

A Checklist for Progressive Worker Centers and Hiring Halls

In April 2002 NAFFE's Temporary and Day Labor Action Group met in Chicago. The meeting's primary focus was worker center and hiring hall strategies. A number of allied organizations—each of which operates a worker center or hiring hall—also participated in the meeting. In total, about a third of the three dozen organizations attending the meeting currently operate some kind of worker center or hiring hall. A version of this report was presented at the meeting.

Over three days, delegates discussed a range of challenging questions: Are worker centers really an effective alternative organizing strategy for contingent workers? If so, how can they be made more effective? How can they work with existing institutions such as unions? Do worker centers undermine efforts at unionization? Can non-profit hiring halls and temporary help agencies be social change agents, or do they merely reinforce the low wage labor market by rationalizing the supply of cheap labor? How do they differ from for-profit companies? How can they help workers to organize?

There was broad agreement that worker centers can be effective in meeting the needs of workers in difficult to unionize, contingent jobs. By “bundling” an assortment of tactics, worker centers offer a holistic approach to organizing that goes beyond the workplace or the industry. This is especially important among high turnover workers like day laborers who change employers, workplaces, and industries regularly.

Delegates also agreed that hiring halls, which are often components of worker centers, can be important contributors to social change strategies. First, they can increase incomes for workers in existing labor markets. While competitive pressures make significant *wage* increases difficult to achieve even by the best worker-run hiring halls, hiring halls can raise *incomes* by distributing work more fairly. Second, perhaps more importantly, hiring halls can create the social and physical space to help workers to organize.

The meeting concluded with a general agreement that NAFFE and our progressive allies should support worker center strategies that are rooted in the fight for social change. But worker centers and hiring halls come in all shapes and sizes. To ensure that they remain rooted in the fight for social justice, delegates created the following checklists of principles and standards for worker centers and hiring halls.

A checklist of standards for progressive worker centers:

- ❑ Provides information about labor, employment, and civil rights laws
- ❑ Provides up-to-date and useful information on the local labor market
- ❑ Helps workers with grievances with employers
- ❑ Involves workers in the governance, leadership, and planning in a meaningful way
- ❑ Has a clear and transparent political agenda and is involved in a broader social movement
- ❑ Seeks to build democratic community and civic participation
- ❑ Is located in a place that is accessible to workers
- ❑ Works to build alliances with unions and other worker organizations

A checklist of standards for progressive hiring halls

- ❑ Provides a better alternative than working for a for-profit agency
- ❑ Advocates for the best wage possible
- ❑ Promotes stable employment and a fair allocation of jobs
- ❑ Seeks to find permanent work for those who desire it
- ❑ Does not charge any fees apart from normal membership dues or reasonable organizational time commitment
- ❑ Is organized as a non-profit and re-invests any surpluses in the hiring hall
- ❑ Promotes health and safety standards by turning down dangerous jobs
- ❑ Fights for the decriminalization of homelessness
- ❑ Does not discriminate against the undocumented, supports the legalization of undocumented workers
- ❑ Screens prospective employers to weed out abusive or unsafe conditions