

Draft-not for circulation. Comments welcome.

Generative Work: Popular Education and Day Laborer Organizing in the U.S.

Nik Theodore
Center for Urban Economic Development
University of Illinois at Chicago
400 S. Peoria St., Chicago, IL 60607
theodore@uic.edu

June 2010

Acknowledgements

This project was sponsored by the National Day Laborer Organizing Network. I would like to thank all of the organizers and workers who gave so freely with their time and insights so that we could complete this project. Thanks also to Pablo Alvarado, John Arvizu, Erica Foldy, Katherine McFate, and Mary Beth Tegan for comments on earlier drafts of this report. I also greatly benefited from conversations with John Arvizu, Ana Luz Gonzalez, Héctor Cordero-Guzmán, Victor Narro, Chris Newman, Hilary Stern, and Abel Valenzuela (who also participated in the interviews of day laborer organizers).

Funding for this project was provided by Leadership for a Changing World at New York University. Thanks to Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla, Sonia Ospina, and AiLun Ku for their help and guidance in completing this work.

Introduction

Day labor organizing in the United States has a brief, but rich, history—a history that becomes considerably more textured when one examines its ties to radical counter-movements during the Latin American “dirty wars” of the 1970s and 1980s. Upon closer inspection, the day laborer workforce, a seemingly unorganizable group of immigrant, precarious workers employed in the frontier zones of a restructuring U.S. economy, emerges as a highly innovative and self-reflexive organizing community. Indeed, day labor markets have become an especially fertile ground for the production of groundbreaking labor organizing strategies.

Day laborer organizing in the U.S. borrows heavily from Popular Education theory and practice, which gained prominence in Central and South America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Popular Education is a pedagogical approach designed to raise the consciousness of its participants and enable them to become more aware of how an individual’s experiences are connected to broader socio-political forces. The diffusion of organizing lessons based in Popular Education has not been applied indiscriminately through decontextualized replication. Rather, organizers have applied Popular Education strategies through a geographically nuanced reading of local context and the contingencies of specific urban economies. A key technique of Popular Education literacy work is the use of alphabetization and the “generative word” process; these lessons become particularly important to endeavors of social analysis and politicization. Alphabetization, which depends on breaking down words into their syllabic components in order to recombine them for the development of expanded vocabularies and a broader political awareness, is here read as a process analogous to the mobile technologies deployed in day laborer organizing. Day labor organizers borrow freely from familiar repertoires of contention which are then adapted in context-sensitive ways.

Indeed, the highly flexible “generative word” method is both a basic communication technique and the foundation for critical thinking and political action. For U.S.-based day laborer organizers, alphabetization has both literal and figurative power since it serves as the basis for the “generative work” performed by educators/organizers as they strive to destabilize hierarchies of power and expertise. Such “generative work” depends on participatory practices and collective mobilization; it involves the *production* of new leadership, the *re-creation* of familiar strategies in untested situations, the *building* of an extensive day laborer network, and the *generation* of better opportunities and wages for workers.

This paper traces the evolution of a model of leadership development that is being practiced by the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), an alliance of workers’ rights advocates, day labor worker centers, community organizers, and day laborers. The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 provides a brief overview of NDLON and its mission. Section 2 summarizes the conditions faced by workers in the day labor market in order to provide a context for NDLON’s organizing and leadership development activities. Section 3 recounts the experiences of day labor organizers who were active in Latin American social movements. Section 4 explores the diffusion of

Popular Education theory and practice from Latin America to the movement to organize day laborers in the United States. Section 5 discusses leadership development within the day laborer workforce. These experiences have yielded lessons that have become central to NDLO's shared philosophy and approach to organizing precarious workers under variable and mutable local conditions. The goal of this history is to offer an analysis of the geopolitical spaces that give rise to the organizing frames and repertoires of contention that have emerged within the day laborer movement in the United States.

Organizing in Hard Times

Changing the societal structures that perpetuate violence, abuse, exploitation, and repression of day laborers requires the active involvement of the workers themselves. However, real participation can only be achieved through collective processes that promote the development of critical thinking skills. Thus, without enhancing the leadership abilities of day laborers, change will not take place. Leadership development, as we understand it, is a collective teaching-learning process with political implications. In other words, people learn while transforming the reality in which they are immersed (NDLO, 2006: 27).

NDLO was founded in 2000 and is currently comprised of 41 community-based organizations that organize day laborers in cities across the United States.

The mission of NDLO is to strengthen and expand the work of local day laborer organizing groups, in order to become more effective and strategic in building leadership, advancing low-wage worker and immigrant rights, and developing successful models for organizing immigrant contingent/temporary workers (NDLO, 2006).

In fulfilling this mission, NDLO and its affiliates engage in a variety of activities with and on behalf of day laborers. These include: worker organizing, direct action, policy advocacy, public participation, media outreach, litigation, and operating day labor worker centers. As a national network, NDLO member organizations come together for collective strategizing and planning, leading national actions, sharing best practices, and creating community-based, regional, and national alliances in the struggle for immigrant worker justice. According to NDLO (2007), "the unifying principle of [the network's] member organizations is a commitment to democratic and participatory practices that allow day laborers to shape their own futures. NDLO's member organizations are driven by a belief that only when people directly address their own problems and organize their own communities can they create a more humane and democratic society."

NDLO is a social movement organization that is situated at the intersection of punitive immigration laws, a restructuring labor market, heightened levels of worker disorganization, rampant violations of workers' rights, and political backlash against undocumented workers and the organizations that defend their rights (Theodore, 2007; see also Melucci, 1996: 53). It is a heterogeneous organization/network that operates according to a set of shared principles and philosophy – regarding democratic participation; regarding the importance of protecting workers' rights, safeguarding immigrant rights, and defending human rights; and regarding the pressing need to rebalance power relations in the low-wage labor market in the direction of contingent

workers. At the same time, NDLON members embrace a multiplicity of approaches and tactics in the struggle to achieve these ends. Members are autonomous organizations that are responsible for their own affairs. They ally under the auspices of the network to advance a common agenda.

