un activismo muy grande, entonces muchos de estos muchachos se volvieron activistas. Entonces las luchas que se están dando en México, por cierto: los electricistas, los de metal, varios sindicatos independientes grandes han dejado una gran enseña a los hijos de ellos. Ósea, ellos han... ellos pensaban que dicen: “mata la cabeza y el cuerpo cae solo” No fue así. Dimos la lucha porque reorganizamos nosotros mismo. Sabíamos organizar. (J12)

4. **Driving without ideological direction.**

As a way of highlighting the importance of the integration and understanding of ideology into organizing and the dangers of not doing so, respondents cited two examples of organizing models that can be devoid of ideology; Alinsky-style organizing and union organizing.

The following quotes capture some of the critiques by the worker center organizers of both models:

**a. Alinsky-style organizing.**

You know the Alinsky-style of organizing is anti-ideology. It’s bread-and-butter. Get people together about whatever they care about and let them organize. So
in it's worse instances you have neighbors organizing to get youth of color off the block or getting more police and things like that because of the apolitical nature. (J45)

Saul Alinsky was a reaction to left forces organizing in neighborhoods, right. So this was a way to take the same tactics but be able to do it in a McCarthy context by taking the ideology out of it. (J39)

So there's none of that in definitely Alinsky-style trainings are not like that. So my big critique of all the trainings I haven't found any that I would want to send my staff to. Lot of them are lacking when it comes to political education around you just basic stuff whether it be around race, gender, class, or ideology. They lack that.

So many problems with Alinsky in terms of race and gender and stuff like that. But the biggest critique I have is the whole like leave your ideology at the door and I think, when you do leave your ideology your values your beliefs at the door you get into a situation where, what happened with Alinsky where you organized a bunch of people to like discriminate against another set of minorities which you know the organizing he did in the Back of the Yards basically he does organizing to exclude black people from the area. (J74)

b. Unions without ideology.

So this is how the labor movement is in the United States right now, it's basically an antiquated unionism. This means a labor movement that is not developing because they lose, or have lost, their representation in the fight, right. They no longer fight. They are just trying to keep the contracts. And, yes if they can give in a little less, but give in nonetheless in order to keep the contract, they do it. And I do not mean all the unions, but a good large majority of them prefer to negotiate unfavorably to keep the contract, right. And to keep collecting dues. The question of electability of the union president is a myth that is not true, it does not exist. Until the son of a bitch dies is when they leave, or unless there is a very strong internal fight as has been the struggle of the Teamsters, as has been the struggle of Unite Here against ... the fight within the Unite Here that is basically a fight for power. Internal power struggles.

Así es como está ahorita el sindicalismo en Estados Unidos que es básicamente es un sindicalismo anticuado. Esto quiere decir es un sindicalismo que no se está desarrollando porque además pierden o han perdido su representatividad de lucha, verdad. Ya no luchan. Ya nada más se tratan de mantener los contratos, no. Y si, y si puedes ceder lo menos, pero ceder para mantener el contrato, lo hacen. Y no me refiero a todos los sindicatos, pero sí una buena gran mayoría de ellos prefieren negociar
desfavorablemente para mantener el contrato, verdad, y para seguir obteniendo las cuotas. La cuestión de la elegibilidad del presidente de los sindicatos es un mito, eso no es cierto, no existe. Hasta que se mueran los hijos de la chingada, es cuando salen de ahí o cuando hay una lucha interna muy fuerte como ha sido la lucha de los Teamsters, como ha sido la lucha de Unite Here en contra... la lucha dentro del Unite Here que son básicamente luchas por el poder no. Luchas de grupos por el poder. (J67)

The labor movement really like, community organizing, said we are going to organize on a non-ideological basis in the United States.

Because there is no ideology then all this fucked up shit starts... it’s the same in the labor movement. U.S. labor movement because it has no explicit ideology, you know gets led down all these paths and that is part of the reason why we are where we are. (J39)

The union does not educate its members; it is very rare when the union educates. The union is still in the service tradition. You pay me a due; I give you a service. I manage your collective contract and when there are problems I solve your problem. It’s a relationship that I call customer service. You're my client. You pay me and I give you a service.

El sindicato no educa a sus miembros, es muy raro cuando el sindicato educa. El sindicato se mantiene todavía en la tradición del servicio. Tú me pagas una cuota, yo te doy un servicio. Yo administro tu contrato colectivo del trabajo y cuando hay problemas resuelvo tu problema. Es una relación que yo le llamo clientelar. Eres mi cliente. Tú me pegas yo te doy un servicio. (J34)

That's one of the most interesting things I think that's going on right now is the FOP within the CFL and AFL-CIO. And the way I wrote about it in my analysis is that you can't serve God and the devil at the same time. You know unionism was a tool to protect the working class not to protect their oppressors. And you can't take stances like you took with Trump and the demands that you then listed to Trump that you want to see to enhance your ability to oppress people of color and then still think that you can be housed with the working class. Like you are using a tool that’s developed by the working class to oppress the working class. (J71)

**c. The absence of a true left.**

When examining the ideological continuum of political parties, Mullaly (2007) maps out the political parties of Canada, Australia, and the United States on a Left,
Center, Right spectrum. In engaging in this type of exercise he acknowledges various points, among them a recognition that parties can shift along the spectrum depending on the issue, or that individual politicians can also position themselves along a different point of the spectrum allowing for parties to have a range. Nonetheless, his analysis identifies the United States without a political party on the Left. His analysis places the Democratic Party right of Center and the Republican Party on the furthest end of the Right, outflanking the furthest Right political parties in Canada (Conservative Party) and Australia (Liberal Party). The notable absence of a Left in the United States is striking, while his analysis places three political parties from Canada and Australia to the left of Democrats. Some respondents in this study acknowledged how this reality has a tangible impact in organizing within the context of the United States. One respondent summarized it in the following way:

So in some ways it is kind of a weakness of organizing in the U.S. generally because there is no, it is really not a left or there’s not an area where we can have the deeper ideological debates in an easy way because most of that has been really crushed and so there is sometimes it does feel like nothing is guiding some of this work, actually. And I actually think it is a need. (J39)

The following excerpt was taken from the discussion after the member check, where one respondent elaborated on the impacts and risk of the absence of having a Left as part of the political discourse. The respondent articulates that no matter how many policy initiatives are successful, without contributing to building the ideological Left, worker centers as well as other non-profits, run the risk of undermining the growth of the Left in this country. The following passage captured one respondent’s perspective during the member check in discussion following the presentation of the findings:
There is a big, big danger in the worker center movement, I think, and that is from a completely Left point of view. Which is the new substitution of the labor movement, which is [as the findings presented] power without ideology. We are not only substituting labor unions, we are substituting the Left and that is a big danger, I think. Because the Left is acting through the labor groups through the worker centers, through many other non-profits, housing non-profits and I don’t know what else and what else. And I was saying last year, we passed I don’t know how many pieces of legislation in Springfield and who is we? We Leftists working in non-profits drove this legislation. We proposed it, we wrote it, we supported it, we love it for it and then legislation passes and who takes the credit is not the Left, it is the worker centers, it is the non-profit organizations. So the way to go is the non-profit complex, the non-profit industry, the Left doesn’t figure anywhere, yeah the Left doesn’t figure anywhere. So as Leftists, we are undermining the Left because the Left is pretty weak, because the Left is not acting as they should, you know political parties could be driving that legislation, but they are not because they are living in some kind of stratosphere and we the ones working with the worker class, the working class are doing the job of the political parties and are substituting the Left. And that is a big, big problem that I see. I mean that won’t deter me from keep working, of course. We are being effective somehow. But it is a big danger, because we can keep going on, and on, and on and we are never going to build any real ideological power as Left, because we all hide our Left position, we hide it behind the non-profit complex and industry. So who passes legislation, oh [The Coalition], oh the I don’t know what alliance, the blah, blah, blah. So the Domestic Bill was passed by the workers. That’s fantastic! But the Left, oh, no, no, no don’t ever mention the Left here, no, no, no. It is the non-profit groups doing all this work. (J34)

As another respondent articulated in an interview, true structural change requires the melding of the ideological with the structural:

It is like the idea of Antonio Gramsci with hegemony, right. That there is state power but there are also ideas that are infused in that state power. And that you know taking state power is one thing but if those ideas remain intact then with a regime change or whatever, you will still be reproducing because those ideas haven’t change so it is sort of like it is not one or the other, it is sort of a both that structures, and usually through the state but also through social structures, will reproduce ideas or an ideology. We can be out there trying to change ideology but also without taking some degree of power from those structures it is not enough to just sort of put ideas out there or, to change the way people think, if we don't have, if we don't occupy institutional power. So it is
sort of that dyadic between, you know, where as other people would be focused on capturing state power but without changing the ideas behind it is worthless. That's sort of the tension of figuring out how are we always trying to work these two ends. (J17)

D. Challenges

Developing an open conversation about the structural violence created by capitalism is a challenge for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that the funding of the worker center movement as structured as 501(c)3 non-profit organizations which rely on almost entirely on philanthropy, primarily through private foundation support. The understanding of the worker centers as organizations situated between the lives of people as vulnerable workers facing exploitation or exclusion from a capitalist system and being reliant of funding from private foundations created from excess wealth, was an element present in all the interviews. The following three quotes speak to this understanding as well as perceived risk felt in verbalizing the impacts and ideologies related to capitalism.

That is the whole thing I am saying, it is like recognize that you are a human being, that we are in a machine that makes us work fast to make the capital and run the systems but as organizers and nonprofit worker center movement we are a part of that system too. And we don't even recognize it. So you are trying to improve it, so that it goes faster? What are we trying to do here? You are trying to make it, you know, like what is it? I challenge the fact that, it is a process let's think about that, because it allows our members to think about it too, to see... going to that back question that first as identifying ourselves as a human being. (J87)

I look around the room before I say something bad about capitalism because you know, look I just know, I know the structure that I'm in now. I run a nonprofit organization that is dependent upon, you know, wealthy donors, foundations started by wealthy people and labor, which essentially is using the money for workers to fund the movement. And so I'm very aware of that. But, you know what can you do? (J74)

[From the member check] Nevertheless, here at the workers’ center it is not allowed, at least from what I see, unless someone can tell me otherwise, there is no space to
develop ideological work, they (the foundations) don’t allow it, aside from the fact that they have you controlled. It is control, the foundations are a tool for social control and oversight, because they know what you do and don’t do, who you are, what you do and how you operate. We are controlled by a general globalization and by the economy, which is fundamental.

