



Building the Washtenaw County Workers' Center
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1) Provide a one-paragraph summary of your NCID-sponsored project.

Our NCID project provided vital support to two fledgling workers' centers: Centro Obrero in SW Detroit, and the Washtenaw County Workers' Center (WCWC) in the Ypsi/Ann Arbor area. In both centers, NCID money was used mainly to support the part-time staff who made it possible to utilize effectively the many volunteers who offered their time, expertise, creativity and commitment to the center over these months of growth and innovation. Together, these part-time staff and volunteers from the University of Michigan and the communities of Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and Detroit have made great strides at both worker centers. As well, a bond of solidarity was established between the two workers' centers at this formative stage of their existence. The WCWC's accomplishments over the last year are summarized in the next section. (We focus on the WCWC because about 85% of the NCID money went to that workers' center, and because Centro Obrero got the bulk of its funding, from October 2006 forward, from other sources, whereas NCID was WCWC's primary source of funding in its first year.)

2) Describe the extent to which you have been able to meet the expected outcomes of your project. What conclusions or findings have you made through this project, and what questions or next steps remain?

Since we began in June 2006, the WCWC has accomplished a lot. Here are the highlights:

- Developed and delivered an ESL curriculum that uses workers' rights as a medium for teaching English to recent immigrants (Summer 2006).
- Supported Centro Obrero in SW Detroit as it put this ESL curriculum into practice and build the local support to carry it on w/o additional support from the WCWC (July-Dec 2006)
- Provided bridging funds to Centro Obrero staff until more substantial funding could be found
- Provided matching funds for a 0.5 FTE AmeriCorps member (6/06 to 6/07)

- Contacted over 200 low-income individuals in Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor (Aug. 2006-present).
- Created the Workers' Rights Committee (WRC), a worker-led group of 30-40 people that meets monthly to provide trainings on specific workplace issues and conduct outreach by doing door-knocking in local apartments and low-income neighborhoods (Oct. 2006-present)
- Conducted trainings for over 70 individuals on basic elements of workers' rights, including wage and hour violations, discrimination and harassment, and forming organizing committees in one's workplace.
- Assisted several workers in mediations with employers re. workplace problems.
- Elected a multiracial, economically diverse board of 15 people (Jan. 2007). Board members include leaders from local churches and unions, university undergraduates, graduate/law students, and faculty from University of Michigan, and community members who are low-wage workers in the restaurant, service, and food processing industries.
- Sponsored and organized a 2-day conference, "Crossing Borders: Immigration, Worker Centers, and Universities," involving workers' rights leaders and activists and academics from across the U.S. to share strategies and identify directions for future actions and research (Nov. 2006).
- Incorporated as a nonprofit organization and receiving 501(c)(3) status from the IRS (Jan 2007)
- Became the 16th workers' center to join Interfaith Workers' Justice network of Workers' Centers, headquartered in Chicago (February 2007)
- Funded two work study students, each working 10 hours per week, to support the work done by our AmeriCorps organizer, thereby allowing us to significantly step up our level of activity (Jan-June 2007).
- Secured funding from the Sociological Initiatives Foundation (SIF) for community-based participatory research to document the local labor market patterns that may influence the barriers and opportunities for building Latino immigrant-African-American-White/European-American alliances around economic issues, and began to undertake this research. (Jan. 2007 to present)
- One of our volunteer Board members, Sociology & School of Social Work PhD candidate Alice Gates secured funding to launch more extensive leadership training and development from Grinnell College fund for socially active alumni over the summer of 2007 (April 2007)

- Provided a learning environment in which two of our three staff (i.e., the AmeriCorps person and one of the work study students) opted to become full-time professional organizers: one will work for DART and the other for the SEIU, both in Florida. The third may join Witness for Peace's Nicaragua office.
- Opened negotiations with Co-Directors of the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY) – a highly effective workers' center that focuses on restaurant workers -- to become part of their effort to disseminate ROC organizations and organizing strategies throughout the country (June 2007).
- Began to implement the WCWC's long-range fund-raising plan (June 2007).

3) How has your project led to or encouraged social or organizational/institutional change?

The WCWC promotes social change in four main ways: (1) by creating a worker-led organization that can draw on the resources of the U of M, local unions and other community organizations to help organize the most poorly paid and vulnerable workers in our local economy; (2) by identifying working-class leaders of different ethnicities in the low-wage service sector of our communities, bringing them together, and providing them with opportunities to develop their organizing and leadership skills; (3) by linking our WCWC to a national network of workers' centers so that we can learn of the best strategic and tactical practices developed by others and, through exchanges with them, determine how best to adapt them to our local circumstances; and (4) by conducting research into the local low-wage labor market that can inform the strategic thinking of WCWC organizers and their future campaigns.

4) In what ways have you worked to promote the sustainability of the project?

By working closely with ROC-NY and the IWJ network, we not only increase the sophistication of our strategic and tactical practice, but greatly enhance our access to foundation money that can support the hiring of permanent, full-time staff, so that we need not rely further on NCID or other UM money. However, by maintaining strong ties to UM faculty committed to social justice, willing and able to do research that facilitates the work of the WCWC, we help to ensure that the connection to the university and its resources is not lost, even as the control of the organization shifts to the workers who constitute the bulk of its membership. If the financial resources, dedicated and skilled worker leadership, and substantial community volunteer support can be put in place, the WCWC will be sustainable. The need is great and will not go away soon, so sustainability hinges on institutionalizing the resources and commitments necessary to respond effectively to this need.

5) In what ways is your project a national exemplar?

The WCWC is the only example to date of a workers' center born primarily as an initiative of university students and faculty. Many were skeptical that university community people could play such a founding role, as opposed to supporting an already existing organization that somehow managed to find sufficient resources to get the point of asking university people for support. Our effort shows that, with support such as we received from the NCID, leveraged through other university-connected programs such as AmeriCorps and work study, new workers' centers can be started "from scratch" and then (over a period of a couple of years) "turned over" to the workers that they organize.

This is important because it implies that many more workers' centers can be created – and created more quickly – than if university people and resources could only be utilized after workers' centers managed to emerge by some other means, with some other source of resources. Not every university will have the students and faculty willing and able to found such a center, but in the larger public and private universities, this is quite possible. Few universities will have the equivalent of an NCID, but our experience may encourage foundations to step in to play such a role.