

Low-Wage Immigrant Organizing on Long Island: The Workplace Project's Achievements and Challenges

A conversation with Executive Director Nadia Marin-Molina

by Gregory M. Maney

Mirroring national trends, U.S. Census figures show a rapid increase in the presence of immigrants on Long Island. Between 2000 and 2008, Long Island's foreign-born population increased by 21.5%. Immigrants now comprise over 14% of Long Island's population. Many have come from the plains, haciendas and favelas of Mexico, Central America, and South America. As in the past, a combination of push and pull factors help to explain their often-perilous journeys. Structural adjustment, austerity, trade liberalization, militarization, and the

participation of these workers in the communities in which they live. Through the organization, immigrant workers have won key victories, incl

You know, I was kind of wandering and looking around, and I came here and I met Jennifer, the Workplace Project's first organizer. Once I met people there, I was hooked. I knew that I wanted to come here. So I did a summer internship in my second summer. Then after the summer internship, I was able to work during my third year to get a fellowship to be able to start to work here full time after graduation.

Nadia Marin-Molina

Q: So with those initial experiences, what was it that really captured you and made you say, "Wow, this is a great organization, and this is the kind of work that I really want to be involved with?"

NMM : Well, again, while I was in law school I wasn't sure what I wanted to do at all. But I really did feel like I wanted to do something that would somehow actually make change, and I think in law school you start to lose a lot of that idealism. You realize in law school that the legal process is extremely long and doesn't necessarily have an outcome that is in the interest of justice, much less social justice. What I liked about the Workplace Project was that it combined law and organizing. So there was an immediate recognition from Jennifer that the legal system was flawed, but that the ideal was we want to teach people about their rights, and it's important for people to know about their rights. We also wanted to educate the community and activate the community around those rights. So we weren't going to just rely on the courts to deliver justice. I think that's what I really, really liked about the organization.

Q: So that gives kind of a starting point for and a nice segue to the next question, what is the Workplace Project? What are your main goals and activities?

NMM : The Workplace Project was founded in 1992 with the idea of fighting against the exploitation of Latino immigrant workers on Long Island. At the time that the organization was started, its central focus was around workplace issues. People came to the organization because they had some sort of a problem on the job. It could be wage theft, it could be

accidents on the job, discrimination, firing, et cetera. And we offered workers' rights courses, orientation and support to people in terms of enforcing those rights.

Over time, that continues to be the core of the organization. I would say the majority of people who come to the organization do so because of some sort of a problem on the job. And we've maintained that core idea and that base of people, of workers in the organization. But the organization has also expanded so that it's not focused exclusively on workplace issues anymore. We've worked on campaigns that have to do with housing, on campaigns that have to do with immigration reform, right now on educating people around the census.

So we've tried to be responsive to the issues that are brought up by the community, because an issue, for example, like immigration reform is something that is not directly a workplace issue, but it is so crucial to people's lives not only as human beings, but also as workers that our board and our members thought that the organization needed to get involved. We've been flexible in terms of looking at and responding to the needs of the community and trying to create campaigns in the areas that are brought up by the community.

The Alliance for Justice is basically our workers' rights program. We've also organized day laborers in different corners of Long Island, in some cases to establish a day laborer hiring site, in other cases just to negotiate with the police or with local officials to ensure that their rights are respected as workers. We have a domestic workers' cooperative called Unity Housecleaners. It strives to improve the working conditions of domestic workers by allowing women a way to organize themselves to promote their own work and also set their own wages and working conditions. In addition, Unity Housecleaners is the group that is involved in the fight for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights at a state level and the formation of the National Alliance of Domestic Workers.

We have a committee of workers at Belmont Racetrack who walk and groom the horses. Most people don't know that there are about 2,000 workers who live and work at the racetracks, and that many of those are immigrant workers. We also have an office in Farmingville, which is a much smaller immigrant community than Hempstead and surrounding areas. Farmingville has a community that's mostly from Mexico, and there are a lot less services in that area. There's just less infrastructure, so there the office that we have functions as basically a referral center for people who needs all kinds of services, not just work-related issues, and also a place for ESL classes and dance. There's a dance troupe that meets there.

