

The Wal-Mart Challenge to Union Organizing: A Conversation with Carlos Ramos of UFCW

By Niev Duffy

Carlos Ramos is a full-time organizer employed by Local 1500 of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW). Local 1500 was founded in 1979 and now represents over 22,000 workers in New York City, Long Island, Westchester, Putnam, and Dutchess Counties. It has won collective bargaining contracts with major supermarket chains like D'Agostino's, Gristede's King Kullen, Pathmark, and Shop Rite. Today, it has set its sights on the nation's largest private employer: Wal-Mart.

Carlos Ramos is a native of Lima, Peru. Before migrating to the U.S. in 1988, he worked as a lieutenant in the Lima police department. For his first 10 years in this country, he was an employee of a unionized supermarket. As he became increasingly active in union affairs, he came to the notice of UFCW leaders and, in 1998, was offered and accepted a full-time organizing position with the union.

Niev Duffy spoke with him in New York City last summer.

Q: Can we first ask you a bit about your background and past work experiences.

CR: After I came to the United States in 1988, I had the experience of working both at a store represented by a union and also in a nonunion store. The first job I got at that time was in a supermarket in Jackson Heights, Queens. There was one store, one owner, no union and, as an immigrant, I needed to take the job to survive here. I was not living with a family; I was just renting a room like everybody else. And I remember I had one particular accident that really pushed me to do something. I was working one day cutting boxes. And I cut my hand right here, my left hand, with the knife. That was not a really big cut, but, I was bleeding and I went to the manager. He said: "Just stop what you're doing, go to the hospital and take care of whatever you have to." So I went to the hospital, they took care of my hand, and I went back to work three hours later. But the manager said, "Just go home and take a couple days off, then come back when you are ready to work."

So I took off a couple days and then I went back. The next week, when I got my check, I was surprised: I just got two days' pay. And I say -- I was thinking that maybe he's going to pay me for this and he say, "No, you were out for three days, okay? You know, you're not getting paid." I was afraid to lose that job because that was my only job; I had to pay the rent, nobody else was going to support me. So I said, "Okay."

Two weeks later, I got the bill for the hospital and friends of mine told me, "Well, just give it to him. He's supposed to pay you." So I gave the bill to the store manager, and he said, "Well, it's not my bill. It's your accident, you pay for that." And, after that incident, I saw he was cutting my days, my hours. He put me on three days and then, after a little while, he just put me on two days. He tried to basically say, "Hey, I guess it's time to just go to another job."

In that experience, nobody I knew ever really said, "This is not right." Then I met some guy did, and he started telling me what to do and that he was working in this supermarket called King Kullen. King Kullen is a big chain in Long Island, Queens and Staten Island. He said, "Why don't you just go apply over there, because it's better wages, they treat the workers better, it's a union place, you know, and you got some representation." So that was the beginning of how I started. I was a union member since that time: I was a rank-and-file member for ten years, 1989 to 1998. And I was very active as a shop steward, for Local 1500. My stores, I was part of the contract negotiations with the supermarket and the union in 1998. And then, in 1998, after we got the excellent contract, the union offered me the position as an organizer.

Q: Was anyone else in your family ever in a union in Peru?

CR: No, actually, my father was also a police officer, retired, and my grandfather was a police officer too. And the military people in Peru, they can't be organized, can't be in the unions. It's a very unpolitical part of the country. But, at the same time, as a high school student, I tried to just read whatever I could about the unions. I know there were two strong unions in Peru: the CGTP and also the teachers unions

Q: What kind of organizer training did you get?

CR: Well, first of all, as a union member, as a shop steward the last five years working as a local member in the supermarket, Local 1500 was always training us as stewards: what your rights are, what you can do or what you can't do. And part of this training is we still have these shop steward seminars once a year. Half of the day is also training on how we organize new members. And then, as an organizer, I'm in different organizing trainings from UFCW. I remember there was a three-day seminar we went to in Albany for just organizing. And then we got two days' training from the AFL-CIO in Long Island.