One of NDLON's key functions as a social movement organization is to facilitate the diffusion of ideas, practice, and forms of contention between member organizations (Melucci, 1996; Diani, 2003; Tarrow, 2005). NDLON fosters exchanges between members (NDLON, 2006) through national conventions, regularly scheduled conference calls, regional meetings, site visits, strategic planning sessions, cultural events, and celebrations which offer opportunities for continuous interactions between organizers and leaders working to adapt strategic maneuvers to diverse local conditions. It is through these varied interactions that organizing philosophies and repertoires of contention are shared, molded, and transformed.

Significant elements of what can be considered "the NDLON approach" to labor organizing were cultivated during a period of intense social struggle in parts of Central and South America. This paper examines the experiences of organizers and leaders *before* they became involved in day labor issues in the United States. For many day laborer organizers, who themselves are immigrants from Latin America, their participation in mass movement activities was a formative experience. Indeed the principles, practices, and techniques of Popular Education and leadership development that now are so central to the work of NDLON were forged in and through the social struggles that enveloped Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s, and continue today in places like Chiapas and in the struggles of the indigenous peoples of North and South America (see Almedia, 2008; Brockett, 2005; Eckstein, 1989; Escobar and Alvarez, 1992; Pearce, 1986; Postero and Zamosc, 2004; Subcomandante Marcos, 2002; Wood, 2003). This observation is not meant to underplay the vital role of U.S.-born and raised organizers, many of whom are leading some of the most vibrant and innovative day laborer organizations. Rather, the organizing philosophies and methods that are practiced by network affiliates are the result of the productive melding of the organizing styles of a diverse cadre of organizers who have creatively adapted experiences from North America, Latin America, and elsewhere to the context of low-wage labor markets in the United States.

To better understand these developments, this paper delves into the formative experiences of several organizers to highlight the philosophical underpinnings of their organizing practices.¹ I highlight here the ways in which organizing methodologies are adapted to

¹ This paper is based on a series of interviews of day laborers and organizers who are affiliated with NDLON and its member organizations. In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 organizers and leaders between 2006 and 2008. These interviews were supplemented by participant-observation during strategic planning sessions in Los Angeles and New Orleans, the 2006, 2007 and 2009 national day laborer conventions, site visits to worker centers and informal hiring sites, visits with congressional staff on Capitol Hill, and network conference calls. NDLON staff selected organizers (seven men and five women) with varied backgrounds and experiences to be interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. Most interviews lasted several hours.

suit the realities of day labor markets in the United States. Equally germane to this study is the application of Popular Education in NDLO's activities to develop *dirigente populares*. *Dirigente popular* is the encapsulation of a loosely defined concept connoting an organic leadership that is embodied both in individuals and in the collectivity. It is a form of leadership that embraces democratic principles, especially the right of those affected by decisions to participate in the making of those decisions. *Dirigente popular* is a leader who is dedicated to creating new leaders. Leaders lead by facilitating and encouraging those around them to reflect, analyze, and alter their actions based on this reflection. As practiced by NDLO, the concept of *dirigente popular* is infused with the principles of Popular Education, and Popular Education methodologies are especially suited to fostering this type of leadership.

In the sections that follow, this paper examines two inter-related aspects of generative work among day laborers—Popular Education and leadership development. Important currents of thought within the network of day laborer organizers are identified, recognizing that distinctions between Popular Education and leadership development are, for many, blurred. This paper focuses less on the leadership styles, personal qualities, and individual attributes of the organizers who were interviewed, in favor of an approach that reveals the shared organizing philosophy that has developed among those active in NDLO. This organizing philosophy emphasizes building and maintaining diffuse leadership among workers and organizers, developing a critical consciousness among the day labor workforce, and uniting day laborers as a force for social change.

Day Labor in the United States

Each morning, at hundreds of open-air hiring sites in cities and towns throughout the United States, day laborers and employers meet to arrange work for the day. Day laborers gather at these informal hiring sites, as well as at approximately 60 day labor worker centers (Theodore, Valenzuela and Meléndez, 2008), eagerly awaiting prospective employers to hire them to complete short-term clean-up, gardening, painting, demolition, and other manual-labor projects. The day-labor site is a hiring spot where workers and employers meet to negotiate the terms of employment, including job tasks, wages, and length of the working day. Assignments primarily are for construction and landscaping work, and their employers usually are residential construction contractors and private households requiring immediate help with projects.

On any given day, approximately 117,600 workers are either employed as a day laborer or looking for day-labor jobs (Valenzuela, Theodore, Meléndez, and Gonzalez, 2006). The day-labor workforce in the United States is predominantly male and largely comprised of migrants from Mexico and Central America. Three-quarters of the day-labor workforce are undocumented migrants.

In recent years concerns about the growth of the day-labor workforce have been raised by policymakers, the media, and local stakeholders. Some critics complain about public disorder and antisocial behavior stemming from the actions of day laborers, while others have focused on issues of immigration control and even of national security. In many

respects, day laborers have been cast as the public face of a broken immigration system – standing in public spaces, day laborers are described as openly defying U.S. immigration laws while undermining the employment prospects of native-born workers. The visibility of day laborers, in part, has made them a target for vigilante groups and anti-immigrant organizations which have sought to disrupt hiring sites, intimidate workers and employers, and portray day laborers as “evidence” that stricter immigration enforcement is needed. In most areas of the country, day laborers live and work in an environment characterized by growing tensions and hostility, and at times this has escalated into incidents of violence against workers (see Moser, 2004; Valenzuela, 2006). The general climate of hostility towards day laborers has serious ramifications for their employment prospects, and rising antagonism towards day laborers has been associated with an undermining of employment conditions for these workers, particularly by unscrupulous employers who have sought to take advantage of workers’ limited recourse to defend their labor and human rights.

