Low-Wage Immigrant Organizing on Long Island: The Workplace Project's Achievements and Challenges

A conversation with Workplace Project Executive Director Nadia Marin-Molina
by Gregory M. Maney

Mirroring national trends, U.S. Census figures show a rapid increase in the presence of immigrants on Long Island. Between 2000 and 2008, Long Island's foreign-born population increased by 21.5%. Immigrants now comprise over 14% of Long Island's population. Many have come from the plains, haciendas and favelas of Mexico, Central America, and South America. As in the past, a combination of push and pull factors help to explain their often-perilous journeys. Structural adjustment, austerity, trade liberalization, militarization, and the suppression of labor movements have contributed to large numbers of economic and political refugees. At the same time on Long Island, the housing market boom at the turn of the century has combined with longer working hours for the average worker to raise demand for low-skilled, flexible labor above and beyond the usual needs of area farms, factories, and restaurants.

Because of their impoverished and endangered status, many recent immigrants lack the resources and life options necessary to individually resist the exploitation, prejudice, discrimination, and harassment that they encounter. Desperate for work, they often accept low wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. Undocumented workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation since employers can threaten to have them deported.

In the context of a deep recession, immigrants throughout the United States have become convenient scapegoats for a host of problems that they are victims of and did not create. On Long Island, hate crimes such as the November 2008 fatal stabbing of Marcelo Lucero, an Ecuadoran immigrant, coupled with repeated anti-immigrant initiatives and statements by prominent politicians in Suffolk County have created a climate of fear among Latino immigrants.

Despite these challenges, low-income Latino immigrant workers have managed to organize effectively throughout Long Island. This triumph of the human spirit is due in no small part to the Workplace Project. Founded in 1992, the Workplace Project is a widely known worker center that organizes Latino immigrant

workers on Long Island to achieve socioeconomic justice by promoting the full political, economic and cultural participation of these workers in the communities in which they live. Through the organization, immigrant workers have won key victories, including a New York State law protecting workers against wage theft and the establishment of an official hiring site in Freeport.

The inaugural 1998 edition of the *Regional Labor Review* carried an interview of the first Executive Director of the Workplace Project, Jennifer Gordon, just as she was being replaced by Nadia Marin-Molina. We thought it fitting to take a look back over the last decade with Ms. Marin-Molina as she prepares to leave her post to assume the position of Regional Organizing Director for the National Day Laborer Organizing Network. A child of parents from Colombia, Ms. Marin-Molina was born in Cambridge, MA and educated at Boston Latin School and Brandeis University. After graduation with a B.A. in Philosophy and Linguistics, she moved to New York and earned a law degree at NYU. In 1996, she went to work full-time for The Workplace Project. In February, Greg Maney interviewed her at the organization's headquarters in Hempstead, NY.

Q: What have been some of the key influences on your career in politics? Who are the people who inspired you to get involved in organizing and advocacy around immigration issues?

NMM: I wasn't really inspired by individual people, but I think when I was in college, I started to get involved with student groups. They had different levels of activism, and I found myself drawn to the student group with a higher level of activism which, at Brandeis, was the African-American Student Association. So we started to work on promoting a multicultural center, and eventually successfully established a multicultural library, and also participated in the selection of a new president of Brandeis. So I think that I learned about activism, about protests. And that politicized me and got me to thinking that you have an obligation to think about the community that allowed you to go to school and to try to figure out how you fit into that and how you can push for something better.

The other thing, I guess, even before that was that my parents, as immigrants, tried in some ways to stay out of politics. But they certainly are very opinionated politically, and I got a lot of that at home. I remember a couple of times that we did go to protests with my parents. It was very rare, but we did go to some protests, and I imagine that that also kind of stuck in my head.

Q: After Brandeis, were you involved in organizing, say, at NYU or elsewhere upon getting your law degree before coming to the Workplace Project?

NMM: Well, once I was at Brandeis, I pretty much decided that I wanted to do something that had to do with public interest, but I had no idea what that would be. Once I was there, I interned at the Center for Immigrants' Rights in Manhattan, and I volunteered for a while as well. I was looking around the issue of immigration, but I didn't know much about it. I didn't know about the organizations that existed. I had a friend who attended a talk at NYU that was given by Jennifer Gordon, the founding executive director here. My friend said, "You would love this place. It's wonderful, and you have to go and talk to them." So I said, "Well, all right."

You know, I was kind of wandering and looking around, and I came here and I met Jennifer, the Workplace Project's first organizer. Once I met people there, I was hooked. I knew that I wanted to come here. So I did a summer internship in my second summer. Then after the summer internship, I was able to work during my third year to get a fellowship to be able to start to work here full time after graduation.

Nadia Marin-Molina

Q: So with those initial experiences, what was it that really captured you and made you say, "Wow, this is a great organization, and this is the kind of work that I really want to be involved with?"