Sin embargo, aquí no te dejan en los centros, yo lo que veo excepto de que me digan lo contrario, no hay algo para que hagas un trabajo ideológico, no te dejan, aparte que las fundaciones te tienen controlado. Es un control, las fundaciones son un control para la sociedad y para todo, porque ellos se dan cuenta de lo que haces o no haces, tu quién eres que haces y como te mueves. Estamos controlados por una globalización general y por la economía porque es fundamental. (J12)

Another challenge mentioned within the interviews is that capitalism as an ideology is particularly engrained within society, making it a hidden ideology as Structural Social Work model would contend. Respondents mention that despite the fact that it is not openly discussed, it is apparent in every aspect of social relations among people. Organizers contend that capitalism is represented within the societal structures that are so deeply rooted within this ideology. The combination has real-life consequences on the vulnerable workforce, those within the worker center movement are keenly aware of these consequences and as a result find it necessary to address. The following quotes capture the essence of how this ideology permeates the interpersonal relations and structural systems. The first example highlights the perceived interrelation of capitalism with the political systems, referencing the Democratic Party presidential primaries:

Yeah it totally does. No, it is fascinating it is funny that you said capitalism it is like, oh yeah duh. It is something that is ingrained in our society, you don’t even, there’s not even a place to question it. It just is... do you know what I mean? It is fascinating. Especially with Bernie Sanders running the political context currently where it is like, ‘socialism blah, blah, blah, like capitalism is the way to go’ and you’re like ‘no, no, no, one is an economic theory and the other one is a political system.’ They’re not the same,
like you cannot compare these things, it is democracy and Republic democracy versus socialism okay fine you got me there. Capitalism, is not a political system but it is so tied together in this country that you can’t divorce the ideas, you know. It is the driving factor in everything. (J19)

I call it now the machine, I don’t call it the U.S. or none of that, it is a mentality, it is a mentality that it is a system that I call the machine that sucks up your spirit, sucks up your talent, your thoughts, your creativity towards profits, the capitalist goal, white supremacy fucken capitalists dog-eat-dog machine and all the people in downtown of those, all that talent are going to feed this way of life that is destroying the planet and Mother Earth. Capitalism is capital before human beings. We don’t... the American people don’t challenge that at all. They just... they look up to the best examples of the people who have been successful in that. (J87)

And also ideologically the greater society, I think, if you think about it in our school system, a lot of religious schools included, but a lot of the different ways we educate young people and then kind of reinforce in adults is that in this country and in other parts of the world, but in this country, social and sort of you know, cultural, individual ways you act and behave it is somehow okay to have a moral view on those things. You know you shouldn’t go and slap someone in the face walking down the street. You shouldn’t drive into your car into another car, alright, that is bad. Or you shouldn’t get angry at your neighbor and throw rocks at their window, you know, and people say oh those are things that are wrong. For some reason, economically we make an exception. It’s like we teach people that in economic relations there is no right or wrong. If I got more than Arturo, I got more than him. He better try to find a way to get more than me. And there is no moral, look at that, if someone owns all the apartment buildings on this block and runs all the families out and brings in only wealthy people and there is gentrification that is not wrong. That the way our society is structured. Oh well you better try to be that guy. You better try to send your kids to school and to be lawyers and then you can buy those buildings. But there is no question... obviously there is right, but there is not a lot of questioning as to why do several thousand families essentially have control of 90, 95% of the wealth in the United States. That’s... you and I might say that just not feel I dunno...that just does not feel right to me, I am also not trying to hurt people. But imagine there is 10 kids in a room. Someone says hey kid you are taking a break at school, here's some lunch. Well if one or two of those kids punched everyone and grabbed all the sandwiches, everyone would agree no matter what your religion wait, wait, wait a minute, that does not feel right. But that is what our society does with our wealth. That is exactly what it does but somehow we are trained, oh that guy is rich, (claps) he is literally Man of the Year, you know, Time Magazine Man of the
Year, right. Why how many communities maybe did he destroy? How many tax loopholes? He has so many tax loopholes we can close the poverty gap with some of these billionaires paying taxes. But we do not, many of us question, but not that many. It’s you go through school and there is reinforcement that the economic sphere is not, you are not really supposed to have these moral feelings. 'Well I told this guy this and they fired me.' 'Well you are stupid for speaking up.' 'No, I just said don't yell at me.' 'Well hey all I know is that you do not have a job now do you, idiot.' 'But he called me these names' or you know whatever... 'I feel like people of a certain race do not get work.' 'Well maybe they should go to school and learn.' 'Well but they do not have no schools, they have been... You know there are no schools in that community.' 'Well...' So it is on you to somehow have enough wealth to really have what you and your family need and there is no way that anything is wrong. You know just... if in your neighborhood only 5 or 10 people can be reasonably well-off economically and we are not talking about being rich, reasonably well off economically, we are taught instead of saying there's something wrong with that... ten of us? Dang there are hundreds of us working so hard. It is taught, you better be one of those ten. You better go to school and get an A. Do better than Johnny, do better than Maria, do better. It is competition, right. You better be the smartest PhD candidate Arturo, because you are not going to get work, right. So instead of saying dang man I have been working all these years why can’t I even find a job, right. Not to blame people, but why isn’t there more employment in the richest country on Earth. Now many of us in our circles do, right. But that is what I kind of checked out as I was growing up. The economic sphere, you can say hey that is wrong that someone said something nasty about women or about races or whatever but if you talk about how come all of the jobs are minimum wage, minimum wage is so low, the schools are closing, people have to move. Some people find that wrong. Others are like well I guess they should have managed their money better. They probably wasted it. They should have tried to go to school they could have kept their homes, so yeah it is sort of taught to them do you have to be smarter and work harder. (J85)

The hidden ideological can only be explored if there is a desire and sufficient understanding to bring them to the surface. Understanding this component as a part of the equation is essential to the work, however not completely flushed out or understood in the same manner by all organizers within the worker center movement. One space of convergence by organizers was the acknowledgement that there is a need for further conversation, exploration, and defining of ideologies within the worker center movement. Organizers shared
a variety of challenges that impeded this level of dialogue within the movement, including the limitation in time or energy to add have this conversation within the time and space available, as well as the need for the preparation and exposure to theoretical understandings of ideology and theory. The following quotes capture the distinct challenges:

Not everybody can have it the same level. Some people have had training around this stuff, other people have not. So how do you have that conversation, right, people have different levels of experience. But I do think it is actually one of these things that it is needed and... well see, the other problem I think people see with it, is it does not lead to anything concrete right away, right. So next week you know it’s like ‘next week you have to do XYZ, how does that help us.’

It is very difficult because obviously we are underfunded we all have big visions around policy and organizing and it is like every waking hour we are doing that stuff and it is very difficult to have the other, the bigger conversation but incredibly necessary because it is... class consciousness is one of the major factors that comes down to. (J39)

We even as organizers need to prepare ourselves to even have these conversations and to even get to the same page you know because... and then even when we’re talking about privilege within organizing, right, and the social justice movement you know, cause it’s like who has the time to sit down and talk about ideology and like systems of oppression. (J36)

I do not know I think I have been so focused right now with the organization that I have not I stopped participating in a lot of these meetings there are several, there is like one group of people in Hyde Park who are now... I just have not been able to attend the sessions where they talk about oppression, capitalism. (J91)

I think basically it is a lack of class consciousness. We are not accustomed to talking about class consciousness. We are not accustomed to speaking properly about our class, of the class of the workers, of the class of the people that make part of this society and have been destined to be exploited most of the time without having power in our industry, our whatever... Because there is no possibility of that. So we have to understand that class consciousness is a thing that we should talk about and none of us is doing it. Not even I am doing it, nor am I speaking of class consciousness. And I think a time will come when we have to start talking about it. And our friends from the unions.
have to start talking about it if not they will be steamrolled. They will not be able to do anything.

Creo que básicamente es una falta de conciencia de clase. No estamos acostumbrados a hablar de conciencia de clase. No estamos acostumbrados a hablar propiamente de nuestra clase, de la clase de los trabajadores, de la clase, de este, de las personas que formamos parte de, de esta sociedad y que, y que hemos estados destinados hacer explotados de la mayor parte del tiempo sin tener que poder nuestra industria, nuestro lo que sea... Porque no hay posibilidades de eso. Entonces tenemos que entender que la que conciencia de clase es una cosa de que deberíamos de hablar de ello y nadie de nosotros lo está haciendo. Ni yo estoy haciendo, ni yo estoy hablando de conciencia de clase. Y creo que a la mejor va tener que llegar un momento que hay que empezar a hablar de eso y nuestros amigos de los sindicatos tiene que empezar hablar de eso porque si no se lo va cargar el tren. No van a poder hacer nada. (J67)

Nonetheless there is a recognition that the conversation will have to continue to be part of the development of the worker center movement filled with difficult conversations yet overdue conversations. As one respondents emphasized:

It is out of that love and recognition of human beings who are trying to do something great, that I personally feel compelled to stop us and take a deep breath. Because we are talking about fundamental changes to the system, right. But where is that knowledge coming from? Where is it based out of? Where is the rooted from? And if we are saying ‘oh it is coming from our base’ okay so ask that question to the base. Where is that coming from? Where is it coming from? Is it a Christianity concept, is it an indigenous concept, is it a labor, what is it? That is the questions I am asking. So people get nervous because they are all about this rush to get somewhere and I am like where are you getting to though? Where are you getting to? You're moving so fast you have not taken the time to take a breath and where are we getting to and why, what is it? Ask questions. (J87)

Parallels in these findings can be made with the profession of social work where an exploration of personal ideologies is often a part of social work education. This can be a challenging process for both those entering the profession and those with decades of experience in the field. However, the necessity to develop a deeper understanding of how
personal ideologies, as social creations, have an impact on our work in the field and as a profession as a whole. As one respondent puts it, “something is guiding your work whether you know it or not and you are going to end up in a particular place and if you don’t know where you are going, then that’s... there are particular consequence to that” (J39).

E. Potential for Defining the Ideologies of the Worker Center Movement

The desire exists among respondents to incorporate ideologies within the work much more explicitly. There appears to be a building momentum to the development of a common set of ideologies in the congelation of the worker center movement. There is also a perception by some of the organizers within the worker center movement that this is a crucial time in American history which will require accepting alliances and identifying shared ideologies with different contemporary social movements as an essential element to structural change work. The following quotes highlight this shared desire by respondents within the worker center movement to further the development of the ideological left:

So I mean it was a question of whether worker centers are going to make that same mistake and we are coming of age in a time where you know, like most millennials identify as socialist. We are in the middle of this civil rights uprising. We are in the middle of this period where what is the worker center understanding of that, what is the worker center reaction to it, you know. We have an opportunity in some ways to create that ideology. (J39)

[From the member check] Has anyone read the platform for Black Lives Matters? I would recommend that you take a look at it, it can be the jump off point to having a conversation about ideology. I believe a lot of what we are talking about is within the platform.

¿A alguien aquí leído la plataforma de Black Lives Matters? Yo recomiendo que le echen un ojo porque podría ser el principio para partir a una discusión ideológica importante.
I think worker center ideology also exists on the spectrum and I think that as [The Coalition] we are trying to do especially as we move into this next retreat is getting really clear what those ideologies are and identifying like how do we challenge ourselves to be more transformative. Because if we don't we're going to fail.

I think that many of the worker centers they also carry that knowledge, because of the nature of who they are organizing, they are working class black and brown people. So like I said I think the potential is there and I think maybe the conversation is there and maybe just we haven't had it collectively. But I think as [The Coalition] we’re thinking about, let's get really clear on our principles, let's get really clear on our values. How can we come up with like a Port Huron statement of [The Coalition] right, a black and brown manifesto, a black and brown working class manifesto that says this is our analysis and this is where we see the movement going and if we don't move toward in this direction then we fail. And then how do we bring our communities, the base, how do we bring our allies, how do we bring funders into that conversation and help evolve their thinking too beyond just what they've been doing for the past however many years. (J95)

The challenges persist, as within every movement, as to how to integrate all the differing ideological perspectives into a unifying understanding of the worker center movement’s analysis on the intersection of race and class as well as the needs for structural reform in response to the structural violence being felt by marginalized communities currently being felt within this global city and throughout the global north.
VIII. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study set out to develop a more thorough understanding of Chicago’s worker centers as an examination of how organizations can engage with a marginalized and vulnerable populations to work for structural change. For the researcher, the goal from the onset was to develop as comprehensive an understanding as possible within the study’s constraints. This led to the development of two central questions that drove the research to develop an understanding of both oppression and the opportunities for resistance through a structural analysis lens. The research focused on exploring the perspectives of the worker center organizers and their understandings of the elements of oppression in the lives of the workers, as well as to their explanation of the approach and interventions utilized by worker centers in intervening in all the levels of society as the operate with Chicago, as a global city.

