

In the US: Workers Organization of a Bronx Restaurant Shows Latino Immigrant Style Organizing

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What does organizing among Latino workers look like today? The owner of the Liberato Restaurant in the Bronx, New York found out on April 19th when more than a hundred restaurant workers and their supporters — including a six-piece band — filed into his establishment chanting in Spanish “Exploiters no, workers yes.”

One well-dressed group of supporters had entered the dining room earlier as customers. At their table they raised toasts to the cooks, servers, helpers and cleaners and in support of their demands for better treatment. Then, shortly afterwards, dozens of other supporters entered chanting and clapping, as the Rude Mechanical Band (three clarinets, a trombone player, and drummers) played its rhythmic, upbeat music. For two hours afterwards the group continued to demonstrate outside the Liberato, as various labor and left groups gave speeches alternately in Spanish and English, supporters chanted, and the spirited band played on.

The workers, virtually all of them Latino and Spanish speaking, have been organizing secretly for months, and the action on April 19th represented the debut of their campaign which had been coordinated by the Laundry Workers Center, a group that organizes not only laundry and restaurant workers but also tenants in apartment buildings, as well as inspiring a women’s group in one neighborhood. The LWC members involved in the campaign — some of whom have worked at Liberato for seven or eight years — are demanding that their employer sit down and negotiate with them over a long list of alleged problems, including violations of the Wages and Hours Law (requiring workers to labor 70 hours a week without a day off and to work through 10-hour days without a break for lunch), stealing the workers’ tips, and verbally abusing the workers. Flagrant violations of the law such as these are characteristic of the conditions faced by many Latino immigrant workers as well as by other low-wage workers.

How is this experience different from other labor organizing efforts? First, no labor union is involved. The Laundry Workers Center is not a union; it has no offices, no staff, and no distant leadership in Washington. But then, too, it has no treasury, no strike fund, and no research and education department. Second, the LWC’s members are nearly all Latino and African-American workers employed at laundries and restaurants and other workplaces that are too small for most unions to be bothered with. Third, the LWC, even more than most workers’ centers, relies on its members’ commitment, and their solidarity, which derives in part from their common experiences not only as low wage workers, but as community members, tenants, and family member.

The Liberato workers are counting on their supporters to give them strength in dealing with their boss. And who are these allies? They are other workers from the Laundry Workers Center’s own workers’, tenants’, and women’s organizations. They are other workers, such as Jornaleros Unidos (United Day Laborers), another small, struggling group of low-paid workers who showed up at

Liberato. They are activists from the Occupy Wall Street movement 99 Pickets. They are members of various socialist organizations. They are religious supporters such as Pastor Fabian Arias of St. Peter's Lutheran Church of Manhattan, an Argentine immigrant himself, who, before going off with the crowd to march through the restaurant, offered, not a prayer, but the thought that all religious people believe in the same God and that even those who are not religious believe in our common life and that "we must all take care of each other." He said he hoped God would favor the workers struggle for justice and also touch the heart of the boss and change his attitude and behavior.

Just as they have done for more than a 100 years, immigrants organize in their own communities where they can speak their own language and often share religious beliefs, although Latino immigrants today may be either Roman Catholic or Evangelical Christians, and, among some Latino groups, there is also a strong anti-clerical tradition. One should leave one's stereotypes behind. One of the key advisors of the Laundry Workers is a Sephardic Jew from the Dominican Republic. What binds immigrants groups together most fundamentally is their character as working-class communities sharing the same conditions of work and everyday life in the barrio.

Immigrants groups may start their meetings with prayers, with guitar music and singing of movement songs, or with reading from Latin America's great poets such as Pablo Neruda or César Vallejo. Immigrant organizations such as Make the Road New York offer their members information and advice about immigration law, taxes, health, education, and housing problems. They often teach English, sometimes teach trades or give classes on health and safety on the job. The workers' centers, which represent just one kind of immigrant organization, may be affiliated with a church, with a labor union or federation, or with be part of a national network, such as the National Day Laborers Network (NDALON). Often — and these can be mixed blessings — such groups receive financial assistance from foundations, become involved with the non-governmental and government organizations, and offer support to politicians in exchange for their patronage. Few are as independent and grassroots as the Laundry Workers.

Workers centers developed in the 1980s and 1990s in part because unions, sometimes because they were dominated by white men unaware of immigrants' experiences and needs, or simply because they were bureaucratic organizations, failed to respond to immigrant workers' needs. Today, while the composition of some unions has changed, and in some cases the leadership as well, by incorporating immigrant and female leaders, though labor organizations often remain as bureaucratic, hierarchical, and heavy-handed as in the past. They still often focus on organizing the big companies, on blitzing the workplace, getting signed cards calling for a representation election, and winning recognition through the National Labor Relations Board. Today, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) are involved in campaigns to organize fast food workers and big box stores. But such approaches do not necessarily reach the 200,000 restaurant workers in New York City, for example, most of whom work in medium or small sized restaurants, many of which are not part of national chains.

So immigrants like those in the Laundry Workers Center have taken the matter into their own hands. They want the employer to sit down and negotiate with them. They realize this may be a long struggle. The struggle now is the hearts and minds of the workers in the kitchen, in the dining room, and, if necessary, on the street. We their allies are prepared to back them, the other workers, the pastor, and the Occupy activists. And the band is tuning up for the next march.

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<http://www.thesocialist.us/workers-organization-of-a-bronx-restaurant-shows-latino-immigrant-style-organizing/>

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