Day labor is characterized by employment instability, low earnings, hazardous work, and violations of basic labor standards. The day-labor workforce is an entirely contingent workforce; workers are hired only when employers need them and the duration of the employment “contract” (which consists of nothing more than a verbal agreement) is unsecured and open-ended. Day laborers are the epitome of at-will employees, and those who hire them are in no way bound to honor promises of continuing employment, whether from one day to the next or from one hour to the next. The instability of employment contributes to the low earnings of day laborers. Patterns of job holding and prevailing wage rates combine to keep most mired in poverty. Employer violations of day laborers’ rights and violations of basic labor standards are an all too common occurrence in the day-labor market. Wage theft is the most typical abuse experienced by day laborers, with nearly half reporting that they have been completely denied payment by an employer for work they completed in the previous two months and nearly half reporting that they had been underpaid during the same time period (Valenzuela et al., 2006).

Day labor also is a particularly dangerous occupation, and lost work time due to injury is common among the day-labor workforce. Several factors contribute to exceedingly high rates of on-the-job injury. These include exposure to hazardous conditions (including exposure to chemicals, dust and toxic emissions), use of faulty equipment (including improper scaffold construction and tools that are in poor condition), lack of protective gear and safety equipment, and lack of safety training (Mehta and Theodore, 2006; Walter et al., 2002). The levels of on-the-job injury experienced by day laborers cannot simply be accounted for by their employment in the construction industry, which has high rates of worker injury. Rather, the inescapable conclusions are that day laborers are hired to undertake some of the most dangerous jobs at a worksite and there is little, if any, meaningful enforcement of health and safety laws. Day laborers continue to endure unsafe working conditions, mainly because they fear that if they speak up, complain, or otherwise challenge these conditions, they will either be fired or not paid for their work (Mehta and Theodore, 2006).

Because most day laborers are working without authorization, exploitative employers are emboldened to withhold wage payments, abandon workers at job sites and subject workers to other abuses. Employers are often able to deter workers from contesting these conditions by threatening to report them to federal immigration authorities. Even when employers do not make these threats overtly, day laborers, mindful of their immigration status and the precariousness of work, are reluctant to seek recourse through government channels. As a result, violations of basic labor standards have become a taken-for-granted feature of day-labor markets. It is within this context that the National Day Laborer Organizing Network and its affiliates are working to improve working conditions for day laborers through popular education, worker empowerment, and leadership development. It is to these activities that we now turn.

Hard Lessons: Popular Education in Latin America

The work of NDLON educator/organizers is deeply informed by the Popular Education approaches that were developed and disseminated by theorists and practitioners throughout Latin America since the late 1960s. Some future day laborer organizers received formal training in Popular Education while others learned its theory and methods “on the job.” Either way, they participated in a community of social movement activists throughout the region that was developing an approach to organizing with its own philosophy, methodologies, and repertoires of contention. Always in the process of development, this approach to organizing has been particularly well suited to organizers who are prepared to adapt techniques to particular situations and local circumstances.

During the 1980s, and running through to today, various forms of Popular Education were being practiced throughout Latin America as educators challenged dominant pedagogical practices that reinforce the distance between teacher and student. For example, Elmer Romero worked as a popular educator in El Salvador and elsewhere in Latin America. He received formal training in Popular Education theory and methods at the Instituto Mexicano para el Desarrollo Comunitario (Mexican Institute for Community Development) in Guadalajara, Mexico. His work experience includes positions in the Youth Organization department of Archbishop Óscar Romero (during the year prior to his assassination following a sermon calling on government soldiers to disobey orders that violate human rights) and as a popular educator with *Equipo Maiz* in El Salvador.

We went to Mexico in the 1970s to study at an institute called IMDEC – *Instituto Mexicano para el Desarrollo Comunitario* [Mexican Institute for Community Development]. And there we learned how to integrate Popular Education into specific topics. Most of us had read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, from Paulo Freire;² ... [and] a book called *Educate to Transform*, they call it the “Bible of Popular Education.”³ This was on a very theoretical level, but in Guadalajara, Mexico, we found the practical level, a more pragmatic Popular Education. Then we ... went back to El Salvador to apply that in the practice. El Salvador was

² Freire, 1970.

³ Núñez, 1992.

going through a rough period. Most of the leaders had gone to war or they were exiled, and there was the need to create new leadership, at that moment, through Popular Education.

[At IMDEC we learned] how to ... apply Popular Education in specific contexts like religion, economic development or leadership development.... So we learned in Mexico how to use new techniques because I had been learning a lot at the theoretical level but we couldn't [easily] apply Popular Education in the context of El Salvador.... [We had to think about] how to introduce new ideas so people would feel comfortable with them, and how to manage ideological differences. We were radical and politicized, so we were looking for something new at that time.

Romero highlights two key aspects of the application of Popular Education to social justice work: (1) the ongoing need to create new leadership during the course of a political struggle; and (2) the need to closely align organizing approaches to local knowledges, community concerns, and the everyday realities of economic hardship and political subjugation. Such pragmatic strategies require building on the familiar in order to tailor organizing approaches to local circumstances and, when necessary, recombining emergent elements of Popular Education practice with known and meaningful contexts, such as work, religion, war, and culture. Recombinant strategies, in turn, demand mobile technologies such as the alphabetization process developed by popular educators because such distillations allow for the technologies' adaptive potential across varying contexts.

Pablo Alvarado, the executive director of NDLON, illustrates the flexibility of alphabetization, drawing upon his experience with literacy campaigns in war-torn El Salvador.

[We would begin with words like] *Trabajo* – Work. *Agua*. *Agua* means water and it's meaningful for a lot of people. But for peasants, water is a precious thing because in the village where we grew up, there was no running water. ... [W]hen the water comes in May, that's when all the peasants go and prepare the soil. So, we could generally hold discussions with [these kinds of words] and it was very meaningful. Those words were really meaningful.