The following two research questions were explored through the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 former and current worker center organizers of 8 worker center organizations in Chicago. The two research questions driving the work were: 1) How are the various factors present in the lives of immigrant low-wage workers, excluded workers, and the excluded workforce, in particular, elements of personal, cultural, and structural oppression understood by the worker center organizers? 2) How does this understanding shape and determine the interventions of the worker center organizer and the maturing worker center movement in the Chicagoland area at the three different levels of society; super-structure (interpersonal), structural (social institutions) and sub-structural (ideologies) in support of this vulnerable workforce?
Both these research questions allowed for the interviews to explore a myriad of subjects and produced a structural analysis of the forces present in the lives of the vulnerable workforce. The findings chapter allowed for a space of integration of the various views and understanding of the work necessary for structural change work. This comprehensive exploration also inadvertently led to the development of an initial history of the origins of each worker center organization as well as the historical roots of the movement in Chicago. This historic perspective led to a richer understanding of the worker centers as, less an eclectic mix of loosely affiliated worker advocate non-profit organizations, towards more of a developing movement responding to the dynamic and constantly evolving economic landscape of a metropolis like Chicago. The findings of this study indicate that the worker center movement within Chicago has the potential to actively contribute to the national conversation on the future of labor and social change work as a whole.

A. A History in Development

Chapter V provides a brief historical outline of the emergence of the worker center movement within Chicago, dating back to 1969. The history was developed from a compilation of excerpts drawn from the interviews where the worker center organizers shared their experience within the development of their respective worker center, as well as their understanding of historical developments that predated their involvement. These unexpected findings led to a deeper understanding of development of the worker center movement in responding to the challenges presented in the lives of the vulnerable workforce within the context of a city experiencing largescale shifts in the local economy.
As originally constructed by the researcher, the history was organized into two waves. Yet when shared with the worker center organizers present at the member check, they proposed the notion of understanding it as three waves. As outlined: the first wave, the era prior to the formalization of what is now defined as a worker center; the second wave, the early adopters of the worker center model within Chicago; and the third wave, the emergence of a new wave of organizations entering new areas not covered by the second wave organizations. This was also the era in which various worker centers developed intentional partnerships and coalitions to further their capacity and impact to achieve structural reforms. The researcher ends his analysis as the worker center movement seems to have congealed by entering a new phase of development, one united of under the flag of The Coalition.

The chapter ends with an initial analysis of the worker center movement as a response to the economic shifts within Chicago as a global city. Sassen’s (1998) conceptualization of the global city serves a key role in understanding Chicago as a space of economic shifts as it is embedded within the context of globalization, as the metropolis actively seeks to reestablish its economic position within the global economy in the post-industrial era embarking in a shift from manufacturing to a service economy and serving as a key commerce and distribution hub. Sassen’s understanding of global cities as a site for increased marginalization and contestation reflects the context in which worker centers have emerged in support of the marginalized population within.
B. Understanding Oppression in the Lives of the Vulnerable Workforce

Oppression is a central theme of exploration in this study. Drawing on understandings of oppression as integrated within Structural Social Work, this study sought to explore how oppression is understood by the worker center organizer as impacting the workers they organize. Specifically, the study sought to understand the experiences of oppression at the personal, cultural, and structural level and the interrelation among the three. The findings within the chapter seem to confirm the interrelation of the three areas within the lives of vulnerable workers.

Understanding oppression in the lives of the population being served by the worker center organizers identified some key findings, beginning with the extreme levels of distress that respondents identify within the population they serve. The interrelation of poverty within the three levels of oppression was also understood as a significant element to the vulnerability of the workers, making them much more likely to experience exploitation as well as its manifestation in many areas outside of the workplace. Respondents shared the challenges this poses to the capacity of the workers to organize in response to workplace exploitation. Oppression in the lives of the population fit within the five elements of Young’s (1990) conceptualization of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism was identified by the respondents as commonplace among the lives of the workers. However, when it came to the amount of time spent on the exploration of oppression within the interviews, on average interviewees did not spend as much time on the subject as anticipated. There are many possible explications including but not limited to the influence of
the positionality of the researcher where the organizers assumed that this topic was already understood the by researcher therefore did not merit much explanation, or the possibility that respondents and the researcher were much more interested in talking about the work to address these issues than to expand on them in great detail. The amount of time spent on this also varied by respondent, as some were much more interpersonally focused than others.

Exploration of structural oppression yielded findings within the research that not only acknowledged its presence in the lives of the workers, through the nine different social institutions identified, but also named within it the limitation placed on worker centers as a contributing factor to the perpetuation of structural oppression. Specifically, the worker center organizers spoke about the challenges and limitations imposed on the worker centers by 501(c)3 regulations which contributes to limiting the structural change necessary to more effectively challenge the systems that maintain this oppression in the lives of the workers. The findings also ended with a brief exploration of the role of capitalism as an elemental ideological component that interplays with structural oppression through various social institutions.

C. Understanding Structural Social Work in Practice

Understanding the function of the worker center through a Structural Social Work lens proved to be a fruitful endeavor. The model as a tool to serve analytical and prescriptive functions proved to fit the understanding of the worker center organizers in this study. The findings outlined in chapter VII allowed for a detailed understanding the function of the worker center serve as a space for; supporting individual workers, organizing for structural change, and engaging in the ideological. Worker centers serve as a focal point of activity by workers who
seek support on workplace related injustice, however for workers engaging with the worker center it also gives them access to many other types of support and possibilities for development.

Worker center organizers shared their understanding of the work through the various roles and functions they serve. At an interpersonal level the function of the worker center is not only to provide support and attempt to offer relief for the worker, but to also conduct an assessment of other issues present in their lives, to not only connect the worker with other resources, but to also link the personal experience with an understanding of the link to structural oppression. Understanding the ties between the personal and the structural, the worker center organizer can engage with the worker in active capacity building and leadership development. The constant presence of the worker center within the marginalized communities they serve also provide the worker center with an opportunity to become the content experts on worker exploitation, and together with the worker engage in developing solutions.

Engaging in the process of structural reform was at the heart of the worker center model, in spite of every challenge present in this undertaking. It is clear however that seeking structural reform requires the development of power. The respondents were all aware of the necessity to develop worker power and would activate their membership base in order to challenge employers, labor regulatory institutions, and reshaping policy in favor of the vulnerable worker. Worker center organizers attempt to navigate three essential elements of power; social, economic, and political. Even though challenges and limitations exist in the three
areas, respondents were optimistic of the potential for The Coalition to increase their organizational capacity, as well as to amplify their ability to engage in structural reform. Utilizing the popular organizing axiom, ‘understanding the world as it is and working towards the world as it should be,’ worker center organizers must be innovative, creative, resourceful and above all not lose sight of what is possible in order to actively support the vulnerable workers. One excellent example of this is the development of the worker cooperative as an alternative economic model, that places people before capital.

An exploration of the ideological nature of the work confirmed the influence of the ideological foundation of society as postulated by Mullaly (2007). Although this study was not meant to be a thorough exploration of all the ideological elements influencing the experiences of the vulnerable worker, capitalism was found to be a central ideology in the findings. An examination was presented in the chapter on the role of understanding capitalism as an element of organizing vulnerable workers, as well as understanding of the role it plays in structural work. Furthermore, some respondents were keen to understand the dangers of organizing without a deep ideological grounding, as referenced in their critique of Alinsky-style organizing and the U.S. labor movement. Although the respondents understood the necessity of grounding their organizing efforts in the ideological space of what a different world could look like, they presented a list of challenges to doing so. Challenges notwithstanding, both the potential and desire to develop an articulation of the ideological grounding exists within the worker center movement in Chicago.
D. The Worker Center Movement: Possibilities and Challenges

The examination in the previous chapters captures the worker center movement in Chicago as a demonstration of Structural Social Work in practice. Chicago’s worker center movement is a movement of organic growth built on an incredible amount of collective experience and the rich history of community organizing and labor activism in the city. It is a movement in constant evolution as it tries to sustain resistance to the ever-evolving business strategies that seek to maximize profits by lowering labor costs. It is also a movement that engages in the terrain of an unbalanced playing field where each organization is trying to mitigate the harm inflicted by the structural violence on the marginalized communities whose labor is required to fuel the economic engine of a global city, such as Chicago. Worker center organizations seem to do the impossible as they confront the local and global economy with extraordinarily limited resources in comparison to the multinational corporations that they engage with and are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of exploitation encountered in an economically dynamic metropolis, while also actively supporting community residents who are reeling by the impacts of structural violence. The organizers also rely on the vulnerable workers for support to engage in the difficult work of structural change.

The findings share a narrative of worker center organizers developing and reinforcing institutional protections of vulnerable workers by successfully instituting legislation necessary in supporting workers. Utilizing policy solutions is necessary in order to protect the interests of the worker due to their vulnerable position not only in their place of employment but also in society. That vulnerable position in society also makes political support critical as all the
policies can also be considered to be impermanent. The study not only documents the ability for these organizations to have an impact, but also the reaction and attention drawn onto it by business-interests and the lobbying and legal challenges faced by the worker centers. Any achievement can be fleeting if not for the constant pressure of worker centers. Influence of money in our political system allows an unequal balance within policy-making that can often benefit the interests of capital, especially against unorganized labor. Given the power granted to the executive branch to name the heads of regulatory agencies, electoral politics plays an important part for representation of worker center interests. These appointments can have a significant impact within the labor regulatory system as seen by drastic differences in operations of the Department of Labor with differing administrations.

The creation of The Coalition and the development of the worker center movement to be more inclusive, capturing the diversity of the vulnerable workforce, allows for unique possibilities. In essence, a consolidation of resources and expansion of its base can only strengthen the power of the movement, by broadening their collective power, leveraging their combined potential for increased funding from national private foundations, sharing collective knowledge and experiences to continue to develop strategies to drive structural change. This analysis also served to capture the understanding that worker center organizers have of power. A power that is manifested in the three realms of their work; the political, the social and the economic. A power that is effective. Their collective success speaks to this. Yet the reality is that in its present form even with the consolidation, the worker center movement is constrained. The continued challenge facing the worker center movement in Chicago is
growing to the scale necessary to more effectively challenge the structures in the economic system.

Many challenges face the pursuit of structural change if worker centers are to continue forward in their intentions to alleviate the structural violence faced by vulnerable workers. As worker centers grow in scale, so will the attacks on the movement. The response of capital interests in organizing their resources against the efforts of the worker centers as they continue to challenge structures of exploitation was a topic that surfaced in the interviews. During the research, various attacks surfaced from capital interest groups on the worker centers locally and nationally (Fang, 2013; Uetricht, 2013). The attacks on worker center are currently being curtailed by the rights established by laws and policies that protect free speech, protected concerted activity, the right to protest, and the limited freedom for 501(c)3s to engage in lobbying efforts. These rights are among the few tools that allow advocates and those affected to resist the structural harm inflicted on marginalized communities.