NMM: Well, again, while I was in law school I wasn't sure what I wanted to do at all. But I really did feel like I wanted to do something that would somehow actually make change, and I think in law school you start to lose a lot of that idealism. You realize in law school that the legal process is extremely long and doesn't necessarily have an outcome that is in the interest of justice, much less social justice. What I liked about the Workplace Project was that it combined law and organizing. So there was an immediate recognition from Jennifer that the legal system was flawed, but that the ideal was we want to teach people about their rights, and it's important for people to know about their rights. We also wanted to educate the community and activate the community around those rights. So we weren't going to just rely on the courts to deliver justice. I think that's what I really, really liked about the organization.

Q: So that gives kind of a starting point for and a nice segue to the next question, what is the Workplace Project? What are your main goals and activities?

NMM: The Workplace Project was founded in 1992 with the idea of fighting against the exploitation of Latino immigrant workers on Long Island. At the time that the organization was started, its central focus was around workplace issues. People came to the organization because they had some sort of a problem on the job. It could be wage theft, it could be

accidents on the job, discrimination, firing, et cetera. And we offered workers' rights courses, orientation and support to people in terms of enforcing those rights.

Over time, that continues to be the core of the organization. I would say the majority of people who come to the organization do so because of some sort of a problem on the job. And we've maintained that core idea and that base of people, of workers in the organization. But the organization has also expanded so that it's not focused exclusively on workplace issues anymore. We've worked on campaigns that have to do with housing, on campaigns that have to do with immigration reform, right now on educating people around the census.

So we've tried to be responsive to the issues that are brought up by the community, because an issue, for example, like immigration reform is something that is not directly a workplace issue, but it is so crucial to people's lives not only as human beings, but also as workers that our board and our members thought that the organization needed to get involved. We've been flexible in terms of looking at and responding to the needs of the community and trying to create campaigns in the areas that are brought up by the community.

The Alliance for Justice is basically our workers' rights program. We've also organized day laborers in different corners of Long Island, in some cases to establish a day laborer hiring site, in other cases just to negotiate with the police or with local officials to ensure that their rights are respected as workers. We have a domestic workers' cooperative called Unity Housecleaners. It strives to improve the working conditions of domestic workers by allowing women a way to organize themselves to promote their own work and also set their own wages and working conditions. In addition, Unity Housecleaners is the group that is involved in the fight for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights at a state level and the formation of the National Alliance of Domestic Workers.

We have a committee of workers at Belmont Racetrack who walk and groom the horses. Most people don't know that there are about 2,000 workers who live and work at the racetracks, and that many of those are immigrant workers. We also have an office in Farmingville, which is a much smaller immigrant community than Hempstead and surrounding areas. Farmingville has a community that's mostly from Mexico, and there are a lot less services in that area. There's just less infrastructure, so there the office that we have functions as basically a referral center for people who needs all kinds of services, not just work-related issues, and also a place for ESL classes and dance. There's a dance troupe that meets there.

So these are the broad areas in which we work. Then we have specific campaigns that we work on, like I mentioned before, around immigration or around the census, where we're reaching out to our own committees and training our members to reach out to the community around issues that are designated as important.

Q: I think it is interesting to look at where the Workplace Project was when you first joined and where it is now. So here you've reached out to a number of different workers in different settings. You're addressing issues not only that they're facing in the workplace, but also other issues in their lives -- for instance, around housing discrimination. You're not only helping them to organize to advocate for better wages and against discrimination, but providing services, helping them to advocate not only locally but in terms of state and national kind of

legislation. Would you see those as being kind of the main changes to the workplace? And are there other changes you've seen since 1992?

NMM: Yes and no. I started working here full-time in 1996, and I started as Executive Director in '99. Before that we had focused around workplace issues and we had worked at a state level because we had actually pushed for the Nonpayment of Wages Prohibition Act in New York State. We had to work in coalition with other organizations at the state level in order to be able to push for that.

So it wasn't that we had never worked at a State level. Since the time that I started, I think we've worked more on local issues; for example all the battles at the Suffolk County legislature having occurred within the last ten years, and most of the work with local mayors around day labor issues. That actually also occurred before I came, but there's been more of it in the past ten years.

I think we've been more involved at the Federal level. Before 1999 there was also some level of work there on immigration. But an issue like housing, for example, we had never worked on, as far as I know, before the past few years. Again, I think that the basic core strength of the organization is that it's a democratic organization that responds to its member, and that was there in the beginning, and I think it just happened to be that it was focused on one area at the time, and I think over time it's changed, but that it's changed within that core.

Q: Right. So it's really based in community of immigrant workers, and as the community changes and the needs to be responsive, and that's one of the advantages of having a democratically structured organization.