We put together the literacy primer and we were discussing which words we were going to choose. [My job was to visit] the different villages, understanding the language and getting the most meaningful words for them. People were saying “*avión*” – the airplane. Why *avión*? The airplane was very meaningful to people because it was the airplane that dropped the bombs. It wasn't meaningful for other people in the cities because they hadn't lived that experience. So, that's the way we came up with the words.⁴

⁴ Consider as well the “generative word” work of Elmer Romero, who was at the same time engaged in Popular Education in the city of San Salvador. “A lot of handbooks were written to teach people to read with using generative words. In the countryside we used words from the countryside like ... machete, hammock. And in the city, because of that context, we would use words, for instance, related to

What becomes evident from Alvarado's comments is the commitment to building modes of communication and analysis based on the concepts most significant in people's lives. *Avión*, for example, signifies for the rural population living in the "liberated zones" of the country in ways it simply cannot for city dwellers who were physically removed from the most tangible effects of the conflict. Understanding the various conceptual and linguistic vocabularies of population groups becomes crucial for integrating Popular Education with the lived experiences of those most affected.

[We held literacy classes] outside or inside. It didn't matter. We didn't have chalkboards. We created a *tarjetotrafo* [which contains the syllabic families of the words being used]. And then we would create little packs and then we came up with syllables, so we had the generative words. *Trabajo* has three syllables. *Tra-ba-jo*. Okay? So, what is ...the syllabic family of "tra"? – tra, tre, tri, tro, tru. And then we would create cards for each syllable. So, the peasants would actually be able to visualize that the word was divided in syllables. Those cards are combined ... to come up with new words, to generate new words.

As in the *avión* example above, Alvarado chooses words that have deep resonance for his students. Breaking down the familiar *trabajo* into its component parts (i.e., syllables), Alvarado creates linguistic building blocks that can be readily comprehended and easily recombined. The emphasis on visual knowledge reinforces the learning process, particularly in an unconventional educational environment that lacks even rudimentary facilities. The "generative word" method thus expands the vocabularies of participants through the cumulative layering of syllables, concepts, and meanings, and it does so by ratifying their shared experiences and knowledges. Such "generative work" is essential to the organizing ethos because it demands active individual and collective participation in the analysis of one's contemporary condition, the political and economic forces that give rise to entrenched poverty, and the possibilities for social transformation.

Elmer Romero, working with the "generative word" method in San Salvador, explains how the highly flexible vocabularies developed perform multiple functions; this adaptability allows "generative workers"—teachers and students, together—to move from the known to the (as yet) unimagined, reshaping subjectivities and the sense of one's place in the world. Through this process, underlying socioeconomic structures are revealed as being politically mediated rather than being the "natural" order of things.

We wanted to create a political consciousness so we would use words related to the political context. For example, I remember we would use the word *bloque* [block], because the *Bloque* was a [mass movement] organization. We would use *bloque* and other words related to organizations because we were working on organizing people.⁵

transportation like bus or car because people were familiar with that."

⁵The *Bloque Popular Revolucionario* might serve as an example of such usage.

Bloque's multi-functional application enables the growth of class consciousness and social solidarity, enabling a new form of (collective) agency that was highly effective, in large part because it flew beneath the radar of oppressive institutions and state surveillance systems. At the time, Romero and Alvarado were well aware that Popular Education was, as the latter calls it, "a subversive methodology." Indeed, the grassroots literacy campaigns initially managed to elude the attention of government authorities who might quash these efforts. "They [the government] didn't see it as a threat," Alvarado observes, because, from the authorities' perspective, groups of *campesinos* learning to read were simply developing literacy skills that they probably would never use.

But government inattention to literacy campaigns was quickly about to change. As civil strife in El Salvador deepened, and government repression of mass movement activities became more severe (see Hammond, 1998; Wood, 2003), Popular Educators found themselves in the midst of a full-scale civil war. Romero recalls:

We ran a lot of risks. People knew that they were working in a very difficult context and that people could die or disappear. We lived under the philosophy that we might die soon. The job was very risky. Churches were persecuted.

The death squads came to my house and they left the *mano blanco* [white hand] they used to leave painted on the door; that meant I was the next one to be killed.⁶ They were going to kill me; they killed my classmates, six or seven of them.

The people who were organizing had to move to other areas of the country to keep on working and struggling. I believe we had a strong conscience, and even if there was repression or murders we had to keep on going. And that's why there was a slogan that said, "More repression, more struggle." We had that slogan inside us and we had to live according to it. Otherwise, the movement would fail.

Francisco Pacheco, the East Coast field coordinator for NDLON, describes the various forms of repression with which popular educators had to contend. As an active participant in El Salvador's mass movements, Pacheco had first-hand experience working in an environment characterized by capricious violence and brutal repression.

There were three types of repression. The first one was economic. With the farmers, the repression included that the patron wouldn't pay them, they would steal money from their salaries, they would call the National Guard to take them away, they would exploit them, make them work more. The repression was open, through the Army, the police, the [national] guard, etc. They would just kill the people because they were becoming organized.

⁶ The *mano blanco*, or white hand, was the "calling card" of death squads that carried out extrajudicial assassinations and forced disappearances of dissidents, activists, and members of rebel groups. A white hand on the door of a home was an indication that one of the inhabitants was the target of retaliation by the armed groups, usually operating under the auspices of the dictatorship.

There was another kind of repression, also from the government. It was the death squads. The governmental repression was more direct. They would go, for example, to the marches. There would be a massacre at many of them. [Marchers would be] machine-gunned. People would go to the marches clearly knowing that they could be killed.

The [third] kind of repression was more psychological, but also physical. With the death squads there was psychological terrorism against the population. For example, they would arrive at the different communities and would make people disappear. Sometimes, in the countryside, heads would be found on the wooden sticks of fences. It was very visible. It was a means of provoking terror.

So, the movement developed in El Salvador, but when the repression came they [government forces] decapitated the popular movement. ... They used a technique called “taking the fish from the water.” That meant to take [everyone] out of the hills.... So, the guerrillas were “the fish;” they would be alone or “out of the water.” There were military offensives that would kill everything that moved.