1. **Funding structural change?**

The financial support from private foundations has provided the resources necessary to sustain and allow for the gradual development necessary for the emergence of a movement to reach its current state. This same support has also kept them somewhat siloed in the past and at times in direct competition with one another. One respondent captured this notion in the following way:

I mean Chicago is well-known for organizations fighting with each other and not just in the worker center world but that comes out of the community organizing traditions and
all that stuff here. Turf battles and all this stuff and driven by foundations even though foundation I think don't realize it. (J39)

In addition, respondents shared that the continued private foundation support poses other threats. First, the threat of containment and limited growth. Those threats include the shift in funding priorities by foundations, pressure by interest group to pressure foundations to discontinue support of worker centers, and the limited amount of funding available due to priorities of foundation giving. Secondly, as the worker center movement develops and foundations value the importance of the work to support vulnerable workers, increased funding opportunities may invite additional non-profit organizations to pursue funding. Funding various non-profits may only add to the tensions and continue to propagated turf battles. Beyond fostering additional competition funding organizations that do not pursue a structural approach as outlined in the research, including those that may exclusively rely on case management approach, may only serve to dilute the efforts of the movement’s effort to work towards structural change.

The essential question seems to be, can social movement work necessary for structural change be funded through private foundations? The following respondent articulates the issue in the following way:

In terms of the worker center problematic I think one of the biggest problems is it is foundation funded and it is the trap that we all know about, we all say the same thing, but we all get caught up in the cycle of, you know you are trying to find any way you can to fund the work and this is one way to fund the work and you commit to particular things that may be outside your mission because nobody funds your mission, if they did it would be a different world. So then you are caught up in chasing that money and ultimately the nonprofit structure which is what we all fall under, is not really conducive to organizing workers because workers don't really control a nonprofit ultimately. They
don't elect the board; the board elects itself technically. Funders, some funders are not
going to fund a worker center that is run exclusively by members so you have to have
some professionals on there, whatever, and workers don't know where the money is,
right. Like in the union, a good union, a member should be able to find out at any time
how their dues money is being spent, every month they should get a report about how
their money was spent. The salaries of the people that represent them should be voted
on by the members and those salaries should not be more than what the members
make. In a nonprofit, there's none of that, right, you have no right to see any of that
stuff and you can show it to people if you want, people can see you 990s if they're so
inclined but it is not really set up that way for that accountability because it is not a
membership organization. That is not what nonprofits were set up to do but so there's a
structural issue where, there is a certain legal structure we fall into and unconsciously
we started to adapt ourselves to that structure, you know what I mean. Even though
worker center organizers all understand that this is messed up, we all understand that,
but it is like you are in a particular world and you start to, you know, that structure is
real and you sometimes end up down that path much farther than you meant to go and
I'm not sure that worker organizing can be done through a nonprofit structure. (J39)

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence (2007) thoroughly examine the limitations of
mass movement organizing imposed by private foundations, elements that were consistent
with the findings of the study. Smith (2007) captures the challenges inherent to this model of
funding in the following way:

The Non-Profit Industrial Complex promotes a social movement culture that is non-
collaborative, narrowly focused, and competitive. To retain the support of benefactors,
groups must compete with each other for funding by promoting only their own work,
whether or not their organizing strategies are successful. This culture prevents activists
from having collaborative dialogues where we can honestly share our failures as well as
our successes. In addition, after being forced to frame everything we do as a “success,”
we become stuck in having to repeat the same strategies because we insisted to funders
they were successful, even if they were not. Consequently, we become inflexible rather
than fluid and ever changing in our strategies, which is what a movement for social
transformation really requires. And as we become concerned with attracting funders
than with organizing mass-based movements, we start niche marketing the work of our
organizations. Framing our organization as working on a particular issue or a particular
strategy, we lose perspective on the larger goals of our work. Thus, niche marketing
encourages us to build a fractured movement rather than mass-based movements for social change. (p. 10-11)

The Non-Profit Industrial Complex maintains its financial lifeline from the divergence of tax dollar by tax-exempt contributions made with the excess wealth. The contributions made by the private foundations are set by the established priorities and criteria set forth by the foundations themselves and can directly fund any established 501(c)3. It is worth noting that the IRS directly prohibits direct political action by any 501(c)3, a prohibition not imposed on the wealthy contributors themselves, as seen by the increased influence of Political Action Committees. Worker centers face the challenges of attempting to mitigate the harm caused by the currently economic system while relying on foundation support that maintains other priorities in their funding. Private foundations may impose strategies to fund efforts to mitigate that same harm in very misguided ways, misplacing resources in order to maintain a certain ideological perspective in a non-threatening way to the established social order. The following two quotes illustrates the nature of the challenge:

All the work centers had given them that feedback over the years [to foundations] like you know if someone [a funder] says, ‘oh you should apply for a workforce development grant.’ “Well no you should fund organizing.” ‘Oh we don't fund organizing.’ That is sort of a classic conversation you will always have. There's a lot of money in workforce development. Like to me workforce development sucks, like I mean it is needed in some places, but for the most part I think it is the way overfunded because it is based on an incorrect analysis that is more comfortable to liberals. Liberals like to think that all we just need to train people so that they can advance in life. And it does not rock any boats because you are not challenging employers who exploit. It is just saying, ‘hey you two out of this group of a hundred we will train you and then you could go to a better job over there.’ But at the end of the day somebody is going to be a dishwasher at a restaurant, right. So why not just make a dishwasher position and better job. Because at the end who cares if you promote the dishwasher and they become a server and get paid a lot more, like good for them, but it just means the more vulnerable
worker is going to occupy the dishwasher job. Or in the case of like talking about race, it is going to be the more vulnerable racial or ethnic group that is always going to occupy the dishwashing status. So, we might as well just cut to the chase and make the dishwasher job a good job and get it over with. So, I feel like in terms of the foundation world we could actually divert a very significant amount of money to worker center work, to organizing. If we can convince, to change their minds and to the way to do it is to convince them on the foundation’s own terms. (J17)

Traditional workforce development strategies have these limits because of job quality there's not good jobs to place people in, and to be honest we are safer than unions. I mean part of this is that foundations view worker centers and controllable because they are nonprofits and they're taking their money. (J39)

The question remains, when the foundations control the source of funding for social change work by managing $865 billion in assets in the U.S. in 2014, and do so by funding individual 501(c)3 non-profit organizations or issue-based coalitions with imposed limitations on political activity, is it possible to increase the scale of the worker center movement or any other social movement seeking structural change? (The Foundation Center, 2013) A critique on how private foundations view the means of social change is captured in the following excerpt:

As Joan Roefels notes in Foundations and Public Policy (2003), large private foundations tended to fund racial justice organizations that focused on policy and legal reform, a strategy that effectively redirected activist efforts from radical change to social reform. It also helped to professionalize these movements, since only those with advanced degrees could do this kind of work, thus minimizing the importance of mass-based grassroots organizing. (as cited in Smith, 2007, p.7)

As the worker center movement continues to develop a reliance on policy reform, a tool that the worker centers have become increasingly reliant on and that the foundations endorse, there is also an awareness of the limitation of those efforts to drive structural change. These policy measure, which do create a tangible benefit on people’s lives, are in no way creating
structural reforms needed to address the problems at the scale necessary. The following respondent

We are basically just improving their lives as a day-laborer here but not improving their lives as a human being to the fullest potential and each worker center does that in their own little way because we are stuck in our own little niches. Which is understandable I know that we are trying to accomplish a short-term sort of, short to mid-term goal which is improving a condition of something there, where human beings are actually working at the rates of millions of people per day, right. That is all good I am like ‘let's do that’ but what is our action work for the long term though because we are not even talking about that. We’re... I am all about let’s improve and pass a law right now. Let's do what we are doing with [The Coalition] basically. Let's do it, I am all about that 100% but we are missing 50% of the work.

Human being development, understanding what we are trying to work towards and all that.

So it is recognizing reality too, let's not lie to ourselves. I hate it when we are saying we got $15 that is not even minimum wage according to the fucken studies. What is it $22 right now? So, we are creating the new sub sub minimum wage of the future.

Right, so you are enabling that machine to continue. Okay now, so this is how ugly and vicious it gets. Why we can’t do it compared to other movements, we are fucken naïve. When you look at other movements they are... they create the space for long-term change, right. And so, they create the space for long-term change because they do not have... they are not gripped and tentacles are not around them like the nonprofits are with the foundations. Look how vicious and ugly this gets, right. You are stuck in a machine that has its own clock ‘come on labor, get it done, products right. Boom, boom, boom, boom.’ That is how it is. This vicious little clock that we have. As non-profits, we are trying to improve the conditions of the people in that little vicious clock, clock, clock, clock. They have pressures too, right, of their family, the schools all type of shit because it is part of the clock, clock, clock and then we have grants and part of the fucken foundations that are part of this clock who introduce us concepts on how to run our organizations according to that clock, clock, clock, clock.

So as nonprofits if we are really trying to change this shit. Now again it goes back to your ideology, your principles and values and what you’re trying to envision. For me, my vision is not us being controlled by a fucken vicious clock because... and then as a non-profit you are being funded by foundations who need your next report, your next grant
under that clock, clock, clock, clock because they are working corporate-style right. So let’s recognize reality. (J87)

2. **Power without ideology.**

   The worker center movement in Chicago finds itself in an important junction in the country’s political history situated within a global city of vast economic importance. The analysis captured the passion, commitment, and drive of each worker center organizer as s/he seek to build power by developing the leadership of the affected workers in order to resist the harm being inflicted on them as manifested through exploitation, marginalization powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence as manifested within the economic system as well as on those excluded from it. Those challenges facing the vulnerable workforce present themselves in all areas of their lives and the continued need for structural change will require more than just a manifestation of social, economic, and political power if the worker center movement is to garner the support necessary and hold true to its intention to amplify the voice of the vulnerable worker. If as one as on respondent put it, there are three legs to the stool of social change: leadership development, resistance, and ideology; then why is there not more emphasis on the third? Within the worker center movement there is a recognition of the need to sit with this conversation, as articulated by the following respondents:

   See because of using the respect that we have and we have the mutual respect also of other worker centers. It is out of that love and recognition of human beings who are trying to do something great, that I personally feel compelled to stop us and take a deep breath. Because we are talking about fundamental changes to the system, right. But where is that knowledge coming from? Where is it based out of? Where is the rooted from? And if we are saying ‘oh it is coming from our base’ okay so ask that question to the base. Where is that coming from? Where is it coming from? Is it a Christianity concept, is it an indigenous concept, is it a labor, what is it? That is the questions I am
asking. So people get nervous because they are all about this rush to get somewhere and I am like where are you getting to though? Where are you getting to? You're moving so fast you have not taken the time to take a breath and where are we getting to and why, what is it? Ask questions. That is the whole thing I am saying, it is like recognize that you are a human being, that we are in a machine that makes us work fast to make the capital and run the systems but as organizers, and non-profits, social, Worker Center Movement we are a part of that system and we don't even recognize it. So you are trying to improve it? So that it goes faster? What are we trying to do here? You are trying to make it, you know, like what is it? I challenge the fact that, it is a process let's think about that, because it allows our members to think about it too, to see going to that back question that first as identifying ourselves as a human being. (J87)

I think worker center ideology also exists on the spectrum and I think that as [The Coalition], what we're trying to do especially as we move into this next retreat is getting really clear what those ideologies are and identifying like how do we challenge ourselves to be more transformative. Because if we don't we're going to fail. You know, I think especially now that like because of this new national context. We have to really push ourselves to be bold and unapologetic about having really transformative vision, that may really rub funders the wrong way, but then it's also like in my position, in my view it's part of my role to help facilitate those conversations with funders to expand their analysis as well and help elevate them beyond just ‘I care about racial justice, that's it’ right and it's about more than that, and we've seen that if we only carry that view then we fail. It's already been proven. And so, I think that's the hope for [The Coalition] is that it can function as a space to elevate those conversations. (J95)