NMM: Oh, exactly, exactly. You know, there's always a balancing act between trying to sort of stay true to your mission, stay true to your focus, stay true to your core goals, and changing and sort of adding new areas. So it's always really hard to figure out why would you do one thing versus another. There's government funding that may exist for one area of work and not for another. There's foundation funding, which you may use this for one area and not for another. So it's so important to have a base. To have people who will say, "No, this is an important issue to us, and this may or may not be. We could take it or leave it."

At least for me, when I have a point where I'm trying to figure out kind of where to go, it's really good to be able to go to members, to go to our board and to say, "What do you think?" I think that's essential.

Q: You mentioned the Nonpayment of Wages Prohibition Act. I would imagine you see that as one of the major accomplishments. Tell me a little bit more about some of the other accomplishments of the Workplace Project.

NMM: Some of the other accomplishments? Wage theft has always been one of the biggest areas of problems and issues that have been brought to us by workers and by members. In 2005 what we did was we established a relationship with the Nassau County District Attorney's Office to finally get nonpayment of wages enforced as a crime. It was incredible to us and to workers, who would say, "Why is it that if I take a stick of gum from the store I would be put in handcuffs immediately, but an employer can take $1,000, $2,000, $30,000 from me and they don't do anything?" And that it was in the law. It is a crime. Nonpayment of wages is a crime, but that it wasn't being enforced that way.

So we finally were able to establish such a relationship where they were willing to basically expend their resources going after some of these employers and arrest them. On our end we had members, workers, who were willing to speak to the DA's office, and we were able to build that relationship in such a way that they could do it. So there have been, I'd say, eight contractors arrested by now which had been one of my dreams— to see some of these employers actually arrested for what they were doing.

Now, obviously, that's still a challenge. We're still working on ways to go after employers and to not only win, because we're capable of winning in court or winning in terms of getting employers arrested, but actually to get money back for the workers. Unfortunately, too often, we'll get a judgment on a piece of paper that says to the worker, "You've won," and then they don't get any actual money! They can't collect on the judgment. So it's a big challenge.

The passage of the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in Nassau County was also a huge victory for us. In addition, I think we have fought against the anti-immigrant wave in Suffolk County. Although you can never, I think, say you've won that kind of thing, we've certainly beaten back a few pieces of anti-immigrant legislation in Suffolk County. Even if it's to a small degree, I do feel like right now compared to even two or three years ago there's a real change in terms of the political officials, even the County Executive and the legislators. I don't know whether internally they've changed their beliefs with regard to immigrants at all, but I think they are more careful with what they say. At this point, they haven't proposed any anti-immigrant legislation recently.

So hopefully they're understanding that the anti-immigrant rhetoric they had been using all the time before really did result in hate crimes and murder. I also think they're coming to realize that Latinos are a growing political force and that if they don't figure out how to relate to us, they're the ones who are going to lose in the long term. Anyway, I think that is another area where there has been progress. Not something huge, but certainly steps towards progress.

Q: What are some major challenges that the Workplace Project has faced and ways the organization has dealt with those challenges.

NMM: I think the anti-immigrant sentiment in Long Island and nationally is a major challenge. On the one hand, it's a challenge at a small level. It's a challenge of individuals and those workers who are having their employers discriminate against them or steal their wages. That's part of that same anti-immigrant sentiment. So it's a challenge in that you're always facing those attacks at both a small level and at a large level.

In addition to that, I think what's hard is to see is that the anti-immigrant sentiment also puts politicians in this state of fear. So it's not just the individual anti-immigrant people, but it's the outsized level of power that they have. I really do believe that they're actually a minority on Long Island, that most people are not as crazy as the really anti-immigrant people are. Most people are sort of in the middle. But elected officials get so worried and intimidated by a few people who make a lot of noise.

For example, most polls show that most people think that there should be legalization and that people should be allowed to work and pay taxes if they go through a process. I mean, all of these things are things that people agree with.

And yet you have congressional representatives and senators who are worried about being seen as pro-immigrant. So I think that that's one of the challenges for the organization, which is how to take on issues which often are seen politically as a third rail. They would rather do anything than talk about immigration issues.

Our other challenges are just things which challenge all organizations, like fundraising. I think we're always struggling with figuring out how to balance our resources from one area or from another. I think that just goes with the fact that we're working in a low-income community and there's a lot of need and small amounts of resources.

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Q: What are some of the current issues that the Workplace Project is working on both locally and nationally?

NMM: Well, there are a few different things. One is with regard to day laborers, and more broadly, construction workers in general. One of the groups has formed a new local of the Laborers International Union. It's Laborers Local 10. Our organization, the Latin-American Workers Project, *Centro Immigrante* on Staten Island and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network are all on the board in support of this local. The idea is to organize the residential construction industry. They've done a lot of good work so far in terms of training people around, for example, the green jobs work so that people who might have had experience in residential construction but not in that specific area of residential retrofitting are able to learn those skills and then able to get different kinds of jobs.

