

# **Convening on Workers' Rights in the Gulf Coast:**

*Understanding and Connecting Organizational Activity since Hurricane Katrina*

**Report on Conference Proceedings, April 6, 2006**

Southeastern Louisiana University  
Hammond, Louisiana

*Prepared for Oxfam America and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee*

by Leigh Graham  
May 2006

**Convening on Workers' Rights in the Gulf Coast:  
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since Hurricane Katrina*<sup>1</sup>**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Significant recovery and reconstruction work since Hurricane Katrina is in nascent stages along the Gulf Coast. A large and growing workforce of predominantly Latino immigrants now exists throughout the region and, given the massive displacement of local residents, is heavily involved in the dangerous, dirty, and difficult tasks of clean-up and rebuilding. These workers (many of them undocumented) have in many cases been actively recruited by unscrupulous employers in addition to those drawn by news of the surfeit of available work. The urgent, massive, lucrative and decentralized nature of reconstruction has led to widespread worker abuse, including wage discrimination, unpaid wages, excessive harassment and arrests, retaliation against employees seeking claims, unsafe working conditions and failure to protect workers' health. The political and legislative climates of MS and LA offer little protection for workers – Mississippi, for example, has no state Department of Labor - while pending national immigration legislation threatens to drive undocumented immigrants further underground. The loss of homes and livelihoods for thousands of low-income African-Americans displaced from New Orleans and all along the coast provides ample opportunity for rising tensions and competition among communities of color.

Many local, regional and national organizations have been organizing to protect the rights of workers – both present and future – participating in the Gulf Coast labor force. On April 6, 2006, Oxfam America (Oxfam) and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) convened approximately 30 local, state, regional and national organizations involved in this struggle. The goals of the meeting were to:

- Map the organizational activity around workers' rights in the Gulf Coast, including identifying resource gaps and opportunities for collaboration; and
- Facilitate on-going conversation among and build an enduring network of like-minded organizations and funders interested in workers' rights.

During the meeting, organizations:

- presented summaries of their current activity (please see the appendix to the full report for more information);
- held discussions in three working groups on: 1) worker organizing, 2) legal advocacy, and c) policy action; and
- heard from a panel on potential strategies of action and resource mobilization.

Working groups shared the recommendations of their specific work with one another, and the meeting concluded with a brief discussion on next steps. The meeting was designed to

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<sup>1</sup> This report specifically is concerned with the MS and LA regions of the Gulf Coast.

elicit direct input from organizations; this report explicitly reflects that input. In the full report, when possible, participants are cited.

## **I. KEY ISSUES AND NEEDS IN ADDRESSING WORKERS' RIGHTS IN THE GULF COAST**

### *Organizational Capacity and Development*

Low organizational capacity is a key challenge. Local groups addressing key organizational challenges highlighted the need for an inter-organizational information and communications technology infrastructure. While many organizations are doing similar database development and resource mapping, these tools might be consolidated into one comprehensive organizational database of contact information and activity summaries. This could be linked to information collected from other cities from which workers originated and/or evacuees now live. Any technology infrastructure must reflect varying literacy levels and languages spoken, as well as be bi-directional in its communication with workers. To facilitate coordinated planning and implementation, groups might identify short- vs. long-term goals for the next three to five years, and the challenges to and strategies for meeting them.

### *Worker Organizing and Leadership Development*

A network of workers' centers and corners could be a critical element to facilitate organizing. Ideally, these sites would be community-driven, offering integrated, multi-lingual services to deal with the myriad issues beyond labor impacting workers and their families (e.g., healthcare, day-care, education, wage claims, immigration concerns for undocumented workers, and other legal issues). A network of sites should prioritize leadership development and empowerment for workers and would include workers' councils, where workers make decisions and develop leadership skills. Participants strongly urged that workers be at the table for future discussions. Worker organizing should: 1) reflect workers' diverse origins; 2) incorporate fully the communities they represent; and 3) develop strategies that respond to different worker populations.

### *Workforce Development: The Major Gap in Organizational Activity*

The fact that only three attendees self-selected for a planned break-out group on workforce training and development drew attention to the underdevelopment of work around that issue. Very few organizations at the convening cited work that specifically included strategies for workforce development and training along the Gulf Coast, and it is clear that most have not yet reached beyond the impacted communities along the Coast to incorporate communities housing significant numbers of evacuees (comprised mainly of African-Americans). To avoid perpetuating this important gap in current planning for worker rights and pro-worker advocacy, some participants urged that local and regional organizations develop strategies to link evacuee communities with one another, creating opportunity to incorporate their voices into a conversation on collaboration and action.

### *Legislation and Policy*

A coordinated policy agenda and advocacy strategy should be targeted to local, state, and national governing officials and agencies. A policy agenda should “bundle” multiple issues affecting workers such as housing, healthcare, education and specific workplace-related concerns. Participants suggested that policy agendas use language that frames the issues as follows: sustainable livelihoods; a rights-based approach; accountability for reconstruction funding, and addressing the needs of children. Proposed policy initiatives are:

- a) challenging laws that limit or prohibit local living wage campaigns;
- b) attacking the disproportionate ICE<sup>2</sup> emphasis;
- c) addressing contractor accountability through a contractor and subcontractor tracking system;
- d) promoting fair share healthcare; and
- e) increasing access to education and affordable housing.