Q: What would you say to youth considering becoming an organizer?

CR: I guess all this started for me when I become a young police officer. I always liked having a father who always wore the uniform and always tried to do the right thing. My father always said to me, "You have to do the right thing no matter what," and, "When you're right, you're right; when you're wrong, you're wrong." I always tried to do the right thing, and I always expect people to do the right thing to me. So that's why I decided to be an organizer. I know it's a very, very difficult job. It's not easy to organize, but when we're winning elections, when people tell me, "You're really helping me," when I say to these people, "You know, you've got the right to do this," and they smile and thank me. That makes me still like doing this job.

Q: Wal-Mart has now become the best-known focus of UFCW organizing efforts. Why?

CR: Well, Wal-Mart's really getting to be a big monster right now. Nobody can stop it; it's destroying American jobs. In UFCW, we try to do the right thing for our members and we got them good contracts. Wal-Mart's getting bigger and bigger, especially in New York. They are competition with our union employers. We tried to organize them many times. I know you heard about the story in Texas, where they closed the pro-union meat cutters' department; and they closed a union store in Canada. Wal-Mart's so big, but we need to fight and try to stop them from coming to New York.

It's a war against all the union employers, because they come and just make the smiley face. But we know there's still also low wages and no benefits and that's big competition to employers to the point they can probably close them down. Our members are going to get laid off and it's going to be more difficult for us try to keep that market share.



Carlos Ramos

Q: Any promising signs, in terms of Wal-Mart efforts in New York and Long Island?

CR: Well, we stopped Wal-Mart from coming to New York City, and also we are in exactly the same situation in Forest Hill in Queens. Any sign like Wal-Mart is coming to New York, then UFCW, and all the local unions together will try to stop it. Because now, they're selling gas at Wal-Mart, they're selling cars. So, it's different; it's not just UFCW, it's all the labor movement itself.

And Long Island has right now six or seven Wal-Marts already and one Sam's Club. We not have any SuperCenters yet in Long Island. The SuperCenters are like a Wal-Mart village, they've got everything. Once we start getting those tremendous stores in Long Island, they're probably going to really, really cause a lot of trouble for businesses around them, including the union employers we have under contracts.

Q: When the New York Union Community Coalition fought this year to stop Wal-Mart expansion plans in Brooklyn, critics charged that this would kill new jobs badly needed for low-income residents. How do you respond to that?

CR: Well, Wal-Mart says, "Look, we come here and we going to make a thousand new jobs and that's good for this neighborhood." But whenever there is one particular new job in Wal-Mart, there are probably going to be like ten other jobs lost around the area. So that basically doesn't really help the community. Wal-Mart gets whatever they want, but the mom-and-pop store or the hardware store or the supermarket right there on the

corner, it closes down. And then, after the while, when they got the grand opening, after six months, Wal-Mart starts laying off many they hired in the beginning. So it's not really getting jobs, it's losing jobs.

Plus, they give low wages and no benefits for the employees. So we are losing really good jobs at union companies that pay benefits to the employees. That full-time job is losing because Wal-Mart comes in with the very low wages, and no benefits or some all paid by the employee, if you qualify. And then, after that, they cut your hours, maybe when the business slows down. So that's why we always try to educate the community.

Q: Costco pays higher wages and offers health insurance. Does the union oppose them?

CR: Well, you know, I'm not really very involved with the Costco campaign. I know Costco, we have the stores in Long Island, they are union. And, you know, it's a big difference between Costco and Wal-Mart. It's not like I'm defending Costco. It's just like their mentality is totally different. Wal-Mart just wants to make money and they don't care about employees at all. It's just that we focus more on stopping Wal-Mart, you know? And that doesn't mean we don't try to organize Costco. Even if they pay like \$10 or \$11 per hour to the employees, we still go after them.

Q: What other companies are you trying to organize now?