The civil war in El Salvador wore on, but this did not halt Popular Education efforts aimed at political-economic transformation. Pablo Alvarado explains how committed educators had to deal with the realities of war:

From time to time the army would come with these *huge* military operations so people [had to live] with this... there was no way that the [guerilla fighters] could stand up in a conventional war.

So, when they turned to a conventional war, basically, people would leave and leave everything behind. The army would come and they would destroy *everything*. Kill the animals and burn the houses down. But that operation would end. When it ended, people came back to rebuild their lives again. And in four or five months, it was happening again. The same thing. People took off, and then they came back to rebuild their lives. So, we did literacy when things were okay, you know, when there was peace. The only schools were the ones that we were creating.

As becomes clear from these accounts, the highly repressive state actions, including choreographed violence and pervasive surveillance, compelled educators and organizers to adopt subtle, innovative means of engagement. Education needed to be highly flexible and mobile because communities could be disbanded in a matter of moments. Indirect modes of communication and organizing were developed: centering upon everyday activities, these techniques utilized such familiar contexts as work, play, and religion to analyze the realities of the oppressed and work towards social transformation.

Pablo Alvarado explains how seemingly unthreatening everyday words like “water” can, under the guidance of a popular educator, be used to expose underlying political-

economic relations between, for example, the landless poor and wealthy property owners and ranchers. But during the Salvadorian civil war, he cautions, educators had to be extremely careful: “you had to be clever how you did it. Because we were always under surveillance.” Here he offers one example of the tacit messages educators sent:

Water. The water, it’s about the land. Because when the water falls, it makes the wealthy wealthier. That’s the way it was approached. [The Church] would talk about Jesus having preference for the poor but [they taught this] by reading the Bible, by deciding what portions of the Bible to read. So, they did that in a very subtle way.

Alvarado illustrates how the most familiar contexts are deployed in the education process, highlighting the interrelated nature of *campesinos*’ everyday activities and belief systems. This attention to the meaning-making structures of the student population allowed educators to introduce new belief systems like Marxism and Liberation Theology. The quotation below illustrates the power inherent in educative action that begins with the most fundamental aspects of people’s lived experience.

In the liberated areas, the army wouldn’t let us bring milk, not even *leche en polvo* [powdered milk]. Not even that. . . . The people didn’t have enough protein, so we decided to introduce the soybean. This was a beautiful project. We brought five pounds; we created a community plot;, and we brought the peasants together. Out of that plot, they generated a lot of seeds. And then each peasant had their seed and they went back and began growing soybean, and that’s rich in protein. So, the next thing we did, we put together a team of women that would come to the community and teach the people how to cook it, how to process it, how to make all kinds of things with soybeans. And when they were harvesting the first time, the community had a big party and they would make this delicious food. Then the women taught them how to make milk out of soybean too. And that [began happening] all over the area.

Introducing the soybean to the area, to bring proteins to peasants, was a subversive act. It was a subversive act because milk wasn’t allowed to come to those areas. And the children were malnourished. And we saw it. We saw what people needed, and we brought alternative health projects. So, it was an act of subversion to bring [soybean] and teach people how to grow it. . . . It was really cool to see people coming together and seeing the women teaching the other women how to process the soybean and make all these kinds of foods, and the celebration [that was] taking place. All of that was beautiful. And you were being the teacher, bringing the teaching to them. So, a lot of the literacy work fits within that effort as well. At the same time that we were teaching how to grow the soybean, we were teaching them how to read the word, *soja* [soy], *frijol soja* [soybean]. So, it went along and the same with the health project.

Self-sustaining work that meets the nutritional needs of the community thus becomes the means through which literacy is achieved. Fostering independence and self-sufficiency,

this form of “generative work” involves the whole community, women and children as well as men; helping to create productive roles for everyone, educators improve the conditions of community members in non-paternalistic and sustainable ways.

Where agrarian work was the context within which Alvarado operated, Oscar Paredes, founder and executive director of the Latin-American Workers Project in Brooklyn, New York, chose another indirect educational method—that of play. As a teenager, Paredes became involved in the Indigenous Ecuadorian Movement, which functioned principally in rural areas of the country. The Popular Education work in this setting combined theatre, music, and social commentary as part of empowerment and consciousness-raising activities. He recalls how he and his fellow organizers would travel from town to town to perform a puppet show for *campesinos* who were deeply mired in poverty:

They would see us coming in the bus and they would run to us to carry things. They would [then] run to the middle of the plaza and help us set up the stage. Then they [would] sit at the front waiting. Both kids and adults were waiting for the show. I would start with the guitar and play a song and Adriana started with the puppets. They paid a lot of attention.

We would tell the story of Churuquita. Churuquita was a little lady in the village who was always very happy. She is like a butterfly [wonderful and full of life]. But she sees her boss as a monster. In the show, the boss of the ranch comes and she is hurt.

And then we start to directly ask the public: “Who is the monster of *this* ranch?” They would all shout and say names. And we would ask:

“Why?”

“Because he doesn’t pay the workers...”

We asked them:

“Why is he a monster?”

“Because he doesn’t pay us our salary! We don’t have food, we don’t have water!”

They would all start to scream. They don’t have the documents that show that they are the owners of their little houses. “We don’t have the papers for our houses! He is a monster!” [Laughs] We laugh and then we make songs and we dance with them. The puppet starts dancing and they all start dancing with the puppets. So we, again, make them speak.

“Now, what are you going to do?”

“We have to talk with him.”

“When?”

“Monday!” [Laughs]

“What do you want to say? How are you going to say it?”

So we ask, among the workers, who will be the spokespersons? They say:

“Oh. Ricardito, Ricardito!”

“Why Ricardito?”

“Because he is strong. He knows how to talk.”

... We did that in Quito, too, in the poor neighborhoods outside of the capital, in the villages where the workers lived. Factory workers, construction workers, they go to work to the city and then they go back to the ghetto. We used that system with them [as well].