The space for that ideological conversation has to be apart in some ways from the daily work. I mean it is the same in trade unions right, I mean you can be a leftist in the trade union but if you spend all day building trade unions then at the end of the day that's all you have is trade unions and that is fine, but it is not going to change the world. It is the same with worker centers right, if we are spending all day dealing with wage theft and trying to pass laws and doing all the stuff that we do then we are not thinking about where we are actually going. I don't know how to resolve that, other than explicitly trying to figure out how we build some organization where that happens, it is very difficult because obviously, we are underfunded we all have big visions around policy and organizing and it is like every waking hour we are doing that stuff and it is very difficult to have the other, the bigger conversation but incredibly necessary because it is... class consciousness is one of the major factors that it comes down to. (J39)
The worker center organizers seem to be aware of the risks of organizing efforts devoid of a deep ideological grounding as they draw lessons from the rich and tumultuous labor and community organizing history of Chicago. Critiques of the U.S. labor movement and of Alinsky-style organizing in the analysis boil down to the same elemental issue: the risk of perpetuating exclusion of racial minorities and those residing low-income communities by focusing solely on building power for self-interest. Both the labor movement and Alinsky-styled organizing were referenced for their unfulfilled potential due to their failure to integrated ideological principles into their organizing efforts. As a result, organizing efforts driven by organizations in both areas, limited their efforts to bread and butter issues, not grounding their organizing effort on ideologies that prioritize the creation of a more equitable society. This in turn, limited the ability of poor and working class people to be active participants in order to establish the protections everyone within society.

Structural Social Work emphasizes the importance of incorporating ideologies into our assessments of structural oppression because, simply put, ideologies matter. Organizing is a means by which oppressed people may gain the power that is necessary for change. Yet, devoid of solid ideological grounding, these efforts may in the best of cases run the risk of not garnering the support of the larger progressive community necessary to build the scale necessary for structural change and in worst of cases may perpetuate exclusion and divisiveness. The challenges facing marginalized communities across racial lines cannot achieve any structural solutions if we are solely building power for a those living within, what are socially create/imposed distinctions, such as geographic boundaries, race, political parties, etc. In order to build those bridges, worker center organizers have developed a class analysis in
their work in a way that seek structural solutions based on unification of those in lower class communities that has evolved the movement beyond the exclusive focus on immigrant worker from which the current wave is derived, to one that attempts to marry race and class. Although this vision is not yet fully articulated by the worker center movement, one respondent spoke to the necessity of maintaining a class analysis while at the same time not losing sight of the racial analysis as an important means to develop unity in the following way:

If we only took identity politics, which is hypothetical because of course you can’t, just... If it was only identity political to its full conclusion, the result would be a diverse 1% and meanwhile we would still have the same number of people of color exploited economically. You just have a little bit more... You would have a few representatives at the top. But if we only focus on identity politics strictly, right, if we would refuse to acknowledge anything. So like, so then the counter proposal is saying ‘Bernie Sanders is only focusing on class and so he is not good enough on racial justice’, right we heard that critique from you know Black Lives Matter. Well it’s like how is not talking about minimum wage, universal childcare, universal healthcare. How is that not a racial justice platform in that the vast majority of beneficiaries from that program would be people of color. So to me that is a good demonstration of like it is not either or... if you take a class approach like on the contrary you are uniting the racially excluded, marginal on a common economic agenda that is how you unite them, because otherwise if you do a strict identity politics, the other thing is it's more difficult to unite. (J17)

Of course, at their own recognition, worker centers realize ideological conversations take a back seat to the other demands of the work. What may be seen as a fruitless exercise that takes time from the necessity of relationship building and developing strategy, conversations of ideological perspective not only allow for developing alliances but also ground the work in a space of deeper commitment to the sustainability in the harsh opposition that structural social work often encounters. The experiences and personal ideologies of the various worker center organizers that constitute the worker center movement are in essence the facilitators developing working-class power and the success in changing social structures to the
benefit of the working class is tied to ideology. A more open and inclusive conversation of ideologies may allow for the worker center movement to build up scale, even with limited resources at their disposal.

The structural violence facing those on the margins of globalization and the economy require their voice and concern to be projected and the creation of a platform to stand on in the struggle for a better world. As one respondent put it, “what we are living in is a battle of ideas” (J45). If this statement is correct and individual ideals matter on the challenging of social issues, then ideology is the organizing of those personal ideals into a coherent platform, one unifying ideology grounded in what it needed for a more just world. In our work as social workers, organizers, and all those who are interested in social change, we have to explore and ask what is our grounding ideology. One respondent states it in the following way:

So you have institutions like [national organizing organization] that now are saying like, "look actually the Right has a strategy and the strategy is an articulation of an ideology. They are not just doing this because. They are doing this because there is a worldview and ideology that they believe in and these strategies are an articulation of it and then the tactics and bills that you see are the way that, the vehicle they see for moving that strategy which is a manifestation of the ideology. So if the Right has an ideology, what is ours? I think for a lot of groups in the U.S. that is a brand-new conversation. (J45)

Central in the findings, one ideology that is often overlooked in our analysis of structural inequality, either intentionally or unintentionally, is capitalism. The consequences of the limited regulations of capitalism are being felt and will continue to impact our society. This applies to every social challenge being faced by our society including but not limited to crime, housing, employment, healthcare, education, poverty, and environment. Social worker education requires students to question and explore personal ideologies and biases in
preparation to engage with the wide variety of people we interact with in the field and to address the plethora of social issues. Our understanding of personal ideologies and biases cannot stop when we engage in structural work with an aim of social change. When discussing poverty as a profession, a critical understanding of capitalism is absolutely necessary, without it we will continue to treat poverty as incidental and not structural in nature. Without this understanding our field will continue to treat the symptoms of poverty instead of the system that relies on poverty to operate. As social workers, we are uniquely situated to play a central role in structural change work, but to do so we must encourage the difficult dialogue of ideologies with those we actively engage with in resisting structural oppression. These conversations may be challenging and not all ideologies will line up, however these conversations can yield valuable understanding of shared values and commitment to form the alliances necessary for structural work. In many ways, structural change work lays in the intersection of the social work axiom of, ‘meeting people where they are at’ and that the organizing axiom of ‘operating in the world as it is and working for the world as it should be.’

Mullaly’s model of Structural Social Work (2007) is grounded in the social wellness of all and an anti-oppressive worldview as both a model method of analysis and a prescription for social action. Figure 4 outlines the view of structural change central to the model.
As a critique of unregulated capitalism and awareness of class, Structural Social Work serves not a repudiation of capitalism itself but instead an understanding of how a country can best use its resources to the benefit of its population and the world in which it exists. Many examples of socialist democracies within first-world capitalist societies exist throughout out the world. Their structural arrangements can offer valuable lessons on how to address social issues in a way that leads to a more equitable society. These societies maintain a level of governance necessary to regulate the detrimental aspects of capitalism and whose role in governing function serves a primary responsibility to ensure the protection of society; in essence, placing social wellness over the interest of capital, and not the other way wound.

In the context of this study, worker centers are fully aware of the impacts of unregulated capitalism and the harm it inflicts on marginalized communities, as they are situated between the social relational level and the social institutions directly impacting the
lives of vulnerable workers. The keen understanding of this reality by worker centers gives them the expertise in how to better address the structural violence playing out in the lives of the working class and what are the grounding ideologies for this vision. Worker centers can be key contributors to the discourse. This is nonetheless a difficult discourse. The following quote speaks to the inherent challenges to be openly socialist given the socio-political culture of the country and the lack of a unifying doctrine for the Left in this country:

Researcher: And in many ways, the worker centers are growing into a movement that has a ton of limitations and restrictions and among those limitations what I’m hearing from the organizers is there's also a lack of unifying ideology.

Respondent: Yeah. I would say. Yeah, unifying ideology. I think we're all for the most part leftist. But I think that's the extent of it, so most of us you know, I think if you had to give us sodium pentothal or shit like that we’d say we’re socialist and stuff like that, but that's it. I think how we address or how we think about race, how we think about gender, how we think about you know building power and wielding power. All of that stuff is different and I think even if we may all be leftist but like even how we think about the world and what it should look like. Our vision for marginalized workers I think that's that is probably different too. (J74)

E. Ideology and the Political Moment

The study would be incomplete without an examination of the political moment in which the interviews were being conducted. Data collection in this project was carried out during the 2016 presidential primaries. The topic entered some of the interviews, as the emergence of a Democratic Socialist as a viable candidate for President of the United States allowed for the conversation about what is needed for the Left to be real part of the political discourse in this country. The final interviews were conducted after the election of Donald Trump. Beyond a conversation of politics, the interviews stayed with the ideological when broaching the subject. In many ways, this seemed to be a much more fruitful space for
conversation, given the shared understanding the organizers carry of the limited support from the Democratic Party to the labor movement. By contrast, the independent Democrat from Vermont, Bernie Sanders, ran a campaign that appeared to be much more grounded in ideologies that were understood by the respondents and the researcher as a pronouncement of the political Left within the Democratic Party. Running a socialist platform that highlighted the elements of structural oppression caused by income and wealth inequality, he introduced political ideas that resonated with 43% of Democratic primary voters (Berg-Anderson, 2016).

One respondent captured it in the following way:

> Look at Trump he is moving people. He recognizes he may or may not but that is power man, you know and then you have other people who say are powerful like Clinton, who steal an election. That is stealing that is authority. That is not power of Bernie moving people. That's a big difference. (J87)

> There is a need for a social movement. There is a need for like what happened with Bernie, right. It was an important movement what Bernie started, and that is still not over, Bernie has not allowed that to finish and that is good, right. It is good that he does not allow that to finish. Bernie was right because he spoke about Wall Street. He spoke about all the misery that we have in this country. He spoke about how they are screwing over the middle class, they really are. They call pauperizing, that they are creating poverty, right and so something has to happen. Something will happen. If they don’t listen to Bernie, it’s going to get much worse because then there will be... what will happen is that there will be social unrest like has happened in many places.