CR: Right now, in Long Island, we have, for example, the IGA markets, the Best Yet Supermarkets, and Whole Foods. That's another company that's getting bigger and bigger. IGA have stores in Nassau and Suffolk. There's probably nine to ten stores. And the workers include a lot of immigrants, but mostly white people work in those stores. The areas they open in are middle-class and upper-class. So they don't have really the background of workers supporting unions.

Let me just give you the example, we try to -- we have a big campaign in Fort Salonga in Long Island. I don't know if you familiar with the area. That is in the North Shore, in Suffolk. There's a lot of part-time kids. They come to work with nice cars, like a \$40,000 or \$50,000 car. When we tell them, "We're trying to organize this place," they look at you and say, "Do you think I really need a union?" So that makes it difficult.

Q: What do you say to those young people?

CR: We always try to explain that, "Look, there definitely have to be some people in this store who have a full-time job and really need this job. I understand you young people will probably go back to college next year or something like that, but they need your help. The people inside -- that cashier, or the people in the deli -- they probably need those benefits and they can't do it by themselves; they need you. And they can't really speak out, because they are probably going to get fired."

Q: That sounds like it would be a powerful recruitment tool, telling young people that this is a way that they can really make a difference. And especially because they don't have kids yet. They don't face the same problems if they do organize.

CR: Right. Sometimes, you get a good response: "Yes, I'm definitely in. I'm on board to help you guys in any way." But, some guys, they say, "Sorry, but --" Also, sometimes they get some influence from their parents. They say, "Oh, my mother always says to me, "Don't talk with strangers."

At the IGA, we did some campaigns and customers always come to us and say terrible things about the labor movement, the unions themselves. So even some customers say like "The unions destroy this country. You are not supposed to be here and why don't you just leave this guy alone, he's just doing business?" And then, when we start doing some handbills, for example, I got phone call messages at my office, "Tell me why you do this? Communist!" "Leave this guy, he's a good guy." I guess he told all his friends to call and say good things about him. So that makes it difficult for us to organize places like that.

And that's one example of a campaign. Whole Foods has tried to open -- they got one store in Manhasset, another in Bellmore. And they're opening another store in Jericho by September, October this year. And their plan is to come to Long Island and do the same thing they do in the city.

"I believe in coalitions of workers, community and labor together – that's the only way you can organize right now. Pressure the employer at rallies, spread the word in the community to say what this or that employer's doing. Plus, show the employees you're trying to organize that they're not alone. They can see there are people supporting them and that really blocks the fear factor."

Q: Are they unionized in the city?

CR: No, they're not union, they're not union at all. They sell upscale gourmet food, all organic and different kinds of customers go there. Some people say they're not really competition with the regular supermarket, but they are.

Q: What are the main challenges that the union tends to experience when it's organizing immigrants?

CR: Well, I spent five years working in New York City on the greengrocery campaign with UFCW, Local 1500. I can simplify my answer with just one word: fear. When you deal with immigrants, it's hard for the immigrant try to find a job. And there's the language issue, legal status, skills. It's really three things against the immigrants, when they try to find a job. You can find a good job, but you have to basically have the documentation to get that job, and they ask, "How is your English?" The greengrocery workers in New York City are probably 80% Mexican and 20% from different parts of Central America or South America.

Sometimes when I talk with them in Spanish, their education level is not even sixth grade in their countries. So the workers here don't really have too many skills and it's hard for them to find a job. When the organizers come to the job, whether they're doing delis or deliveries or selling flowers or whatever, the first thing in their mind, is, "What happens if I lose my job?" So that is one of the big struggles when we try to organize immigrants in New York City -- the fear factor. And, let me tell you, in those five years in New York City, I saw things I never could have imagined: how people live crowded in those buildings sometimes. I understand how difficult it is for the immigrants to try to survive.

The good part is sometimes, even with those working conditions, even with no papers and no skill, we still organize those workers. We still have contracts, no matter if they are they are documented or not,

permanent or not. We still win elections and I guess that's what matters to them. No matter what you started with, you still have the right to join the union.

