

Organizing Workers along Ethnic Lines

THE PILIPINO WORKERS' CENTER

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Worker centers often attract members who share a geographic area or ethnic background—rather than an occupation or industry—and help them claim and expand their rights. Working predominantly with immigrants scattered across various industries, these centers are attuned to members' problems not only at work but also in other domains such as immigration and housing (Fine 2006, 13, 20–22). This chapter examines how building a membership along ethnic lines impacts a worker center's campaigns. Previous scholars have shown that geographic or ethnic-based worker centers have been effective in directing work-related legislative campaigns (Gordon 2005) and in mobilizing for tenant and immigrant rights (Fine 2006). Because organizing along ethnic lines can be so consequential for a worker center—from determining its industry focus to establishing its organizational allies—I seek to delineate the impact of this organizing strategy on a center's trajectory. Through an analysis of four campaigns at the Pilipino Workers' Center

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(PWC), I trace how one organization implemented the ethnic organizing principle and the resulting support and setbacks it experienced.

For more than ten years, PWC has been organizing low-wage, primarily undocumented Filipino immigrants in Los Angeles to help them make advances on issues of work, housing, banking, and immigrant rights. Since its inception, PWC grew from an unsuccessful union organizing drive to a membership of five hundred adult workers and fifty youth; from borrowing desk space at another worker center to directing a forty-eight-unit affordable housing complex on its own property; and from accepting small marketing fees from Western Union to challenging the company's business practices and entering a profit-sharing plan with a competitor. How did the organization experience this growth, and how did its decision to serve an exclusively Filipino immigrant population shape its path? I will explore these questions with the goal of highlighting useful lessons for other worker centers, labor unions, and community-based organizations that are considering adopting an ethnic organizing strategy either in its entirety or as part of a broader organizing agenda.¹

The chapter is organized in two sections, each considering a different aspect of PWC as a Filipino worker center. The first section explores how PWC became a Filipino *worker center*—in other words, how it met the unique needs of the immigrant Filipino low-wage population, many of whom are wary of organized labor and protest movements, in order to build its membership. The second part of the chapter examines PWC's experience as a *Filipino* worker center, arguing that its focus on Filipino immigrants has had mixed results in its workplace struggles but has helped the organization develop crucial alliances to address non-workplace issues. To contextualize the organization's activities, I begin with an overview of Filipino migration to the United States and description of the L.A. Filipino population.

Filipino Immigration

Filipinos are the second largest Asian population in the United States and roughly two-thirds are foreign-born (Reeves and Bennett 2004). The Philippines' distinct status as a former U.S. colony, coupled with changes in immigration policy, have shaped the experience of the Filipino population in the United States. While the first wave of Filipino immigrants arriving at the turn of the previous century were mainly unskilled laborers, in recent years the Philippines has been the single largest source of professional migrants to the United States (Espiritu 2003). Yet the success that has characterized the second wave has not been shared by all.

After annexing the archipelago following the 1898 Spanish American War, the United States exerted significant economic and cultural influence on the colony, creating a legacy that continued after independence in 1946. The Philippines' economy was stymied by its transformation into a single-crop (sugar) economy and by its economic dependence on the United States. High rates of inflation and unemployment (Espiritu 2003) pushed people to find work abroad. Currently, one in seven workers from the Philippines are abroad at any given time (DeParle 2007). About one in three emigrants settle permanently, primarily in the United States, while 40 percent make long-term careers as temporary contract workers in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, spending extended periods of time away from their families. Finally, an estimated 1.3 million are working abroad without authorization from their host countries.

While U.S. economic influence motivated Filipinos to migrate from their country, changes in immigration law and policies created two distinct waves of Filipino immigrants to the United States. Colonization enabled the first wave of Filipino immigration, composed primarily of young single men recruited as migrant farm workers. While exclusionary immigration policies closed the gates to Asian immigrants beginning in the 1880s, Filipinos were exempt because of their "U.S. national" status. But when the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Independence Act granted the Philippines independence, it also stripped Filipinos of their exempt immigration status (see Ngai 2004) and curbed the flow of Filipinos to the United States.