Culture becomes the medium through which the prevailing patterns of socioeconomic inequality that produce such deep poverty among rural farmers and the urban working class are exposed, and the audience-participants play an active role in the problem-solving process that unfolds. They are, in fact, engaged in the theatrical performance from the very moment the theatre troupe arrives, helping to unload the truck and build the stage; the *campesinos'* labor initiates the pedagogical performance that follows, an act of empowerment that sets the stage for their continued political engagement. When asked whether government officials were aware of the traveling puppet show (and the subversive content), Paredes quietly replied, “They hated us. They don’t like people like us. They killed people like us.” The dangers attending such political consciousness-raising activities are undeniable, but educators like Paredes use humor and interactive theatre to mediate such discussions and to diffuse the tensions that are unavoidable given the suffering of the rural and urban poor.

Another powerful context educators exploited in their “generative work” was the state-sanctioned religion of the masses. Their creative recombining of religious doctrine and Popular Education practices allowed Romero and others to “use the church as a force for liberation” in ways that were initially undetectable and drew substantively on the objects and ideas that had the greatest meaning for their adherents. At a young age, Romero was exposed to priests who had embraced Liberation Theology, and with it Popular Education; he recalls below his earliest encounters with the recombinant strategies of these religious practitioners.

The Church’s job was, basically, to conduct education in faith; but the priests during those days were also looking at how to help the farmers. And illiteracy was also a problem; people couldn’t read the Bible. ... The movement was starting in El Salvador. This was the beginning of the movement.

One time I remember being surprised, because all the teachers, the popular educators, were priests. We were celebrating the Mass.... Usually we used the Host, but he used a tortilla. He consecrated the tortilla. That was really shocking for many people – even for me – but because we developed a process ... we really understood why a tortilla. He said, “If Jesus was born here he would use tortilla in the Last Supper.” So, that changed many people.

Consecrating the tortillas that were not only consumed but *produced* by members of the congregation, the priests demonstrated another means through which the most familiar, everyday objects become invested with new, politicized meanings.

Recombinant Organizing in Day Labor Markets

“Experiments cannot be transplanted; they must be reinvented” (Freire, 1978: 9).

The strategies employed in the foregoing examples are highly suggestive of the models of organizing later adopted by NDLON. Oscar Paredes speaks to the diverse practices that developed in various geographical locations, commenting upon the challenges of adapting them—indeed, reinventing them—for application in the United States.

Even if we come with different organizing styles from our countries, we try to integrate them in the organizing process we develop here. For example, we participated in cooperatives in our countries. Housing cooperatives, land cooperatives. That helps us have a clearer vision in order to see our needs and to figure out what our problems are. ... That is our starting point. To figure out our needs and to figure out why is it that we have them. What is stopping us from moving forward? What do we want to do and how should we plan to do it? One of the things we respect the most, and that’s why we’ve been successful organizing Latin American workers from different countries are the workers’ ideological beliefs, their religion, their culture.... We respect that. How are we going to integrate all of the elements each of us brings in our own development?

This experimentation with forms of organizing, collective action, and leadership development involves adapting, reconfiguring, and remaking Popular Education methodologies that were developed in the context of Latin American social struggles to suit the unique challenges of day laborer organizing in U.S. cities. Again, Mr. Paredes elaborates this point:

We come [to the United States] with our self-esteem very low... We need to heal the painful sores we come with. In order to come we had to leave our families; others are here because of political situations; some escaped from wars. How do we plan to change that and create community? [By] talking, debating, and destroying all of the negative barriers, transforming them into positive things. The reason why we don’t follow the models of the United States is, in the first place, because they are weak models. These models were created as an answer to a situation that exists here. In Latin America we have different situations ... each country has its own situation. And each country has its own organizing models. Each person learns in a different way. That is the interesting thing here – to put all the pieces together to create something different.

Paredes highlights the challenges of organizing workers from diverse backgrounds, varying economic conditions, and different cultural traditions. And yet, respecting the difference and situatedness of workers results in a “piecing together” of disparate elements from which new and appropriate approaches can be developed. Just as popular

educators in Latin America fostered literacy and solidarity among the various populations through the process of alphabetization and “generative work” so too do day labor organizers foster community and politicization through recombinant strategies.

Carlos Mares, a day labor leader working in San Francisco, lends insight into the significant challenges posed for organizers of day laborers through an account of his early day labor experiences:

The first day was tough because they drove me to [to a nearby suburb], and an [employer] took me to his house to remove weeds but he didn't give me any tools. He expected me to do it with my hands. I didn't know it was [poisonous]; I spent about four hours removing weeds and then I went home. The following day, I saw that my hands were swollen.

His description highlights the uncertainty and alienation faced by the individual worker, and the structure of the day labor market exacerbates the atomization of the laborer. Mares recalls that, just as today, the competition among day laborers for jobs was fierce. “Pure competition. The one who would get into the truck would be the winner,” he explains. There was very little communication, much less cooperation, between workers. As a result, collective strategies to address abuses in the labor market were not possible. “When there was any trouble, the worker wouldn't say anything at all” and therefore abusive practices on the part of some employers continued. In addition, few workers' rights organizations were active in day labor issues, and many workers, like Mares, did not know that organizations that assist low-wage workers even existed. But this began to change in 2000, when “we started to get organized.”

Day laborer organizing to improve wages and working conditions must confront basic issues of economic survival. Given the low wages and sporadic nature of work in the informal construction industry, many day laborers live on poverty-level earnings. In addition, the activities of unscrupulous employers, anti-immigrant groups, and local law enforcement officials threaten the viability of day labor hiring sites, potentially jeopardizing workers' ability to secure employment. Mares explains:

There used to be 20 or 30 [workers] living in the streets.... It is obvious that the situation would make the workers lose control of their lives. To live in the street, to wake up in the morning because you are cold because it rained, not to have communication with your family. You want to go to a park to rest. You don't have any illusions, your life is drowning.... The situation was very intense.

Mares continued his involvement as a day laborer leader joining with other workers to raise wages at the hiring sites. But again, the difficulties of organizing this contingent workforce were ever present. The workers decided to try to establish a minimum wage of between \$8 and \$10 an hour.