Q Why are they joining the union, despite those things? And what do you say to them, given their fears?

CR: I always divide it into three big key issues. The workers, are looking for better wages. They also want some kind of benefits. And respect. Those are always my three key issues. In the greengrocers' case, I always said to the workers, "Look, we're not asking for the stars, but is the employer treating you in the right way?" If employees get at least the minimum wage and any benefit, like the right to go to the hospital if something happen to your wife or your kids. I mean, that's what we're looking for. I guess that's why the workers try to organize. We talk about pensions, we talk about legal services we talk about vacation time, sick time. But if you go only by that, they'll probably not really listen to you. Because they are always being intimidated by the employer: they're always yelling and calling the workers names. And, sometimes, they're working six, seven days straight, no breaks. I mean, we got to the point like we got the whole store out for a one-day strike, even those with no legal status. But if you just send the message, it breaks the fear. One thing about the Mexican immigrants is they're very strong. A store may have twenty employees: fifteen Mexican, maybe two Korean, maybe two Indian and maybe another group. But, when they act together, they can make a difference in the stores.

Q: Is that because they're familiar with organizing themselves? I mean, if you don't come from a culture or a background where unions are understood and appreciated, then you might be less likely to support it. Do you think it's because the Mexican immigrants are more likely to be familiar with the benefits of organizing?

CR: Well, sometimes they do not really believe that the unions in Mexico are better than the unions in Venezuela or Peru. Because they tell you the unions in Mexico, they're corrupt. But at least they got the idea of what the unions is, the *syndicato*.

But, they're always looking for something to change and for a leader. At any deli, any supermarket, any little bodega, we got those workers, those immigrants. They're always looking for somebody to stand up and say, "Yes, let's do this." And when you find that person, everything else is OK. And if he says, "Yeah, let's go for the union," then you have the whole campaign.

In the beginning, we went there and we tried to talk with the workers. And sometimes we got a good response, sometimes not. And then one of them said to us, "You're doing the wrong thing. You come here and you give a flyer or you try to talk with us and you know there is a fear factor. Do you think my brother's going to talk with you if you have the boss right there, looking at us talking to you? He's not going to listen. I mean, we're not going to talk to you, we're not going to listen to what you say. You have to find some different ways to talking with us." And I asked, "How?"

Well, they mentioned Tepeyac. There's one in the city on 14th Street, between 6th and 7th Avenues. This is one of those big Mexican associations. These workers try to find a place where they can find friends reflecting their issues and their mentality. As Hector Figueroa [SEIU Local 32BJ's Political Director] says, you have to go around with the community groups, religious groups, and churches so these workers see you as a part of their family. Because when they have some problem -- even our union members -- not particularly at work, but any other issues, they go to those associations. They feel more comfortable go there. They have English language

classes, classes about labor law, knowing your rights and all those kinds of things. It's a nonprofit organization. And word goes around there about our union: "Hey, they did this for me." That's where you start the whole organizing campaign.

Q: Has UFCW ever given any seminars there?

CR: We try working with them, but Tepeyac has their own agenda. I respect their ability and they try to really be neutral for their community. That's what they say to us: "We respect you as a union, we believe in unions. But our image to the public or the Mexican community is we are neutral."

Q: Anything else you think is important for future organizing?

CR: Well, I believe in coalitions of workers, community and labor together, that's the only way you can organize right now. Pressure the employer at rallies, spread the word in the community to say what this or that employer's doing. Plus, show the employees you're trying to organize that they're not alone. They can see there are people supporting them and that really blocks the fear factor and they can say, "Yes, let's go for the union."

Otherwise, if you have the [NLRB] election, the employers are 24-7 saying, "Look, the union say this, this, this." And those antiunion law firms, they have bilingual people and they have the money to hire some Chinese counselor, for example, to deal with Chinese people only. So that's going to be very difficult for just one union try to organize. Coalitions – labor unions, the employees and the community together -- that's the key for organizing immigrants right now.

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REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 8, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2006).

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