Migration picked up again with the passage of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which sparked a second, and distinct, wave of Filipino migration. The 1965 act admitted newcomers primarily under the family reunification criteria but also allocated visas based on domestic occupational needs. Compared to other countries, a far greater share of Filipinos entering the United States after the 1965 act—between one-third and one-half—entered using preferred occupation categories (Choy 2003, 97–98; Espiritu 2003, 34; Lobo and Salvo 1998, 745). After settlement in the United States, this professional population was able to further multiply its ranks through family reunification visas. The legacy of U.S. influence in the former colony helped prepare these Filipinos for the roles they would serve in the United States. For example, the United States installed English as the language of instruction in the Philippines (Espiritu 2003) and increased access to higher education and professional training, particularly in medical professions (Choy 2003). Thus, while more than two-thirds of the U.S. Filipino population are now foreign-born, three-quarters report speaking English very well (Reeves and Bennett 2004). With relatively high levels of professional training, particularly in the medical field, Filipinos can fill shortages

in the U.S. health care industry (Choy 2003; Ong and Azores 1994). As a result of their concentration in professional occupations, the Filipino population in the United States today fares better than the non-Filipino population. In 1999, Filipino median family income was \$65,000, compared to \$50,000 for non-Filipinos; and only 6 percent of Filipinos lived below the official poverty line, compared to 12 percent of non-Filipinos (Reeves and Bennett 2004).

Yet the success that has characterized the second wave of Filipino migrants has not been ubiquitous. Among those who do not fit the image of immigrant success are relatives of the earlier wave of low-wage immigrants who entered the United States through the family reunification clause of the 1965 Immigration Act (Espiritu 2003); those unable to apply Filipino educational credentials to the U.S. system (Allen 1977); and those who cannot work at positions commensurate with their skills because they are residing in the United States without proper documents—usually on expired tourist visas. This last group, the Filipino undocumented population, was estimated to number 280,000 in 2006 (Hoefler, Rytina, and Campbell 2007).

California is home to nearly half of the Filipinos in the United States, with nearly 300,000—or 13 percent of the total U.S. Filipino population—living in Los Angeles County in 2000 (U.S. Census 2000). Foreign-born Filipinos outnumber U.S.-born Filipinos by two to one in L.A. County, and a considerable portion of the foreign-born population, 39 percent, is comprised of noncitizens (see table 2.1). Paralleling the national figures, Filipinos in Los Angeles are a generally successful immigrant population, but the most recent immigrants—especially those who are noncitizens—are at a noticeable disadvantage.

As can be expected from their higher levels of education (see table 2.2), Filipinos on average suffer from a lower poverty rate than the general population in L.A. County, but there is a great deal of variation within this population (see table 2.3). While the average poverty rate in the county was

Table 2.1. Nativity and citizenship status of Filipinos, L.A. County, 2000

Filipinos	Population size	Percentage of total
U.S.-born	97,287	33%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	123,333	41%
Foreign-born noncitizens	77,839	26%
Total	298,459	100%

Source: U.S. Census 2000.

17 percent in 1999, the rate among Filipinos was only 8 percent. Yet non-citizen immigrant Filipinos had a much higher rate, 12 percent, compared to their naturalized or native-born counterparts. While even the 12 percent rate is far below the L.A. County average (17 percent), it is surprisingly high given the Filipino population's relatively high level of education.

Table 2.2. Educational attainment of Filipinos and non-Filipinos, by nativity and citizenship status, L.A. County, 2000

Filipinos	Less than HS degree	HS degree	Some college	College degree	Total
U.S.-born	9%	20%	35%	36%	100%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	11	10	29	50	100
Foreign-born noncitizens	12	11	29	49	100
Total foreign-born	11	10	29	50	100
Total Filipinos	11	11	30	48	100
Non-Filipinos					
U.S.-born	14%	22%	34%	30%	100%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	37	18	22	23	100
Foreign-born noncitizens	60	15	12	12	100
Total foreign-born	50	17	17	17	100
Total non-Filipinos	31	19	26	24	100
L.A. County total	30	19	26	25	100

Source: U.S. Census 2000.

