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Authors
Nik Theodore, Ph.D., is professor of urban planning and policy and associate dean for faculty affairs and research in the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs, University of Illinois at Chicago. His current research focuses on low-wage work, labor standards and worker organizing in U.S. cities.

Beth Gutelius, Ph.D., is a senior researcher at the Great Cities Institute of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her academic and consulting career focuses on urban economic development and the changing nature of employment in low-wage industries.

Ana Luz Gonzalez, Ph.D., is a project manager at the UCLA Labor Center currently evaluating High Road Training Partnerships for the California Workforce Development Board. She has more than a decade of experience conducting quantitative and qualitative research projects focused on low-wage workers, informal labor markets and worker centers.

Art Acknowledgments
Murals at the offices of the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance and Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles.
Across many sectors of the California economy, workers’ access to economic opportunity and basic dignity on the job are hindered severely by illegal employer practices. Too many Californians are employed in industries that have high rates of workplace violations, in part because the enforcement of labor standards has failed to keep pace with rapid changes in business strategies and employment practices. As a result, economic insecurity is on the rise.

Worker centers are confronting these conditions by mobilizing impacted workers and communities to contest substandard working conditions and expand economic opportunity. California’s worker center ecosystem stands out nationally for its vitality and the innovations it has made to safeguard workers’ rights.

This report presents a scan of California’s worker center ecosystem to assess key strategies, identify challenges and opportunities, and offer recommendations for strengthening the capacity of this vital workers’ rights infrastructure. In California, there are more than 30 worker centers that intervene in low-wage industries. These are nonprofit organizations whose principal mission is to organize workers for the purpose of transforming the industry practices that lead to low pay, employment instability, demeaning treatment on the job, economic insecurity, poverty and widening inequality. The state is home to a robust worker center field that includes some of the strongest and most innovative organizations in the broader labor movement.

Processes of economic restructuring and the manifest failures of an enforcement regime have given rise to rampant violations of labor standards. In response, worker centers have developed a range of interventions into high-violation industries. The worker center field has developed a distinct theory of change, consisting of five core components:

1. Transforming industry practices;
2. Modernizing labor standards;
3. Strengthening enforcement of employment and labor laws;
4. Improving job quality and expanding employment opportunities; and
5. Changing public discourse on low-wage work and inequality.

Worker centers’ economic action organizing posits a model of worker power based in the mobilization of a relatively small, empowered and often-fluid membership whose capacities to analyze and act individually and collectively have been fostered through leadership development. In designing interventions into high-violation industries, members provide industry expertise, identify workplace problems and organize for collective action. In pursuing public policy reforms, they frame moral demands, provide firsthand testimony concerning workplace abuses, participate in public deliberations and shift policy debates through moral suasion. Within their organizations, they engage in deliberation, democratic decision making and mutual support, and in building their organizations they help to institutionalize pro-worker labor market interventions and policy priorities. Finally, in the communities of which they are a part, members become active in a range of civic engagement activities.

In the activities they undertake, worker centers help improve workplace standards by contesting wage theft, employee misclassification, racial and gender discrimination, and other illegal employer practices. They have developed an innovative, evolving model of strategic enforcement, in partnership with government agencies and legal aid providers, that targets high-violation industries and improves economic outcomes for workers.

The California Division of Labor Standards Enforcement, the principal enforcement agency charged with ensuring employer compliance with employment and labor laws, has made significant strides in transitioning to a model of
strategic enforcement that holds the promise of raising levels of compliance. This set of next-wave compliance activities is a response to the sweeping changes occurring in the structure of growing industries. They include:

- Focusing on the top of industry structures and the businesses that most greatly impact the terms of competition in a sector;
- Enhancing deterrence within high-violation industries and in targeted geographical areas through partnerships with workers' rights organizations; and
- Integrating complaint-driven investigatory practices with proactive enforcement efforts targeted to high-violation industries in which vulnerable workers may be reluctant to file complaints with enforcement agencies.

In moving toward a model of strategic enforcement, the DLSE has partnered with worker centers to undertake industry-focused monitoring and deterrence. Worker centers' roles in these partnerships include:

- Providing analysis of industry structures and patterns of violations;
- Identifying workplaces that may be out of compliance with employment laws;
- Assisting the DLSE in responding to worker complaints;
- Securing the trust of impacted workers so they fully participate in investigations;
- Publicizing the outcomes of investigations to workers and communities through media outlets, membership meetings and other means; and
- Devising new arrangements for the ongoing monitoring of labor standards.

By coordinating investigations with worker centers, the DLSE has enhanced the deterrence effects of enforcement activities while also reaching groups of workers who might otherwise not receive the benefits of compliance monitoring and enforcement. The deep trust worker centers have established with vulnerable workers is key to this strategy. But their importance to compliance extends well beyond their community connections. Through their members, worker centers have developed extensive expertise on supply chain networks, the rhythms of production in volatile industries, employer workforce systems, employee exposure to retaliation and other risks, the involvement of labor market intermediaries in firms’ staffing arrangements, and health and safety hazards in the workplace.

In addition to enforcement activities, worker centers have sought to raise the floor on wages and working conditions by engaging in public policy debates. They have been leaders in calling for policy reforms that would modernize labor standards and expand protections to a larger share of the labor force. Worker centers and their allies play a critical role in these campaigns by documenting labor market problems, designing policy proposals, mobilizing their members and reaching out to allies in support of policy reforms, and monitoring the implementation of new laws.

Finally, the report offers a set of recommendations to both philanthropy and the field for ways to strengthen California’s worker center ecosystem:

- **Ensure long-term protections on the job.** The ecosystem must continue to develop new, durable approaches for protecting labor standards and ensuring workers’ voices are heard.

- **Support under-resourced regions.** The infrastructure needed to serve low-wage workers requires targeted resources, including expansion into regions outside of the state’s main metropolitan areas.

- **Support for the development of new membership models.** Worker centers should continue to explore approaches to expanding their base building that balance breadth and depth, with attention to the increasing geographical dispersion of their members.

- **Address resource constraints.** Worker centers require significant, flexible, long-term funding to enable them to react quickly and strategically to opportunities that arise.

- **Strengthen state and local networks.** Worker centers and their allies should consider creating a formalized structure for joint strategizing, coordinating trainings and campaigns, and convening workers, which could hold the potential for building power and deepening civic engagement.

- **Establish an organizer institute.** The field would benefit from the creation of an organizer institute as a shared infrastructure that could train organizers and provide worker leaders with a venue through which to exchange industry analyses and organizing strategies.

- **Encourage union-worker center collaboration.** While union-worker center relationships sometimes are fraught, there are important opportunities for unions and worker centers to mutually strengthen each others’ work.