_Falta un movimiento social. Falta como lo que paso con Bernie, verdad. Ósea eso fue un movimiento importante lo de Bernie, y eso todavía no se acaba y Bernie no ha dejado que se acabe y eso es bueno, verdad. Es bueno que no dejé que se acabe. Bernie en eso tuvo razón verdad porque hablo de la Wall Street. Hablo de todas las miserias que tenemos en este país. Hablo de que le están dando en la torre a la clase media, verdad la están. Le dicen pauperizándolo, que esto es empobreciendo verdad y entonces este pues algo tiene que suceder. Algo va pasar. Si no le hacen caso a Bernie les va ir peor porque entonces el problema va ver... lo que va pasar va ser una expoliación social como en muchas partes._ (J67)
In so many ways, Bernie’s historic run for president as an openly Democratic Socialist allows space for the political conversation to explore what a true Left could look like in this country. Polling during the presidential primaries allowed for measures to be gathered on the attitudes towards socialism. A poll conducted between January 25-27, 2016 designed to measure the favorability of capitalism and socialism found the youngest generation, millennials, have a much more favorable view of socialism than capitalism (Jordan, 2016). A separate poll conducted by a Republican polling firm between February 2-4, 2016 of 1,000 potential Democratic voters found that voters across all demographics viewed socialism favorably, 57% reporting socialism has a positive impact on society (Debenedetti, 2016). Finally, a Harvard University survey which polled millennials found that the majority, 51% of respondent did not favor capitalism (Ehrenfreund, 2016). While recognizing the limitations of polling data, these various measures indicate that the space has been opened to discuss our current social structure, after all but prohibited within the political discourse for decades. Yet much work has yet to be done in articulating what defines the Left in this country. The absence of a political Left in many ways contributes to the limitation of political discourse. However, as Niaman’s (1997) summary of the principles of dialectic theory reminds us, “Change is constant. Nothing in the universe is final, absolute, or immutable” (as cited in Mullaly, 2007, p. 237). A lesson shared by one respondent:

I believe that the immigrant, particularly let’s say the Mexican immigrant, comes from a tradition where the Left has been participating in the country during the last 25 years. It’s logical that there are left-wing political parties in the electoral process. What is illogical is that there are only two political parties of which to choose from, it’s either Republican or Democrat. It’s like in Mexico it was the PRI or the PAN for an entire lifetime. Until in Mexico you break with that scheme and now the population has grown
accustomed to see a Left, that the Left has an acceptance in all the processes, more than one party from the Left.

Yo creo que el inmigrante, particularmente digamos el Mexicano, viene de una tradición donde la izquierda ha estado participando en el país durante los últimos 25 años. Es lógico que allá partidos de la izquierda en los procesos electorales. Lo que es ilógico es que solamente allá dos partidos de donde escoger, si es republicano o si es demócrata. Es como en México era el PRI y el PAN toda la vida. Y entonces en México se rompe ese esquema y la gente está acostumbrada a ver a la izquierda, que la izquierda tiene un lugar en todos los procesos. Más de un partido de izquierda. (J34)

The evolving global economic realities will require the continued discourse of what direction the United States will take in the constantly changing socio-economic landscape. The analysis of this study ended on January 20th, 2017. Ten days earlier President Obama delivered his farewell speech in Chicago. The speech was address many of the continued challenges faced as his tenure ended among them was the following assertion:

But stark inequality is also corrosive to our democratic idea. While the top 1 percent has amassed a bigger share of wealth and income, too many of our families in inner cities and in rural counties have been left behind. The laid off factory worker, the waitress or health care worker who’s just barely getting by and struggling to pay the bills. Convinced that the game is fixed against them. That their government only serves the interest of the powerful. That’s a recipe for more cynicism and polarization in our politics. Now there’re no quick fixes to this long-term trend. I agree, our trade should be fair and not just free. But the next wave of economic dislocations won’t come from overseas. It will come from the relentless pace of automation that makes a lot of good middle class jobs obsolete. And so we’re going to have to forge a new social compact to guarantee all our kids the education they need. To give workers the power... to unionize for better wages. To update the social safety net to reflect the way we live now. And make more reforms to the tax code so corporations and the individuals who reap the most from this new economy don’t avoid their obligations to the country that’s made their very success possible. We can argue about how to best achieve these goals. But we can’t be complacent about the goals themselves. For if we don’t create opportunity for all people, the disaffection and division that has stalled our progress will only sharpen in years to come. (President Obama’s Farewell Address: Full Video and Text, 2017)
As former President Obama captures in his farewell address, a higher level of political discourse is what is needed in the face of a changing economic reality. As he points to, technological advancements will take jobs. The inevitability of driverless cars and semitrailers, drones that deliver packages from automated warehouses are technologies that will change the landscape of employment. However, his statement overlooks the fact that many jobs have already been lost by the ever-increasing sophistication of algorithms. Federico Pistono, a computer scientist and researcher, writes in his book *Robots Will Steal Your Job but That’s Ok: How to Survive the Economic Collapse and be Happy* (2012):

You think you are special, unique, and that whatever it is that you are doing is impossible to replace. You are wrong. As we speak, millions of algorithms created by computer scientists are frantically running on servers all over the world, with one sole purpose: do whatever humans can do, but better. These algorithms are intelligent computer programs, permeating the substrate of our society. They make financial decisions, they predict the weather, they suggest which countries will wage war next. (p. xv)

Much has been written on the subject since then, but the fact is that technological advancements have advanced since the writing of that passage. We are witness to this with every update on the apps of our smart phone. Pistono’s work explains in detail the acceleration of technological advancement that continue to replace employees, as is argued, at a rate that is different from other eras of technological displacement.

It is much easier to enhance an algorithm than it is to build a better robot. A more accurate title for the book would have been “Machine intelligence and computer algorithms are already stealing your job, and they will do so ever more in the future.” (p.31)
An analysis done by Osborne and Frey (2015) for the BBC produces an analysis of the risk of displacement in the next two decades by automation by job. Social workers rank 312 of 366. Understanding that social workers are not at risk for displacement, the profession will undoubtedly be responding to the social consequences that will face the populations impacted. As a profession, it is essential that we engage in the dialogue of what this new society must look like. The challenges facing our society are real and the profession of social work must develop the appropriate social analysis to respond. The United States maintains the highest incarceration rate in the world, highest military spending in the world, the U.S. healthcare system is among the least efficient in the world, and rates 18th in the world in quality of life despite having the highest GDP in the world, of which Canada rates in first (Du & Lu, 2016; National Priorities Project, n.d.; U.S. News, 2017; Wagner & Walsh, 2016). Social work must better define its own vision for an evolving society, a society with constantly changing set of social issues perpetuated by social structures that focus on the individual as the cause of the social problems instead of the social structures themselves. The NASW defines its mission within the preamble in the code of ethics in the following way:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. (NASW, 2008)

What is our ideological grounding as a profession? How can we profess to “promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients” to address the “environmental
forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living” including poverty, without once mentioning capitalism? Can we as a profession continue to develop social policy that seeks to alleviate individual social problems without acknowledging the interconnected social structures that perpetuate structural and economic violence? Above all, how can we as social workers utilize our skills and knowledge to advance social movements that do seek to develop broad-based social change by contributing to efforts on the ground while serving within the marginalized communities reeling from the impacts of structural violence, both locally and abroad?

**F. Study Implications**

1. **Social work practice.**

Many lessons for social work practice exist within this study of organizers focused on the work of structural change with vulnerable workers. For the field of social work, this study helps to develop the profession’s understanding of working with the Latino immigrant community as well as other populations vulnerable to workplace exploitation. As social workers work within low-income marginalized communities it is important to not only be aware of the various hardships and challenges faced by this community but actively support initiatives and efforts that seek to find structural solutions to these problems. The pervasiveness of workplace exploitation for this population makes it highly likely that these experiences will be part of the presenting issues in working with this community. Social work practitioners must make themselves more knowledgeable on workplace rights and the labor regulatory supports available to workers. Social workers can and should provide case
management support for workers seeking to file claims with the regulatory agencies, such as the Department of Labor, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Department of Human Right, and others.

Social work practice must also be better prepared social workers to engage in organizing. Community organizing is an essential element to addressing social issues facing low-income communities. Within social work program oftentimes specialization divides social worker to be trained in either community practice or clinical, case management, or family support functions. In doing so, social work professionals can be falsely presented as a profession function that can be divided into understanding practice as either micro- or macro-level practice, instead of the necessity to be able to integrate and practice in both. As the findings of this study demonstrate there is a need to be able to utilize both the skills required of interpersonal engagement and understanding as well as incorporating our professional understanding of macro-level policy. Social work practitioners have the potential to be well equipped to be able to integrating both elements. The study serves as a contribution to the literature of the integration of both micro- and macro-level practice with marginalized communities.

2. **Social work education.**

In order to develop social work as a profession that is better apt to engage in social change work, social work education will need to more intentionally incorporate different conceptual frameworks and literature from other disciplines. This study was grounded in Structural Social Work theory as opposed to the ecological model, which is the dominant model
within the field. This study serves as a contribution to the literature as an example of the utility of Structural Social Work in practice, research and as a conceptual model. Integration of Structural Social Work into social work education can provide an alternative view and equally valid viewpoint to social work students, that also serves the function of identifying and expanding on the dialogue of ideologies in the way the ecological model does not allow. Developing a more thorough understanding of oppression and privilege in a way that incorporates ideology is a vital necessity to our profession, the risks of not doing so are captured best by the following passage:

Only an understanding of oppression as a systemic situation that is produced and reproduced in everyday social processes and practices – and an awareness that oppression carries out several important social functions for the dominant group – will lead to structural solutions. Otherwise, social work will continue to treat oppression as a technical problem (e.g., as a lack of ‘goodness of fit’ between the individual and society) amenable to technical solutions rather than as the moral and political (i.e., structural) problem that it is. (Mullaly, 2007; p. 284)

This study contributes to the expansion of the literature with the field on understanding the impacts and causes of oppression in the lives of marginalized communities, specifically the population being served the worker center organizers, low- and medium skilled Latino immigrant and African-American workers in the low-wage labor market.

The study was also grounded in bodies of literature that receive limited attention in the field of social work. When understanding issues related to poverty, it is important that social work education integrate literature and research from a variety of disciplines, with the same vigor that social work has incorporated from disciplines such as the health sciences and psychology. Social work education can benefit from going beyond an understanding of the
social symptoms of poverty and in order to better understand the causes of poverty, in order to contribute to the support structural solutions. Social work education would benefit from the integration of research and literature as labor studies, economics, immigration studies, sociology, ethnography, urban planning, ethnic studies, social movement research, as well as the rich literature within radical social work.

Finally, it is important for continued efforts to expand diversity of the student body within social work education. Students who bring differing professional and educational experience to the classroom are valuable contributors to the discussion and development of collective knowledge for aspiring social work professionals. Students from diverse backgrounds not only bring into the classroom distinct experiences, but also demand more diversity in in the curriculum. Providing material that goes beyond the Eurocentric theories such as theory grounded in popular education, indigenous practices, and liberation theology would better prepare students for actively engaging with the Latino community.

3. **Social movement.**

The findings in the study identify the amount of trauma often in the lives of the marginalized and vulnerable population that is being organized. There needs to be a more intentional effort to incorporate more personal support for the participants in social movement work. Wounded people need not be agitated, providing spaces for healing trauma is absolutely necessary. In turn, people who are healed/-ing from their traumatic experience are better prepared and often looking for opportunities to engage in social movement work. There needs to be better integration on healing and organizing spaces. Part of the solution, although by no
means a complete solution, may be in the deliberate integration of social movement and social services provision.

The findings in the study speak to the importance of organizing to maintain a focus of shared attention to addressing the intersection of race and class. Approaching social change efforts from solely a race based focus may alienate coalition efforts necessary to tackle the social issues. Building organizing efforts on the intersection of class and race has much more power and may be much more transformational, exploring models from within Chicago’s rich organizing history serves to illuminate lessons for today. Two examples of multi-racial organizing to build power include the Rainbow Coalition founded by Fred Hampton in 1968, and Rudy Lozano’s integration of community organizing and labor organizing which provided key support in the election of Chicago’s first and only African-American mayor, Harold Washington.

Findings in the study also point to the importance of engaging in an active exploration of ideology as part of social movement work. Often, addressing the immediate and countless pressing concerns within organizing takes priority to ideological exploration and dialogue. The findings of this study indicate that movement work may only be strengthened by development of a deep ideological understanding. Doing so may engage membership in a more substantial way, allow for alliances to form with other social movement efforts, allow for a more complete assessment of oppression, and allow for more comprehensive strategies to engage in structural change. It may be compared to the work of plugging the hull of a leaky boat to redirecting its course to safer waters. Utilizing Structural Social Work as an analytic and prescriptive tool can
support social movement efforts by developing a better understanding of the interrelation between the three levels of society and their influence on social issues.