Note: Only persons over 25 years of age are included in these data.

Table 2.3. Poverty rates of Filipinos and non-Filipinos, by nativity and citizenship status, L.A. County, 2000

Filipinos	Poverty rate
U.S.-born	8%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	6
Foreign-born noncitizens	12
Total foreign-born	8
Total Filipinos	8
Non-Filipinos	
U.S.-born	16%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	13
Foreign-born noncitizens	27
Total foreign-born	22
Total non-Filipinos	18
L.A. County total	17%

Source: U.S. Census 2000.

Making a Filipino Worker Center

Unlike many voluntary immigrant associations that have social or service-provision goals, PWC's founders are deeply committed to creating social change. Yet their transformative vision has often been met with skepticism by the workers they are trying to organize. In response, PWC has adapted its organizing strategies to address the conservative political outlook held by many of its members.

PWC's Vision: Organizers' Revolutionary Ideals

PWC was launched in 1995 by American-born Filipinos who envisioned it as an organization that would incorporate low-wage immigrant Filipinos into the anti-imperialist movement in the Philippines. Several among the original founders, including Aquilina Soriano-Versoza and Jay Mendoza, met as student activists while attending the University of California, Los Angeles.² They aimed to combine two previously distinct types of Filipino organizations in the United States. The first type was made up of political organizations oriented toward the anti-imperialist movement in the Philippines, but which tended to attract only a small number of native-born Filipinos ("Fil-Am's") and even fewer from the large numbers of low-wage immigrants. The second type was made up of Filipino service organizations that provided assistance to the low-wage immigrant population, but operated without a strategy to change the conditions these workers faced in the United States, and did not grapple with the economic and political conditions in the Philippines that initiated their migration.³

PWC's hybrid approach was premised on a strong belief among its founders and organizers that immigrant workers must be mobilized in order to create political change in the United States and abroad, and that this cannot be done without addressing their pressing everyday problems. In pursuing this dual goal of organizing for economic rights and broader political power, PWC organizers understood themselves to be emulating the labor organizing model within the Philippines, as Jay Mendoza explains:

The Philippines unions mobilize not only for strikes on the picket lines or inside the workplace, but an equal amount of effort is placed on being involved in the national politics... Whereas in the U.S., the unions are more heavily oriented towards primarily the workplace and secondarily politics outside of the workplace... in the Philippines it's the opposite.⁴

According to PWC organizer Lolita Lledo, the worker center seeks to create "short-term victories" for members in order to draw them into broader

political struggles.⁵ This perspective is captured in PWC's official mission statement:

We provide services and resources that help meet the immediate needs of Filipino workers and their families while organizing for long-term change. We also believe that the conditions of Filipino workers and the community here in Los Angeles are inseparably linked to the conditions in our homeland, the Philippines. Justice here includes justice there.⁶

This orientation to politics in the Philippines has been a key factor driving the leadership to target the Filipino population and has shaped the campaigns they have organized.

PWC began by taking note of the absence of Filipinos in multiethnic immigrant organizations in Los Angeles. They attributed this to the distinct experience of low-wage Filipino immigrants, many of whom came from higher class backgrounds than other immigrants in the region. Further, PWC organizers believed that undocumented Filipino immigrants were especially cautious about jeopardizing their presence in the United States, as deportation can pose a distinct reentry problem for those whose mode of entry is through airports rather than across land borders.⁷ PWC wanted to create an organization that Filipinos would consider their own, following the early models of Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA; see Kwon, this volume), an organization that housed PWC in its early days, and the Thai Community Development Center. By serving this unmet need, PWC sought to re-create the *bayanihan*—explained to me as the communal spirit of working together to address shared problems—that Filipinos had lost in their migration to the United States.