Participants discussed possibilities for litigation that could go through the federal courts and have national impact, such as an effort to criminalize non- or under-payment of wages, or to challenge the law that prevents driving a motor vehicle without legal presence. At the state level, ideas to push forward “model” legislation were proposed, such as a migrant and seasonal worker protection law.

Immediate needs to support on-going legal work include:

- a) increased support for additional translators;
- b) additional *pro bono* assistance with back wage claims;
- c) greater access to medical facilities and medical interpreters;
- d) funding to assist state officials to handle labor issues;
- e) assistance to the LA Department of Labor to identify links between contractors and subcontractors to make employers easier to locate, and
- f) worker education on the right to avoid self-incrimination (i.e., their “right to be silent”).
- g) coalitions among legal advocacy groups to share and divide up essential work (local legal clinics cannot handle these issues alone).

### *Strategies to Defuse Potential Tensions*

Participants spent much time discussing the heightened potential for polarization between a newly arrived/exploited Latino workforce and the returning African American workforce. These populations have quite different needs and challenges. For example, immigrants’ paramount issues are more likely to reflect the exploitation that comes with

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<sup>2</sup> ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the new government agency housed within Homeland Security that replaced the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

being undocumented, or the threats posed by rising anti-immigrant sentiment. The African-American population, historically and chronically shut out of the labor market, faces issues related to job development and training in Gulf Coast reconstruction. The situation is easily exploited and magnified by employers, media, and local/federal authorities and agencies. Organizers and their allies working “on the ground” recognized the need to be proactive in addressing the possibility of intra-community tensions by creating opportunities for dialogue and exploration of mutual interest. For example, movements to advance immigrants’ rights should specifically include strategies to build bridges with the African-American communities struggling to regain a foothold in the labor force. Similarly, efforts focused on job development and training for displaced residents should be aware of similar needs within immigrant groups and consider means for extending services across language barriers.

Another tension may arise between “community-focused” efforts, including the establishment of community-based worker centers, and more traditional labor organizing done through the vehicle of unions. Participants agreed that workers have the right to “institutions of self-advocacy” in their communities. Local organizations will continue to confront the challenge of understanding and addressing the complexities of modeling successful community-labor partnerships.

#### *A Long-Term Vision for a New Movement on Workers’ Rights*

The pragmatic discussion of organization activity and collaboration was framed by the language of “movement building.” Participants referred repeatedly to the need for a *movement* that would link their agendas under a broad human rights rubric. Key needs for movement building are:

- a) developing a common frame and language for collective action;
- b) creating more, and more frequent, opportunities for joint strategizing among communities of color;
- c) leadership development for workers and organizers, including strategies to connect younger and veteran organizers to share experiences; and
- d) sharing of knowledge and popular education on models of resistance to discriminatory laws and policies.

## **II. POTENTIAL STRATEGIC APPROACHES AND NEXT STEPS**

As convening organizations, Oxfam and UUSC are committed to working with other allies and funders to draw attention and resources to the issues raised at this gathering. Participants highlighted the following issues, both short- and long-term, as particularly important for those seeking to make investments in support of worker rights:

1. Provide non-traditional, flexible funding that recognizes necessary scope and scale of resources.

2. Move rapidly to address near-term constraints: lack of a communications infrastructure; need for a network of workers' centers; and ongoing development of capacity building and leadership development strategies.
3. Address the gap of workforce development and training, including reaching out to the displaced communities of workers now living outside the Gulf Coast.
4. Conceptualize a new movement via a collective action frame, language and leadership development strategies that focus on worker empowerment, and inter-organizational coalition building.

For specific next steps, please see the full report. Suggestions may also emerge from a review of the current organizational activity in the appendix of this report.

### **III. LOCAL INNOVATIONS AND RESPONSES: SAMPLE LISTING**

Since the convening, participants have continued to push forward their community-based work as well as their legal and policy strategies that are essential complements to fully protect worker rights. A few of the efforts we are aware of that have occurred over the past few weeks are:

- MIRA, the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, organized marches on behalf of immigrant rights in Gulfport and Laurel, Mississippi. Local African-American leaders and members of the state's Black Caucus marched alongside newly arrived and long-resident immigrants in a demonstration of multi-racial unity.
- The National Immigration Law Center (NILC) has placed a Gulf Coast Field Coordinator in New Orleans, whose work is supported by a Gulf Coast Policy Attorney and a Congressional Hunger Fellow, both based in Washington, DC. Their current priorities in the Gulf Coast include: providing support and technical assistance to local advocates; providing "know your rights" information; building and supporting a multiracial coalition of workers; developing a guide to address the needs of immigrants in the context of state/local disaster preparedness plans; undertaking federal administrative advocacy with the Department of Labor, the Department of Homeland Security, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency, and the Department of Health and Human Services; monitoring and analyzing the impact of relevant federal legislative/regulatory developments on low-income immigrants and their families; promoting greater accountability of contractors in the Gulf Coast through negotiation and impact litigation; and undertaking international human rights advocacy intended to hold the U.S. government accountable for its conduct during Hurricane Katrina.
- The New Orleans Worker Justice Coalition, which includes approximately 15 organizations working intensively since Katrina to unite efforts on behalf of worker, immigrant, and civil rights, has formalized its proposal to establish a community-based workers center. The proposed Louisiana Workers Center will have at least four areas of impact: information and education; leadership

development and worker organizing; direct services and service/advocacy referral system; and systems and policy change.

- The Advancement Project, based in Washington, DC with staff in Louisiana, is heading a multi-organizational effort to document labor conditions in greater New Orleans. A report is expected by early June.