Finally, social workers have an important function if they are willing to integrate themselves into the effort of social change work respectfully. Gaining a Master’s degree in social work provides social workers a set of skills to contribute to social change movements, but not necessarily to lead. Being an effective supporter of social justice work requires a humility and willingness to learn. In the same way we learn so much from the populations we serve, people often with very little formal education, social workers must learn from organizers with experience that may not include formal schooling. In social movements, social workers may be seen as, in best case, a foreign entity to refer people to for support; in worst case, as part of the oppressive institutions that could not possibly play a role in social justice movement work. There needs to be more intentional efforts to integrate and engage in a mutually supportive relationship, in order to better serve as social change agents.

4. **Policy.**

Central to the focus of the research was workplace exploitation of vulnerable workers. Strengthening of policies that support the protections of low-wage workers is extremely important. This also includes the policies that increase the possibility of collective bargaining for workers in the low-wage labor sector, passage of the “Employee Free Choice Act” as one example. There may also have to be the development of other forms of collective bargaining as seen in other parts of the world, models do not limit union representation to the individual workplace but instead would allow for collective bargaining across an entire sector.
Increasing collective bargaining across a sector would be an extremely valuable method of increasing labor standards for low-income low- and medium-skill workers, in jobs where union representation is non-existent.

Findings indicated that a major limitation of the worker center movement was the limited funding available for labor organizing through the worker center model. Dues, individual donors, and limited foundation support impose a financial limitation to the work and therefore makes developing the worker center model to the scale necessary to address the volume of worker exploitation nearly impossible. Secure sustainable funding may require policy solutions as well. Given the limitations of the Department of Labor to enact enforcement funding from the state to supplement the efforts of the labor regulatory agencies through worker centers should be considered.

Finally, social work professional advocacy organizations such as the NASW can be playing a better role in supporting the development of social policy initiatives and opportunities to increase funding for social change initiatives, especially in areas where social workers may be present but not necessarily leading, such as worker centers. Support of policy solutions that reform social institutions to the benefit of those in low-income community should be a priority for social work. More consideration must be given to the expansion of funding the welfare system to address these complex social needs.

5. **Further research.**

This study sought to examine the organizing process of vulnerable workers utilizing in-depth interviews with the worker center organizers. This method comes with
inherent limitation as outlined in the following section. Therefore, further research is required to develop a better understanding of the extent to which the organizing methods discussed in this study where utilized by the worker centers and their effectiveness. Future research could include the perspective of the workers themselves regarding their understanding of the worker center model and their level of engagement within the worker center. Workers may in fact provide a far different understanding of the worker center model, and capturing their voice merits investigations.

The findings presented a second-hand account of the impact of oppression of vulnerable workers. A detailed assessment of the impacts on the socio-emotional health of the workers would be of immense value to the field of social work. This research may also seek to differentiate the impacts of oppression of sub-sets of vulnerable workers, for example; undocumented v. documented, actively employed v. those actively seeking employment, differences in gender, race, and by occupation such as day labor, temporary labor, domestic worker. Each one of these subsets of vulnerable workers may detail unique challenges that may have gone unperceived by the worker center organizer, and merits further investigation. Further research into the impacts of oppression for this population and the impacts on the efforts to organizing for social change would be a valuable contribution to the field of organizing. Multiple respondents highlighted the challenges they face when encountering mental health and substance abuse in their attempts to organize workers. Social work research uniquely situated to continue to examine the intersections between personal manifestation and symptoms of oppression and the impact of community organizing.
The findings of this study also highlight the need for more research that is developed in community settings. Within the field of social work there needs to be more attention paid to Practice Informed Research. Understanding social needs and interventions grounded in the field is of crucial importance to social work. Social workers in the field can contribute by engaging in scholarly research that contributes to the Practice-Informed Research literature by supporting data collection that goes beyond single subject design. Researchers that are embedded in community organizations and working alongside community organizing efforts are of critical important to the social movements themselves and the development of scholarly research that had applicability. Research that examines the role the social work can play in social movement work and measuring the impact of that support can redefine the way social work and social movement work interacts.

In general, more qualitative research on the interrelation of social structures and the interplay with structural oppression in the lives of distinct vulnerable populations in needed. Qualitative research methods allow researchers to capture complexity in a way that is needed in the understanding of oppression, the three levels of society, and the interrelated impact of social institutions in the lives of oppressed communities as outlined by Structural Social Work. Qualitative research allows for a natural overlap in both the skill set and access to the population of study that social workers can uniquely provide. More of this type of research would add much richness to the research literature on the complex social issues experienced in the lives of the populations served by the profession.
Finally, a more detailed historical analysis could warrant attention especially one that explores the connections to the economic shifts and trends as well as the migration patterns throughout the decades of development of the worker centers. This examination can provide more detail into the connections of worker centers and the socio-economic landscape of the city.

G. Study Limitations

The principle limitation of this study was the inability of the researcher to conduct ethnographic research or spend extended periods of time in observation with all the worker centers. Prolonged engagement is encouraged in qualitative research in order to reduce reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias; however given that the data collection was done through a limited amount of interviews with participants from various organizations, prolonged engagement was not possible. In order to address this limitation, triangulation was done by interviewing a range of worker center organizers in order to maximize perspectives. A member check was incorporated as a strategy for reducing the influence of researcher bias. Nonetheless, a major limitation of the study was the inability of the research design to measure effectiveness of the methods utilized by the worker center organizers. Given that the data collection was limited to self-reporting, no opportunity existed to verify statements in interviews for accuracy. Also the limited sample will limit the applicability in other settings that are not worker centers. These findings may also have limited generalizability to worker centers operating outside of an urban setting or a city with less diversity in worker center organizations.
H. Conclusion

Chicago, a setting that has fostered the growth of the worker center movement as an organic one, largely unoccupied by national worker center organizations, has created its unique ecosystem that has allowed it to work toward structural change. Of course, structural change does not come easily, and the findings capture the complexity and challenges present in engaging structural change work. Those same findings also capture what is possible, providing evidence of what worker centers have been able to achieve while operating within the constraints placed on them by societal structures that too often benefit the dominant group at the expense of the subordinate. It often appears their main challenge is dealing with the untenable demands of individual injury and severe social needs of the vulnerable workers they serve; and this creates tension. Tension was consistent factor throughout the interviews among the various topics discussed. Tensions with the benefits of and challenges with receiving private foundation support. Tensions with the needs to support social needs of the workers served while recognizing the challenges that brings and drag on already limited resources that could be utilized towards structural change organizing. Tensions on the different styles and ideological perspective between organizers and organizations. These types of tensions are not uncommon and exist within every movement. As captured within the theory of dialectics, “the unity and struggle of opposites” is a natural occurring reality however the key is not getting stuck in the false dualism. As Mullaly (2007) points out we must do whatever is possible to unravel and understand these contradictory forces in order to maximize their inherent power.
The continued pursuit of a just world, will not be achieved without our understanding of these tensions and our ability to manage them. The challenges present in our time will require our field and those who profess its values of social justice to wrestle with the role we play in maintaining social order, while also engaging in the necessary emancipatory support of those facing oppression by structural systems. The established order can often benefit us as professionals while simultaneously perpetuating the oppression we seek to oppose. Working for social change requires us to sit with the tension as we maintain our vision on what is possible. The findings of the study contend that change requires two main things: active engagement and an assessment and definition of ideology. This is never easy and poses many challenges. In fact, one can even be labeled as effective without the other. But without both, structural change is not possible. The beauty in tension is if we sit with it the opposing forces, we can also uncover the unrealized possibilities and space for alliances needed to create a more just world. Not only is change possible but it is absolutely necessary and if there is any one lesson to be drawn from this dissertation it is that it requires the full involvement of those most affected by the harm inflicted by structural oppression.

Respondent: We need some collective of people with a particular viewpoint or at least roughly organized around a particular viewpoint that want to move in the same direction on our side of the spectrum. And if you don't have that, ultimately we are just spinning our wheels. And that is a different piece of work then organizing workers or organizing immigrants or racial justice work, it is a whole... related obviously, but it is its own piece of work to develop that unity among, whatever you want to call it, the left or whatever. Among people who want fundamental changes in society, whatever they want to call it, figuring out what that looks like and how to move forward together is, to me a fundamental task. So I view part of our work as developing the leaders who are going to be the basis on which that gets develop, you know. Like developing people who are not college graduates, who are having a theoretical conversation about whatever
ideology, but actual everyday people, who I believe has much more capacity to change the world, than people who come out of the life I came out of. And so, developing those people so that you can compose the effort to make revolutionary changes in society it has to be led by someone... it is not going to be led by people like me.

Researcher: The professional class?

Respondent: Right, certainly not like white privileged middle-class college-educated dudes and like that is not the change I want to see. Right, certainly not like white privileged middle-class college-educated dudes and like that is not the change I want to see. So it is really about how do you foster the development of people who can take the reins of deeper societal change, to me I think that is a role that worker center organizing and labor organizing generally plays and that is harder to do in other contexts because really the fight in the workplace is about capital. I mean it is a very clear fight...

Researcher: ...and capitalism.

Respondent: Capitalism exactly, it is the domination of capital within society that happens everywhere but it definitely happens in the workplace it is very clear in the workplace. (J39)
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to do this interview. My name is Arturo Carrillo, you may know me from Centro de Trabajadores Unidos (CTU). I wanted to let you know about a dissertation research project I am conducting as part of my Ph.D. program at the University of Illinois at Chicago. This research is being done separately and is in no way related to CTU, although organizers at CTU will also be invited to participate. Therefore, all information collected with not be shared with anyone at CTU and will be handled with strict confidentiality as required by the Institutional Review Board. This research is being conducted to explore and understand the role of the organizer in the context of organizing low-wage Latino immigrant workers in diverse low-wage industries, as well as the socio-political context in which this population lives. I am conducting this study as part of my doctoral dissertation research. I am very interested in understanding more about the organizing process with this population and your experience organizing will be very valuable to me in developing a theoretical understanding of this process. I am interviewing other organizers in this area as well. Everything you tell me will only be used for this research project and will not be shared with anyone. Instead the interviews will be used to build a theory of worker center organizing and this interview today will help shape the development of that theory. As part of this process it may also be necessary to schedule a follow-up interview as I continue to collect information and develop more questions in the process.
I want you to know participation in this study is completely voluntary and your participation will remain confidential. Your name will not be used in this study and all attempts to will be made to make sure no one can identify you with any of your answers. Here is a consent form for you to review, I’ll give you time to read it and I’d be happy to review it together with you. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. **Personal Background and Formation as an Organizer**

   Age:

   Where were you born?

   Education:

   Total number of years organizing for the worker center?

   Can you tell me how you became an organizer?

   Have you been a part of formal organizing trainings? If so, which?

   Have you been involved in other roles as an organizer or activism?

   **Probe:** Such as political organizing? Union organizing? International organizing?

   Do you consider yourself grounded in any specific type of organizing model? If so can you expand?

   **Probe:** Is there a model that you use in your way of organizing?

   How has your view on organizing changed over time?

2. **Worker Center and Workers Served**

   Can you tell me about (name of worker center)?