PWC's Strategy: Members' Conservative Outlook

In targeting the foreign-born Filipino population, PWC's founders had to overcome the cultural divide between themselves—U.S.-born, middle-class Filipinos—and the population they sought to organize—foreign-born, low-wage Filipinos. They also had to bridge the divergent political ideologies of organizers and members. Because politics often does not rank high among immigrants' motivations to formally organize (Moya 2005, 850–51, 857), PWC organizers faced the twin task of increasing civic participation and revising conservative ideologies. By overcoming three organizing challenges—locating low-wage workers, relating to them, and slowly introducing them to an alternative political vision—PWC was able to build its Filipino membership base.

Beginning in 1997, PWC embarked on what its staff often describe as a "trial-and-error" effort to locate and organize low-wage Filipino immigrant

workers. Aquilina Soriano-Versoza recalls reading accounts of exploited Filipino workers—unpaid garment workers, abused maids, victims of human trafficking—but at the time she did not know about the scale of these issues or how to address them.⁸ The familiar strategies of protesting against the Philippine government at the Consulate or participating in protests against the World Trade Organization did not lead to encounters with low-wage immigrants. In its efforts to make contact with low-wage Filipinos, PWC began by offering individual legal services. This led to a few cases: a domestic worker who was being abused in her client's home, or a home care worker who was wrongly charged with elder abuse. But the legal clinic, an effective recruitment strategy for many other worker centers (see, e.g., Gordon 2005), did not bring in many members for PWC because at this nascent stage, the organization did not have a strategy to spread the word about its services, leaving the clinic infrequently attended. Also, there was no clear pattern in the small number of cases. As Mendoza recalls, "We were looking for a bigger campaign where we could organize a group of workers, but most of the people we were working with were just individual cases."⁹

Eventually, PWC struck on its most successful membership-building strategy: in 2000, it launched a food distribution program to attract the residents of apartment buildings that had a high concentration of Filipinos. Borrowing an approach often used by church groups, they collected unwanted produce from a wholesaler and distributed it to residents for free, in order to make contact and gain trust. Then, in 2001, PWC conducted a needs-assessment survey among these residents and learned that the issues that mattered to them most were health care, immigration, and work.

In the meantime, organizers undertook several measures to prepare themselves to relate to the population they were seeking to organize. For U.S.-born staff, gaining linguistic and cultural fluency was crucial. In addition to the obvious need to be able to communicate with recent immigrants, cultural competence was necessary to overcome the belief among some recent Filipinos immigrants that their U.S.-born coethnics looked down on them. As one of the youth members of the organization told me:

There's a separation between Fil-Am's and immigrants, it's like they call the immigrants FOB's ["fresh off the boat"] and stuff like that. Other immigrants that have been here longer are joining the Fil-Am's and then criticizing the ones that still have the accent or still dress like an immigrant.

To gain fluency in Tagalog and learn about their heritage, three U.S.-born members of the leadership and staff—Jay Mendoza, Aquilina Soriano-Versoza, and Strela Cervas—toured the Philippines on exposure programs that connect Filipino-Americans to social justice campaigns in the Philippines. Meanwhile, Philippines-born organizers, Dong Lledo and Lolita

Lledo, who both had extensive organizing experience in the Philippines, also prepared themselves to better relate to recent immigrants. In their case, this meant shelving Marx and Hegel to watch Filipino telenovelas on TFC, The Filipino Channel, a popular conversation topic among recent Filipino immigrants. Yet while organizers sought to bridge the distance between themselves and members, it was precisely because of their different life experiences that they could be helpful to the recent immigrants. The U.S.-born leadership had familiarity and ease of access with legal institutions and service providers in the community, while the foreign-born organizers could help members think strategically, drawing on organizing skills cultivated in the Philippines.