So these are the broad areas in which we work. Then we have specific campaigns that we work on, like I mentioned before, around immigration or around the census, where we're reaching out to our own committees and training our members to reach out to the community around issues that are designated as important.

Q: I think it is interesting to look at where the Workplace Project was when you first joined and where it is now. So here you've reached out to a number of different workers in different settings. You're addressing issues not only that they're facing in the workplace, but also other issues in their lives -- for instance, around housing discrimination. You're not only helping them to organize to advocate for better wages and against discrimination, but providing services, helping them to advocate not only locally but in terms of state and national kind of

So we finally were able to establish such a relationship where they were willing to basically expend their resources going after some of these employers and arrest them. On our end we had members, workers, who were willing to speak to the DA's office, and we were able to build that relationship in such a way that they could do it. So there have been, I'd say, eight contractors arrested by now which had been one of my dreams—to see some of these employers actually arrested for what they were doing.

Now, obviously, that's still a challenge. We're still working on ways to go after employers and to not only win, because we're capable of winning in court or winning in terms of getting employers arrested, but actually to get money

And yet you have congressional representatives and senators who are worried about being seen as pro-immigrant. So I think that that's one of the challenges for the organization, which is how to take on issues which often are seen politically as a third rail. They would rather do anything than talk about immigration issues.

Our other challenges are just things which challenge all organizations, like fundraising. I think we're always struggling with figuring out how to balance our resources from one area or from another. I think that just goes with the fact that we're working in a low-income community and there's a lot of need and small amounts of resources.

that it's really unlikely at this point that immigration reform is going to pass this year. Unfortunately, because there are all these political calendars, it gets even more difficult next year and the year after and et cetera.

But there's never really a good year for an issue like immigration, apparently. We've talked about it a lot, and the truth is that for our members this is an essential issue. So regardless of whether it's a good year or a bad year for it, we're going to continue to push and to try to bring the issue and the importance of the issue to the attention of our congressional representatives and our senators. On the one hand we hear about what the possibilities are, and on the other hand we just feel like we have to keep going. You know, we have to keep fighting.

Q: Ideally, what would be some of the components of comprehensive reform to a broken immigration system that the Workplace Project would like to see?

NMM: That's a good question, because we talk about immigration reform as if we all were talking about the same thing when sometimes I think we're not talking about the same thing at all. Probably the most important component is legalization, so that people who are currently in the country are able to go through some sort of a process where they're able to legalize. Contrary to what many people think, at this point, most of the people who are undocumented don't have any legal options that they can go through to be able to legalize their status.

Second, because of the experience that we have in workers' issues, protecting workers' rights is really important. So no matter the legal status (e.g., permanent, temporary, temporary with a path towards permanence, et cetera), it has to have protection of workers' rights. We've had situations where we've seen workers with legal status, residents or workers who are on guest worker visas, et cetera, who have been exploited. Just having legal status does not guarantee good treatment of workers. So it needs to have protection of workers' rights.

Third, it should also have a path to citizenship. While you can have a temporary status for a while, you can't put people in a permanent temporary status, because then you're really creating a subclass of people. Then there are just things which are kind of more technical, but we want to make sure that there is due process for people who are detained and those kinds of protections for people who are in the system.

There's a whole debate with regard to immigration reform and how much will have to be conceded in terms of enforcement because there are many people who want to see that there is enforcement in the legislation. So for us, we would be worried about agreeing to things which may be worse than what we currently have – things like local police cooperation with immigration. To actually institutionalize that across the country would be bad. There are a lot of other things like the increased criminalization of people. We know that even if they have legalization tomorrow, there are going to be people who will be left out of it. There are always some people who are left out of whatever legislation you have. We're going to see what's going to happen with them and how will we deal with that? That's a whole other area.

Q: As long as corporate globalization continues to create conditions that make it impossible for people to stay in their homes and provide for themselves and their families, there's going to be this ongoing immigration from certain localities in the global economy. And in that context if we say, "Okay, we will legalize people who are

here, but there aren't enough subsequent opportunities to legally immigrate for those who will come in the future," it could be a situation that could lead to even higher le