The idea is to actually change the residential construction industry, because otherwise we're just playing a cat-and-mouse game at the local corners, right, trying to get work, trying not to have problems with the police, trying to negotiate in a very reactive way. So the idea of Laborers Local 10 is to really analyze the construction industry and to allow the workers to set their own conditions.

The other national issue this year that organizations and the community have had their hopes up for is comprehensive immigration reform. Because right now they can't even pass health care reform, it's really not looking good in terms of immigration reform. Everybody that we've talked to from Washington and the national groups also say that it's really unlikely at this point that immigration reform is going to pass this year. Unfortunately, because there are all these political calendars, it gets even more difficult next year and the year after and et cetera.

But there's never really a good year for an issue like immigration, apparently. We've talked about it a lot, and the truth is that for our members this is an essential issue. So regardless of whether it's a good year or a bad year for it, we're going to continue to push and to try to bring the issue and the importance of the issue to the attention of our congressional representatives and our senators. On the one hand we hear about what the possibilities are, and on the other hand we just feel like we have to keep going. You know, we have to keep fighting.

Q: Ideally, what would be some of the components of comprehensive reform to a broken immigration system that the Workplace Project would like to see?

NMM: Well, that's a good question, because we talk about immigration reform as if we all were talking about the same thing when sometimes I think we're not talking about the same thing at all. Probably the most important component is legalization, so that people who are currently in the country are able to go through some sort of a process where they're able to legalize. Contrary to what many people think, at this point, most of the people who are undocumented don't have any legal options that they can go through to be able to legalize their status.

Second, because of the experience that we have in workers' issues, protecting workers' rights is really important. So no matter the legal status (e.g., permanent, temporary, temporary with a path towards permanence, et cetera), it has to have protection of workers' rights. We've had situations where we've seen workers with legal status, residents or workers who are on guest worker visas, et cetera, who have been exploited. Just having legal status does not guarantee good treatment of workers. So it needs to have protection of workers' rights.

Third, it should also have a path to citizenship. While you can have a temporary status for a while, you can't put people in a permanent temporary status, because then you're really creating a subclass of people. Then there are just things which are kind of more technical, but we want to make sure that there is due process for people who are detained and those kinds of protections for people who are in the system.

There's a whole debate with regard to immigration reform and how much will have to be conceded in terms of enforcement because there are many people who want to see that there is enforcement in the legislation. So for us, we would be worried about agreeing to things which may be worse than what we currently have – things like local police cooperation with immigration. To actually institutionalize that across the country would be bad. There are a lot of other things like the increased criminalization of people. We know that even if they have legalization tomorrow, there are going to be people who will be left out of it. There are always some people who are left out of whatever legislation you have. What's going to happen with them and how will we deal with that? That's a whole other area.

Q: As long as corporate globalization continues to create conditions that make it impossible for people to stay in their homes and provide for themselves and their families, there's going to be this ongoing immigration from certain localities in the global economy. And in that context, if we say, "Okay, well, we will legalize people who are here, but there aren't enough subsequent opportunities to legally immigrate for those who will come in the future," it could be a situation that could lead to even higher levels of exploitation and human rights abuses. Maybe there

are some broader issues in terms of international economic and political relations that need to be figured out as well. I don't know if you agree with me?

NMM: Yes. We have discussions internally about the reasons why people come to the country. There is a myth sometimes outside that everybody came because they're just dying to come to the United States. The truth is that most people would love to have been able to stay in their home country with their family, with their friends, and with the people they grew up with. But the situation that they were in, because of issues like the agricultural areas collapsing and large factories closing, forced them to come here.

So the legislation is probably not going to deal with that. But the truth is that that's such an important component of immigration that there will continue to be problems of immigration regardless of whether the legislation is passed. I always worry about when we talk about the solution, because it's so rare that you actually have the solution. You can make progress on an issue, and immigration legislation can be progress, and unions can be progress, and the creation of day laborer centers can be steps in making progress. But none of them are perfect solutions, because the problems are so large.

Q: I think that gets to the future of the Workplace Project which involves trying to accomplish incremental changes on multiple fronts.

NMM: Exactly. I think the essence of the organization will be to continue in the struggle and to ensure that immigrants in Long Island are organizing. What that means exactly in 30 years I don't know. It may be completely different. But the essence of the organization hopefully will still be there, and the fight for social justice will still be there.

Q: Is there anything you would care to add?

NMM: Yes, the new Executive Director is great. He comes with a lot of experience in different parts of the country and comes from a different worker center. I think it's exciting to see a new person coming in, bringing ideas from different parts of the country. Hopefully, it'll bring a new, exciting phase for the organization.

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