Finally, to build and retain its membership, PWC had to be responsive to the distinct needs and constraints of the Filipino immigrant population. Most significant, according to organizers, was members' frequent experience of downward class mobility, or what Parreñas (2001, 150) describes as "contradictory class mobility." Because many of these immigrants entered the United States with visas that have asset requirements, they came from middle-class backgrounds in the Philippines. Thus, while most members of the Association of Filipino Workers (AFW: PWC's membership arm) struggle to meet their basic financial needs, nearly three-fourths of them have at least a college degree (see table 2.4). PWC organizers believe that this makes workers more individualistic, ashamed, and cautious about affiliating with the type of militant labor activism they watched from a distance in the Philippines. Indeed, most PWC members I spoke with described disinterest in and distance from grassroots political activism in the Philippines. Even some currently active PWC members, such as "Mike,"¹⁰ still hold a radically different perspective from PWC organizers:

A friend asked me "Why don't you join [a protest against U.S. influence in the Philippines]?" I said, "I don't understand what you want me to do." He said, "The Americans want to get everything," but I said "All the businesses here are Chinese.... From my understanding, the Americans are helping protect us against the rebels."

In expressing this belief in the goodwill of U.S. influence, Mike's remarks reveal the stark contrast between the political outlooks of PWC members and organizers.

PWC's recruitment practices reflect the organization's careful adaptation to members' lingering middle-class dispositions. The politics of naming is one window into this struggle. Workers are invited to join the Association of Filipino Workers (AFW), PWC's membership arm, which currently helps

Table 2.4. Educational attainment of members of Association of Filipino Workers (AFW)

	Less than HS degree	HS degree	Vocational degree	Some college	College degree	Post- college	Total
AFW members, total	4%	8%	6%	4%	72%	6%	100%
AFW homecare workers	1%	5%	8%	7%	74%	4%	100%

Source: Pilipino Workers' Center n.d.b.

members access discounted health care and offers education and casework services. Launched in 2001 with a hundred members, AFW's membership has swelled to more than five hundred. Each part of this part of the organization's name, Association of Filipino Workers, is a compromise between the worker center's revolutionary vision, and the members' far more conservative sensibility: *association* rather than *union*, *Filipino* rather than *Pilipino*, but *workers* rather than *employees*.

To instill a sense of collectivity among workers who consider themselves not *workers*, but *employees*, AFW comes close to hitting a nerve by calling its members "workers" and highlighting their current, rather than foregone status. This approach is not taken too far, however: the organization is called an *association* rather than a *union* because PWC believes the latter term would set off too many alarm bells because of potential negative associations with radical unionism in the Philippines. Similarly, PWC staff decided to take down potentially radical-seeming posters that might scare off members but would not budge on the mural it placed at the entry of its property depicting workers with raised fists. Finally, in arriving at the name Association of Filipino Workers, *Filipino* was selected in favor of *Pilipino* because although *Pilipino* is the more progressive term used by some Filipinos in the United States (a linguistic purging of colonial influence: Tagalog-speakers could not accommodate the *f* sound in King Felipe II's name), *Filipino* remains prevalent in the Philippines and therefore among new immigrants. The inconsistency in using *Pilipino* in the center's name and *Filipino* in the association's name is intentional, as Soriano-Versoza explains, because it at least raises the topic for discussion with members.¹¹

Yet while PWC organizers cite workers' middle-class backgrounds and their disaffection from witnessing violent crackdowns on activism in the Philippines as a great challenge, the members I spoke with shared fond memories of their experiences at protests and with unions in the United States. Mike, the active member who shunned protests in the Philippines, told me of his positive experience at the 2007 May Day march for immigrant

rights (see Osuji, this volume), notwithstanding the "melee" started by the police at the end: "It's risky there [in the Philippines]. They use rubber bullets here. But *there*, they use real bullets." Members who had exposure to U.S. unions similarly spoke of positive experiences. "Gloria," for example, plans to approach the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) home care workers' local to ask how she can continue to be a member, having had a taste of membership while working as a home care worker for a client that qualified her to join the union. She told me that she was attracted to the ease with which she was able to sign up for the union's services. But of course she, or at least her less active peers, might have a different reaction to a confrontational organizing campaign. These and other members I spoke with most often cited lack of time, rather than lack of interest, as the cause for their limited involvement in the center's campaigns: holding down two or three jobs and being dispersed throughout the city, they found it very difficult to attend meetings at the worker center.¹²

