



PHOTO: Jose, Pioneer Valley Worker Center Farm. CREDIT: Jason Kotoch.

Community as Capital

HOW ONE WORKER CENTER IS SOWING THE SEEDS OF ECONOMIC JUSTICE

"Building power with low-wage and immigrant workers": That's how the Pioneer Valley Workers' Center (PVWC) describes their work in communities in Western Massachusetts. Fair World Project's Anna Canning sat down with Gabriella della Croce as she talked about the organizing they do, and how food system workers, mostly on farms and in restaurants, are coming together to combat the big issues in their communities — while they build toward a vision for a future of economic justice, nourishing food, and resilient networks.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE BUILDS POWER

The Center acts as a platform for a diversity of initiatives and organizing, all driven by our membership. Currently, we're part of a statewide campaign with the Driving Families Forward coalition, fighting for driver's licenses for undocumented people in the state of Massachusetts. That campaign was voted on unanimously by our Worker Committees because most of our members are undocumented. The peril of driving without a license is a huge issue that they face. No matter where you work, you have to drive to get there: to bring your kids to school or go to the doctor. And, just as in other parts of the country, people get racially profiled and pulled over. Those little traffic stops then often drag them into the immigration system.

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We also do know-your-rights trainings on immigration and labor laws. We find that often, people either don't know about the laws that are there to protect them or think that the laws don't apply to them because they are undocumented. A lot of what we do to build power involves preparing people with the tools and knowledge to defend themselves. Last night, I was meeting with a farmworker I hadn't seen in a while. When I first met her a year ago, she spoke very limited Spanish. She's Guatemalan and her native language is Acateco, and it was very hard for me to understand her. She told me about a situation she faced on the job where she got really sick as a result of pesticide exposure in

the strawberry fields where she worked. Her throat swelled up, she had to go to the hospital, and then she got fired because of needing to miss work. Yesterday she said to me, "Now I tell my manager, 'you have rights, but I have rights too. You can't treat me that way.' And now he doesn't bother me as much because he knows that I am going to tell him what my rights are." What shifted in the last year was, in her words, that she has been coming to the Worker Committee meetings and going to our workshops, and "Now I know that I have rights."

We do a lot to educate and bring people together, such as soccer tournaments, art events, and concerts. Immigrating to the United States can be really isolating, and even when people have family nearby, their communities have been fragmented through the process of migration. We provide a space and a platform for people to come together, to strategize, and to take collective action against oppression. These events also build community and allow us to get to know each other so that when emergencies come up, we are able to respond and support one another. In the wake of the 2016 election, we also formed a rapid response network, Solidarity in the Streets, which has now grown to include 3,000 people. Through this network, we're able to organize mutual aid programs — including a rideshare and food distribution program — for which our members actively solicit donations and pass out supplies at our Worker Committee meetings. So, there are a lot of ways that we try to plug people into this supportive, resilient network — to organize and to lean on in the absence of basic services that aren't provided anywhere else.

COMMUNITY AS CAPITAL

It's always been our dream to not only push back against abusive and oppressive systems, but to create spaces where people can build hope and alternative economic structures. So, when an organization called All Farmers — which does land access work with refugees and people of color — reached out to us asking if our members might be interested in farming a seven-acre plot

near Northampton, we jumped at the opportunity.

Our Worker Committees were really enthusiastic about the idea of starting a farm. Many members work long hours on farms, but at the end of the day, they go home and can't afford to buy the kind of vegetables that they are breaking their backs producing in the fields. Many of them were farmers in Latin America before coming to the States, so they have a lot of knowledge and skills. That initial enthusiasm in the Worker Committees then evolved into seven people who got serious and decided to organize and form a worker cooperative farm.

The summer of 2019 was their first season. Throughout the summer, members of our Solidarity in the Streets network went to weekly work parties to help out on the farm. We started very small, actively growing 2 acres of vegetables on the 4.5 acres that we lease. All of the members still work their day jobs — so they would sometimes spend 60-70 hours a week working in the fields and then, on their one day off, worked on starting their own farm.

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Now the farm has a full year under its belt and a new name, too: Riquezas del Campo. At the start of the first season, all we had was a bare field: no irrigation system, no shed to put tools in, nothing. But, once again, we were able to leverage support from Solidarity in the Streets. Carpenters, including members of the

Springfield Carpenters Union, Local 336, built a beautiful shed. A local ceramicist helped craft a simple, but elegant, irrigation system, hand digging a pond out of a streambed and siphoning water into donated storage tanks to flow into gravity-fed drip hoses. At the volunteer work party days, students and people from all kinds of backgrounds, including other farmworkers who aren't part of the project, all came together to help build out the needed infrastructure.

The farm has been a site for all kinds of mingling and relationship building across cultural, class, and racial divides. And this is a key part of how the farm fits into our organizing. It gets tiring going to workshops and meetings, but the farm is a space where we can cross-pollinate, eat together, hang out, and cultivate hope. And, I think equally important, the land offers us all a place where we can heal. In the beauty of the fields and the woods that surround us, filled with fresh air and birdsong, I see how just being there together helps us relate to one another in a more grounded way. We need more spaces like this for collective catharsis.

During the 2019 season, members planted 30 different varieties of vegetables: tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, watermelon, broccoli, and more. They took produce home to their families and brought crates of vegetables to the Worker Committee meetings for everyone to share. And they sold nearly 2,000 pounds of produce to the consumer co-op just down the road from us.

A COOPERATIVE VISION FOR ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY

At our annual membership meeting, all the groups who organize with us come together, and the members vote on organizational priorities. Last year, the results were overwhelming votes in favor of the cooperative farm, as well as the driver's license campaign. And our members want to work on supporting the future development of more worker cooperatives. People are creative and entrepreneurial; they have a lot of what they need to be able to become their own bosses. But they don't have access to tools, literal or figurative. They don't have fair access to capital, financial or cultural. They know how to produce, but they don't own the means of production. Our organizing approach is two-pronged: offensive and defensive. We fight against exploitative systems, but also build small-scale models of what we want instead. And economic democracy is a big part of the world that we envision.

Overall, this farm is sort of a star in the constellation of organizations that we want to be a part of building. And we see this as one small piece of the struggle for a more just economy. The dream is for this farm to provide real livelihoods for all of the co-op members, for them not to have to continue working on other people's farms. They want to be able to make a living wage at their own farm. This is, of course, an ambitious vision, but we are exploring ways to make it happen, including through value-added and niche products. And really, I think the support of our community will make it possible. Like Riquezas del Campo, the Workers Center is a small organization. But we have a lot of power because we bring thousands of people together, both to fight against exploitative systems that aren't working for us and to experiment with better ways of organizing our collective labor and resources.

PHOTO: Eduardo, Pioneer Valley Worker Center Farm. CREDIT: Jason Kotoch.