We had meetings every week. But there was this situation: if we, the group of 90, wouldn't accept the jobs [below the minimum wage], other workers who weren't

organized, would take them. But we had figured out who would work for more and who would work for less money. So, our responsibility was to speak with these guys.

In some cases, a desperate worker would be prepared to work for far less than the minimum wage.

He has his option. We can't go against him. We have to understand that we've been through the same thing. You have to start to recuperate [get back on your feet], but not forever. If you always do it [accept the \$6 per hour wage] you will lower the wage for everybody.

So the leaders would talk to these workers—every day.

I would say, “Look, partner, here we've been organizing ourselves in order to maintain a wage level. We kill ourselves to make \$50 a day, and we are trying to maintain a stable wage for our work.”

But there are always those who will tell you, “This is a free street, I can work with whoever I want.” [We would reply] that we are just trying to talk to him; that we are organizing ourselves and, if they want to get organized, those are the rules. But that they can do whatever they want. And on the next day we would talk to him again.

There are some kinds of people who you see for a year and you talk to them for a year, and they ignore you. You talk to them and it's like talking to a rock. But ... one day these persons come to you and ask you how you are doing with your work. And you tell them you are charging \$8 an hour, and that you have a stable employer. What I learned through the network [NDLON] regarding leadership is that you don't have to make enemies. You have to understand people. And that you have to find a way to make people conscious.

Like many other day laborer leaders, Mares has participated in numerous leadership development and training sessions sponsored by NDLON and its member organizations. These organizations have sought to identify leaders, like Mares, from within the ranks of the day labor workforce. Then, it is a matter of exposing these emerging leaders to the tools and methodologies of organizing in the day labor context to see if they can be effective.

The realities of day labor mean that *dirigente popular*, if it is to be achieved, will reside both in individuals and in the collectivity. The instability of the day labor employment relationship, the pressing need to earn an income to support oneself and one's family, and problems of immigration status which cast a long shadow over the day labor market create significant challenges for organizing and for leadership development. In response, NDLON member organizations have embraced the notion that leadership development will need to be an ongoing activity that involves the day laborers who are present at any

given time. In short, day laborer leadership will be a diffuse leadership, but collectively, day laborers can build solidarity across lines of nationality, race, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status.

Pablo Alvarado, too, sees an opportunity to break down the barriers that divide workers. “I understand Freire when he talks about humanizing. It is like what we do. We get people [together] and we humanize each other as we interact with each other” in the defense of workers’ rights. This sentiment is shared by NDLOM organizers who work each day to build solidarity and develop leadership among the day labor workforce. They strive to build community where they are and to include all who pass through the space of this worker center. In this way day laborer organizations become even more deeply embedded into local communities. No doubt this will require worker centers to evolve and develop into a different type of institution. But with an established presence in the community, and with the lessons and practices of popular education, it is possible that day labor worker centers could become even more important sources of organic leaders – a true *dirigente populares*.

Dirigente Popular: Leadership Development among Day Laborers

Because labor market insecurity results in ever-fluctuating day labor employment relations, the creation of *dirigente populares* is especially challenging. But NDLOM organizers have identified the key resource for a flexible yet stable leadership structure and are firmly committed to ongoing leadership development among the day laborer population. Elmer Romero comments, “I still think that leadership in the day laborer movement has to come from within it. It has to be found. To be able to form leaders it is necessary that we, those of us who work in organizations, go back ... to that base.” Recombinant techniques that echo the participatory theatrical performance discussed earlier enable workers to see themselves as the authors of their own histories. In Paredes’s narrative, the *campesinos* identified Ricardito as their perfect spokesperson because “he is strong [and] knows how to talk;” Carlos Mares, recounts his own rather sudden emergence as a leader when a group of day laborers convened to discuss what to do about ongoing police harassment.

[I was] concerned about having work. I didn’t know anything about leadership or getting organized, my only concern was to work and make money.

This is how I was voted to be leader. There were 90 of us in a room and [the organizer] said we should select a leader. It was a room a little bigger than this one and I turned around to see 180 eyes looking at me. That feels incredible. And all of them saying: “Him.” . . . So I said: “Me?” They told me, “Yes, you can talk.” . . . I said, “It’s a difficult decision to make. Let me think about it.” . . . They all moved to create a path and I left walking through that path. I didn’t know whether to laugh, scream, or run away. . . So I thought about it, “What if I leave? But, then, what will happen? What about all the work we did during the week to develop this?” It was like there was an eruption. We couldn’t allow that eruption to diminish. I went back to the room and they were all there and I said,

“Okay. I accept.” We needed somebody who would be a spokesperson with the message from the group. [I had] no experience at all. It was just my will, my enthusiasm.

Particularly compelling in Mares’s account is the organic nature of his process of self-discovery, and his sense of himself as a medium for the message of his fellow workers. There is no evidence of the ego-driven, individualistic leader who rises from the ranks; in fact, Mares attributes his agency as a *dirigente popular* to his enthusiasm for the collective cause. Leadership development is represented, above all, as a collective enterprise. The social character of knowledge creation, through processes of collective learning, enables day laborers to increase their understanding of the social conditions that impact their lives, as well as to prepare themselves to transform those conditions (Freire, 1970; Hammond, 1996; Horton and Freire, 1990; McLaren, 2000). This shared understanding and commitment, in turn, generates the collective will and enthusiasm that enables the continued reproduction of a flexible leadership.