These members' accounts reflect the growing consensus among labor researchers and organizers that contrary to earlier expectations, certain aspects of immigrants' experiences make them at least as—if not more—responsive to labor organizing as the native-born. Restricted to low-wage jobs because of limited skills and/or legal status, immigrant workers, and particularly the undocumented, were once considered "unorganizable" because they were seen as content with the greener pastures in the United States and fearful of deportation (Delgado 1993). Yet recent successful immigration campaigns have shown that other factors make immigrants more likely than the native-born to accept the risks inherent in a unionization drive: their foreign reference point makes the risks of U.S. unionization seem trivial, their negative reception by the U.S. born motivates them to defend their rights, and their tight ethnic networks help sustain the campaigns (Fink 2003; Milkman 2006). By customizing its organizing message for its members, PWC could address their hesitations while strengthening their motivations for becoming active in campaigns.

Making a *Filipino* Worker Center

While working to recruit Filipinos to join the worker center, PWC also faced the challenge of organizing campaigns suitable for its Filipino membership. In this section, I consider the potential and constraints of PWC's ethnic organizing strategy. PWC's commitment to a specific ethnic population has encouraged it to look at members as more than workers and to look beyond the workplace for its organizing efforts. I therefore consider how PWC's ethnic focus impacted two workplace and two non-workplace campaigns.

Workplace Organizing: The Parking Attendants' Unionization Campaign

PWC's first workplace campaign began fortuitously in 1997 when a PWC volunteer recounted the problems his father was having at his work as a parking attendant at the University of Southern California (USC)—a job site with many Filipino employees. Building on his community organizing skills from his previous union work at the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees' Local 11, Jay Mendoza arranged meetings with workers at this classic "hot shop"—a workplace with aggrieved and agitated employees who were eager to take risks to unionize and demand changes from their employer. A number of the USC parking attendants were inspired by a co-worker who had previously been an organizer in the Philippines, and with his help, the organizing meetings gained momentum. But USC management was soon alerted to the meetings, and PWC found itself enmeshed in a full-blown campaign to organize an independent union among the fifty workers.

PWC had no choice but to file for a union election through the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the U.S. government agency charged with oversight of official union elections. For large organizing campaigns, successful unions have increasingly avoided this route of seeking union recognition because the NLRB's rules and decisions often give an edge to employers (Sherman and Voss 2000b, 84–88). Instead, unions with enough leverage seek "neutrality agreements" with employers to allow them to bypass NLRB certification and demonstrate majority demand for union recognition through a "card count." PWC—lacking the resources to bargain for a neutrality agreement and a card count—instead went head-to-head with USC through the NLRB.

Not surprisingly, USC contested PWC's definition of the bargaining unit, arguing that the election should include a large number of workers with whom the worker center had not been in contact. PWC would have to defend its definition of the bargaining unit at the NLRB. Acutely aware of what they were up against, Mendoza turned to established unions for help, even offering to turn over the campaign to them. But the unions offered only advice and no resources, since for them the unit was too small and not strategically significant. Mendoza defended the case himself at the NLRB, a trying experience not only for him, but also for workers who were put on the stand and asked to identify leaders. After the NLRB hearing, PWC learned that the NLRB had ruled in its favor: the election could proceed with the bargaining unit PWC had defined and with which it had already made extensive inroads.

