Solidago Foundation’s Worker’s Rights, Workers’ Voice Project Overview

The Solidago Foundation’s Workers’ Rights, Workers’ Voice Project is premised on the idea that collaborations between Independent Political Organizations (IPO) and non-profit workers’ rights groups, along with wider coalitions, can seed a new progressive flank of the labor movement and influence the governing process. This project examines and questions how we can re-imagine dimensions of governing in ways that are aligned with those struggling most in the economy. Using the Changing States framework developed by Manuel Pastor, Jennifer Ito, and Madeline Wander, the project tests the theory that regardless of their electoral position, progressives can start governing now in new and innovative ways.

During a House committee hearing in November 2017, Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta suggested that the U.S. Department of Labor might increase scrutiny over worker centers by subjecting them to the laws that currently govern labor union financial disclosures, which would place substantial burdens on often small organizations. In what Sharon Block called a “backhanded compliment,” the move is a testament to the efficacy of worker centers in raising the floor for low-wage workers and giving them a voice in the economy. Not unlike the impulses that have driven sustained attacks on labor unions, Secretary Acosta’s response stems from the perceived threat workers’ rights organizations present to both the political and economic status quo. But this is merely the most recent in a long history of attempts to circumscribe the rights of workers.

Worker centers are community-based organizations that emerged to fill a gap in the labor movement. Traditional labor organizations were not focused on low-wage and informal occupations like restaurant workers, day laborers, and domestic workers, nor among growing segments of the workforce: immigrants, women, and workers of color in often precarious working conditions. The strategic interventions of worker centers over the last decade-plus have included transforming industry standards, modernizing and enforcing labor standards, improving job quality, and raising awareness about low-wage work. Often through deep organizing among workers and local policy campaigns, they have addressed the needs of a workforce that lacks access to both collective bargaining agreements and political representation.

The insertion of workers’ interests into spheres of governance has largely been accomplished through the political contributions of labor unions. As union membership declines, resources and power have also dwindled. Further, the base of worker centers reflects an exceedingly harsh economic and social reality, yet these workers have had little control over the dimensions of governance that shape their lives.

1 https://onlabor.org/backhanded-compliment-acosta-threatens-workers-centers/
2 https://dornsife.usc.edu/pere/changing-states/
In the concise words of Dan McGrath of Take Action Minnesota, governing power is “the ability to set the agenda and achieve it.” This frame draws a distinction between access to power and governing power, between the ability to get a meeting with an elected official and the power to hold that official accountable to the members of an organization and their values. How different would our systems of governance look if a growing political constituency of low-wage workers shaped the agenda? The collaborative learning by IPOs and worker centers, together with philanthropy, in the Workers’ Rights, Workers’ Voice Project will examine how IPOs help to strengthen and move workers agenda in public policy. As outlined by Pastor, there are four arenas of contestation for governing power, in which struggles to shape agendas take place:

- Electoral: running campaigns to elect officials to office
- Legislative: passing pro-worker policy
- Administrative: creating rules and guiding the implementation of laws
- Narrative: framing issues in popular imagination

The Solidago Foundation, in partnership with Beth Gutelius, Ph.D., is leading the first collaboration of its kind, inviting nine c3 and c4 partner organizations, from four states, into a yearlong learning cohort, the Workers’ Rights, Workers’ Voice Project. This innovative approach aims to bring together the work of low-wage worker organizing and electoral politics to engage in these four arenas of contestation. The learning cohort includes:

**Inland Empire, CA**
- Inland Empire United
- Warehouse Worker Resource Center

**Minneapolis, MN**
- Take Action Minnesota
- Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en la Lucha (CTUL)

**Texas**
- Texas Organizing Project
- Workers Defense Project

**Silicon Valley, CA**
- Silicon Valley Rising
- WPUSA

**New Mexico**
- Somos Un Pueblo Unido

Throughout this study, Solidago will collect and share lessons from the learning process with funder and field colleagues. Through collaboration, this project will deepen understanding and prepare for the challenges facing workers across industries in the current political environment. The Solidago staff welcome partnership, shared expertise and involvement. To learn more and be involved in this project, please be in touch with Rebecca Greenberg, Program Officer, Rebeccag@Solidago.org or Guillermo Quinteros, Program Director, Guillermq@Solidago.org.