Conclusion

Sydney Tarrow has observed that “The learned conventions of contention are part of a society’s public culture” (Tarrow, 1998: 20). In the case of day labor organizers from Latin America, these conventions of contention are strongly shaped by repertoires of Popular Education which were so central to the activities of radical social movements in the region. “Particular groups have a particular history – and memory – of contentious forms” (Tarrow, 1998: 21); the campesinos, the urban working class, and the rural laborers, as well as the community organizers, rebel soldiers, and activists who endured the struggles for political-economic reform in parts of Latin America have had their worldviews shaped by processes of Popular Education. Many grassroots leaders in Latin American social movements developed their leadership skills through processes that incorporated or were based on Popular Education. Many influential members of the day laborer movement in the United States share this background. And many workers who assemble at informal day labor hiring sites or who become involved in the member organizations of NDLON also share these experiences. This creates a common repertoire of practice, and a common language, that provides the basis for developing *dirigente populares* – organic leaders – among the day laborer community in the United States. Oscar Paredes provides an example of these cross-national connections in action:

We had some guys that came from Mexico two weeks ago [to the Latin American Workers Project]. I started to explain them our model. [One of them said,] “Oh, I am part of a cooperative in my little town and we work in that same way. We do everything together and we have somebody who represents us. Everybody supports everybody.” They have become very strong leaders because they already have leadership skills. They already have that voice. So, when we opened this [worker] center it was very important for us to make space for people to develop what they already brought [with them from their home countries].

As the above example reveals, the newly arrived workers recognized the model that was in place at the Latin American Workers Project, and because of this, they were readily able to assimilate into the structure of the organization. Because Popular Education, grassroots democracy, and organic leadership are “conventions of contention” that indeed are part of the public culture in some (though not all) segments of Latin American societies, many migrants to the United States carry with them memories and experiences with these conventions and are able to draw upon them in the context of their lives in the U.S. Crucially, the model is one that provides a structure through which leadership development and worker involvement can be nurtured within NDLO member organizations, and it contributes to the vitality of these organizations.

NDLO, in its capacity as a national network, facilitates the circulation of identities (e.g., day laborer [*jornalero*]; migrant worker), organizing principles (e.g., democracy; workers’ rights; social justice; leadership development [*dirigente populares*]), and organizing methodologies (e.g., Popular Education) both within and outside the network. Within the network of day laborer organizations, there appears to be an opportunity to create a new, transnational Popular Education for low-wage workers in the United States. Elmer Romero sees this potential which draws on the experiences of migrants from around the world:

... [T]here have been thinkers worldwide doing the same thing and now we can systematize it. With immigrants [in the United States] from all over the world it becomes possible to create this global vision of Popular Education.

References

- Almeida, P. S. 2008. *Waves of Protest: Popular Struggle in El Salvador, 1925-2005*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brockett, C. D. 2005. *Political Movements and Violence in Central America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diani, M. 2003. “‘Leaders’ or Brokers? Positions and Influence in Social Movement Networks,” in M. Diani and D. McAdam, eds., *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, pp. 105-122. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eckstein, S., editor. 1989. *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Escobar, A. and S. E. Alvarez, editors. *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Fernández-Kelly, P. 2006. “Introduction” in P. Fernández-Kelly and J. Schefner, eds., *Out of the Shadows: Political Action and the Informal Economy in Latin America*, pp.1-22. University Park, PA: Penn State Press.

- Freire, P. 1993. *Pedagogy of the City*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. 1978. *Pedagogy in Process: The Letters to Guinea-Bissau*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Freire, P. 1974 [2007]. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. 1970 [1993]. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Hammond, J. L. 1996. *Fighting to Learn: Popular Education and Guerilla War in El Salvador*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Horton, M. and P. Freire. 1990. *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- McLaren, P. 2000. *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire, and the Pedagogy of Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Mehta, C. and N. Theodore. 2006. "Workplace Safety in Atlanta's Construction Industry: Institutional Failure in Temporary Staffing Arrangements," *Working USA* 9(1): 59-77.
- Melucci, A. 1996. *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moser, B. 2004. "The Battle for 'Georgiafornia,'" in *Intelligence Report*. Atlanta: Southern Poverty Law Center.
- NDLON [National Day Laborer Organizing Network]. 2007. Unpublished internal document. Los Angeles: NDLON.
- NDLON [National Day Laborer Organizing Network]. 2006. *From the Margins to the Forefront – Annual Report: 2004-2005*. Los Angeles: NDLON.
- NDLON [National Day Laborer Organizing Network]. 2001. *National Day Laborer Exchange 2001 – Memoria Histórica*. Los Angeles: NDLON.
- Núñez, C. 1992. *Educación Para Transformar, Transformar Para Educar*. Guadalajara, Mexico: Mexican Institute for Community Development.
- Pearce, J. 1986. *Promised Land: Peasant Rebellion in Chalatenango El Salvador*. London: Latin American Bureau.
- Postero, N. G. and L. Zamosc, editors. 2004. *The Struggle for Indigenous Rights in Latin America*. Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press.
- Subcomandante Marcos. 2002. *The Word is Our Weapon*. London: Serpent's Tail.

- Tarrow, S. 2005. *The New Transnational Activism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarrow, S. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Theodore, N. 2007. "Closed Borders, Open Markets: Day Laborers' Struggle for Economic Rights" in H. Leitner, J. Peck and E. Sheppard, eds., *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers*, pp. 250-265. New York: Guilford.
- Theodore, N. A. Valenzuela Jr., and E. Meléndez. 2009. "Worker Centers: Defending Labor Standards for Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy," *International Journal of Manpower*, 30(5): 422-436.
- Theodore, N. A. Valenzuela Jr., and E. Meléndez. 2006. "La Esquina (The Corner): Day Laborers on the Margins of New York's Formal Economy," *Working USA* 9(4): 407-423.
- Valenzuela Jr., A. 2006. "New Immigrants and Day Labor: The Potential for Violence," in R. Martinez and A. Valenzuela, Jr., eds., *Immigration and Crime: Race, Ethnicity, and Violence*, pp. 189-211. New York: New York University Press.
- Valenzuela Jr., A., N. Theodore, E. Meléndez, and A. L. Gonzalez. 2006. *On the Corner: Day Labor in the United States*. Los Angeles: UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty.
- Walter, N., P. Bourgois, M. H. Loinaz, and D. Schillinger. 2002. "Social Context of Work Injury Among Undocumented Day Laborers in San Francisco." *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 17: 221-229.
- Wood, E. 2003. *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.