   **Probe:** How would you describe the type of work done by (name of worker center)?

   What is the type of workers that your organization focuses on? Why?

   Is there a specific sector of the workforce your organization focuses on? Why?
Can you tell me about the types of problems you hear about in these workers typically face in the workplace?

Can you tell me some of the social/cultural/political realities faced by the workers you work with?

Follow-up: Can you talk about some of the structural issues seen by this population?

Can you tell me how your understanding of the country of origin influences the dynamics in organizing?

Prompt: Have you seen differences in workers from Mexico and opposed other countries or within different regions within Mexico?

Do you feel that oppression a concept that the workers you organize bring up? How so?

3. Organizing Process

What is your role as an organizer?

What do you bring to the table that is important that people can't do for themselves?

Follow up: What is the field of opportunity and constraints?

Can you tell me about the process as you see it for organizing this population of workers?

Probe: How do you understand the organizing process?

What do you see as some of the challenges in organizing this population of workers?

Can you tell me about the influences of documented status and how is that dealt with?

What do you see as opportunities in organizing this population of workers?

What are the strategies you utilize in addressing these conditions?

Probe: Can you give me an example of the development of a specific strategy you use?

Can you share with me you understanding of what goes into the development of an organizing campaign?

Can you share your understanding of leadership development?

Follow-up: How is leadership development understood or developed within the organization?
4. **Areas of Intervention**

*The following set of questions are meant to explore where you as an organizer see your involvement and your role within this and how they connect to one another.*

**Personal**

What is your role within working with individuals?

*Probe:* Such as individual workers, community outreach?

**Workplace**

What is your role within the specific workplace issues?

*Probe:* Such as workplace campaigns?

**Systemic**

Can you list out for me the institutional areas of society in which you feel your work is having an impact, no matter how small or big.

*Prompt if needed:* Immigration system, labor regulatory system, economic system, others...

What are the strategies involved in each one of the areas?

How has your work evolved over time in relation to each one of these areas?

**Foundational**

Do you spend time thinking about how the work on the ground connects with ideologies in society?

*Follow-up:* In your work as an organizer how do you understand the connections with the realities you see on the ground?

**Policy**

How do you see your role within policy initiatives?

**National Campaign/Networks**

How do you see your role within the movements (immigration / labor) at the national level?
International

Do you see a connection or are you involved in work across borders? If yes, how so?

Partnerships with organizational allies

Can you speak with your involvement with other worker centers?

What is your relationship with other non-profit organization/social service providers?

Prompt if needed: Churches, Schools, Community organizations etc....

What is the relationship with labor unions?

What are your thoughts of the traditional labor unions and how they operate?

Follow-up: In relation to worker centers? Similar/different?

5. Outcomes

Finally, as an organizer how do you measure outcomes in your daily work with the workers you support?

How do you understand success in this work?

Probe: How does success look different at any of the levels we spoke about earlier?
APPENDIX B: RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Research Information and Consent for Participation in Social Behavioral Research

Organizing Latino Immigrant Workers in Low-Wage Industries: A Qualitative Study of Chicago’s Worker Center Organizers

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form such as this one to tell you about the research, to explain that taking part is voluntary, to describe the risks and benefits of participation, and to help you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Principal Investigator Name and Title: Arturo Carrillo, Doctoral Candidate

Department and Institution: Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago

Address and Contact Information: 1040 W. Harrison St., Chicago, IL 60617

**Why am I being asked?**

You are being asked to be a subject in a research study about the work organizers do as part of the worker center movement in Chicago as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of the organizing process for working with Latino immigrant workers employed in various low-wage industries. You have been asked to participate in the research because of your experience as an organizer with one of the selected worker centers.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Chicago. **If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.**

Approximately 30 subjects may be involved in this research at UIC.

**What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of this research study is to develop a theoretical understanding of the organizing process and role of the worker center organizer in organizing the Latino immigrant workers employed in various low-wage industries.

**What procedures are involved?**

You are invited to participate in a semi-structured interview as part of a research study for a dissertation proposal. You are being asked to participate in up to three interviews that will be conducted over a 6-month period. The interview will last between 1-2 hours in duration and
will be audio recorded. You will be asked various questions to which you will be required to respond freely based on your knowledge of the subject matter. Follow up interviews may be requested. After completion the interview will be transcribed, coded, and will be incorporated into further questions for the study and ultimately into the findings of the study.

You will also be invited to a member check following the development of the preliminary findings of the research have been developed. The member check will consist of one focus group lasting 1-2 hours where everyone who participated in the interviews will be invited to offer input and critique of the preliminary findings.

**What are the potential risks and discomforts?**

No risk or discomfort is expected in your participation in the study. However, if at any time during the interview feel discomfort you are free to end the interview by making your wishes known to the interviewer.

**Are there benefits to taking part in the research?**

Participants will not directly benefit from their participation in this study; however, their participation may contribute to the knowledge of how the field works to organize Latino immigrant workers and may be used to help others in the future.

**What other options are there?**

You have the option to not participate in this study.

**What about privacy and confidentiality?**

The only person who will know that you are a research subject is the principal investigator and potentially a hired transcription service that will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. However, study information which identifies you and the consent form signed by you may be looked at and/or copied for the purpose of monitoring the research by the UIC Office for the Protection of Research Subjects and State of Illinois auditors. Otherwise information about you will only be disclosed to others with your written permission, or if necessary to protect your rights or welfare or if required by law. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

Only the interviewer will have access to the actual recorded interview and the interview transcripts. Your name and other identifying information will be removed from the transcript and will not be documented in the final report. There may be a risk that even after all identifying information has been removed from the final report, someone knowledgeable with the workers centers of Chicago may be able to identify the subjects of this study given the limited number of organizations and their unique focuses in this study. All consent forms and eligibility checklists will be stored in locked file cabinets separate from the study data. All electronic data files will be stored on a password-protected and encrypted computer that only
the principal investigator has access to. In order to link your data over time, a list connecting
your name, participant ID and pseudonym will be stored in a secure, locked file cabinet,
separate from the study data. This list will be destroyed once data collection is completed. The
audio file of your interview will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Only the principal
investigator and potentially a hired transcription service will have access to this audio file and
the audio files will not be used for any other purpose besides this study.

**What are the costs for participating in this research?**

There are no costs to you for participating in this research.

**Will I be reimbursed for any of my expenses or paid for my participation in this research?**

You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

**Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?**

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation
at any time. You will receive a copy of the consent. Participation is voluntary. There are no
penalties or loss of benefits for the refusal to participate in some or all of the research procedures
and/or for discontinuing participation of some or all of the research procedures.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?**

For questions feel free to contact the researcher Arturo Carrillo at ###-###-#### or by email at
acarrill@uic.edu. For questions, concerns or complaints you may contact the faculty sponsor of
this study, Dr. Mark Mattaini at mattaini@uic.edu.

**What are my rights as a research subject?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have
any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns,
complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
(OPRS) at 312-996-1711 or 1-866-789-6215 (toll-free) or e-mail OPRS at uicirb@uic.edu.

**Remember:**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will
not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you
are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.
Conflict of Interest Disclosure

Arturo Carrillo, the person leading this study, has a family member that is an employee of Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers’ Project. If you would like more information, please ask the researchers or the study coordinator.

Signature of Subject

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.

____________________________________  __________________________
Signature of participant                Date

__________________________
Printed Name

__________________________  ______________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent  Date (must be same as subject’s)

__________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent
Hi Arturo,

Many thanks for this request. I am happy to grant permission for this use. You can take this email as record of permission. Let me know if you need anything else.

Kind Regards,

Cailen Swain (Mr.)
Permissions Coordinator, Oxford University Press Canada

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Sent: Saturday, February 04, 2017 4:22 PM
To: SWAIN, Cailen
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Importance: High

A request for The New Structural Social Work has been made

Book Information
Title : The New Structural Social Work
Edition : 3rd
Author : Bob Mullaly
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Requested Material : Figure 9.1 Structural View of Society p.246 Figure 9.2 Transformational Goal of Structural Social Work p.248 Figure 10.1 PCS Model of Oppression p.263

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Smukler, T. & Adams L. (2010) Behind the kitchen door: The hidden costs of taking the low road in Chicagoland’s thriving restaurant industry. Restaurant Opportunities Center of Chicago, the Restaurant Opportunities Center United, and the Chicagoland Restaurant Industry Coalition.


VITA

Arturo Carrillo

EDUCATION

2010 – 2017  Ph.D., Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago
Dissertation: Chicago’s Worker Center Movement: A Structural Analysis

2005 - 2007  Master of Social Work, Clinical Social Work Concentration, University of Illinois at Chicago

2000 - 2005  Bachelor of Arts, Psychology, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana

AREAS OF RESEARCH AND SPECIALIZATION

Community Organizing; Mental Health Practices with Latino adults; Immigration Studies; Program Development; Latino Studies; Social Movements

TEACHING INTERESTS

Social Work Practice; Human Behavior and the Social Environment; Mental Health with Adults; Community Practice; Policy

SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES


TEACHING

2017  University of Chicago: School of Social Service Administration. Teaching MSW elective course titled, “Structural Social Work Practice and the Mexican Experience in Chicago”

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2011  Michigan Institute for Clinical and Health Research.

Responsibilities included conducting focus groups in Spanish with Latino men aimed at developing personalized programs to help Mexican-American adults manage type 2 diabetes.
2013  "Parental perception of early intervention services and transition", Nucha Isarowong, Principal Investigator.
Responsibilities included conducting focus groups in Spanish with parents of children enrolled in Early Intervention services.

Responsibilities included data analysis and co-authoring final report.

2014  “Little Village Mental Health Needs Assessment”, Roots to Wellness Mental Health Coalition, Kevin Rak and Kathryn Bocanegra, Principal Investigator.
Responsibilities included planning and development of the research project.

Responsibilities included survey design, data analysis, and co-authoring article for publication.

Responsibilities included development and implementation of the research project.

PRACTICE EXPERIENCE

2007-Present  Family Support and Mental Health Program Manager, Saint Anthony Hospital: Community Wellness Program, Chicago, IL

2007-Present  Co-founder, Centro de Trabajadores Unidos: Immigrant Workers Project, Chicago, IL

2010-Present  Co-founder, Roots to Wellness: Mental Health Coalition, Chicago, IL

PRESENTATIONS


Carrillo, A., Estrada, M., Briseño, S., & Aviles, G. “Structural barriers, not stigma, limit access to mental health services for the low-income Latino community.” Presented at the Health Disparities and Social Justice Conference. Chicago, IL, August 12, 2016.

Carrillo, A., Bocanegra, K., Rak, K., Briseño, S., & Lozornio, F. “Structural barriers, not stigma, limit access to mental health services for the low-income Latino community.” Presented at the Latino Social Work Organization Conference. Chicago, IL, October 13-14, 2016.


PUBLICATIONS


HONORS AND AWARDS

2015  National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI-Chicago) – Community Health Advocate of the Year
2015  Enlace Chicago – Jesus “Chuy” Garcia Spirit Award
2017  Community Neighborhood Development Awards – The Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois Healthy Communities Award

GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS

2005 & 2006  Arthur Foundation Bilingual Student Master’s in Social Work Award
2015  Labor Research & Action Network - New Scholars Research Grant

LICENSES AND CREDENTIALS

Licensed Clinical Social Worker, States of Illinois

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Roots to Wellness: Mental Health Collaborative
Brighton Park Neighborhood Network – Health Committee Chair

LANGUAGES

Spanish – Fluent
Italian – Conversational