PWC then confronted the challenge of organizing an ethnically diverse workplace. Just under half of the fifty USC parking attendants were Filipino. By contrast, most of the workers at PWC's meetings were Filipino, although many of the committed worker organizers were African American and Latino. Mendoza recalls the campaign had achieved "multi-racial unity," but once management went into full "divide and conquer" mode, this unity began to unravel.¹³ Management used PWC's identity as a Filipino worker center against it, discouraging Latino, African American, and white workers—who together comprised a slight majority of the workforce—from supporting the unionization drive. They cautioned non-Filipino workers that they might be left out of the benefits that would accrue to Filipino workers and would be disadvantaged with shift allocations. In response, PWC tried to start a multiracial consortium with other worker centers, including KIWA and the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA; see Patler, this volume). But PWC was ultimately on its own with the organizing drive and was its only public face.

When the NLRB election was held in 1998, PWC lost by three votes. The organization's first effort at a "hot shop" unionization drive was thwarted in part because PWC's ethnic affiliation proved divisive among a racially and ethnically diverse group of workers. Although this conclusion should be qualified by the observation that many NLRB-oriented unionization campaigns are unsuccessful, researchers have shown that a union's characteristics, strategies, and tactics are consequential in determining the outcomes of these elections (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Sherman and Voss 2000b).

Workplace Organizing: The Home Care Workers Legislative Campaign

After the setback at USC, PWC spent several years building its membership in Filipino communities. The organization attracted members using the food distribution program mentioned earlier, but soon found itself involved in another workplace campaign, this time targeting the home care industry.¹⁴ This section explains how the worker center's residential organizing strategy led to and supported a workplace campaign, and how its nearly exclusive focus on Filipino immigrants influenced the outcome of this campaign.

Because some occupations become ethnic niches, a worker center organizing along ethnic lines can easily become enmeshed in a particular industry. In 2001, when PWC conducted a survey of the members recruited through its food-distribution program, it found that a significant portion were home care workers.¹⁵ This pattern reflects the broader trend among

Filipino immigrants, who are disproportionately concentrated in the health care industry and in home care work (see table 2.5). While foreign-born Filipinos make up 2 percent of the population in L.A. County, they make up 10 percent of the county's home care workforce (see table 2.6).

Table 2.5. Filipinos and non-Filipinos employed in health care and home care occupations, L.A. County, 2000

Filipinos	Percent employed in health care & social assistance industry	Percent employed in home care
U.S.-born	13%	1%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	28	3
Foreign-born noncitizens	28	9
Total foreign-born	28	5
Total Filipinos	26	5
Non-Filipinos		
U.S.-born	10%	1%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	11	2
Foreign-born noncitizens	6	2
Total foreign-born	8	2
Total non-Filipinos	9	2
L.A. County total	10%	1%

Source: U.S. Census 2000.

Note: "Home care workers" as shown in the rightmost column here include two occupations: "nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides" and "personal and home care aides." These are codes 360 and 461 in the 2000 U.S. Census, respectively, and are equivalent to codes 31-1010 and 39-9020/1 of the U.S. Standard Occupational Classification. For details, see <http://www.bls.gov/OCC/>

Table 2.6. Filipinos as percentage of home care workers and of total population of L.A. County, 2000

Filipinos	Home care workers	Total population
U.S.-born	1%	1%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	4	1
Foreign-born noncitizens	6	1
Total foreign-born	10	2
Total Filipinos	11	3
Non-Filipinos		
U.S.-born	40%	62%
Foreign-born naturalized citizens	21	13
Foreign-born noncitizens	28	21
Total foreign-born	49	35
Total non-Filipinos	89	97
L.A. County Total	100%	100%

Source: U.S. Census 2000

Ethnically organized worker centers are often drawn to not just any occupational niche, but to those that have posed a challenge for organized labor. Traditional unionization models developed from organizing in manufacturing are not well suited for the distinct challenges of organizing the service sector, especially where workers are mobile and work is subcontracted (Gordon 2005, 52–58). Some labor unions, like SEIU, have begun to develop innovative strategies to organize service workers (Milkman 2006). But many workers still remain on the sidelines. The Filipino home care workers that PWC attracted were not part of the seventy-four thousand workers swept up in SEIU's renowned twelve-year organizing drive of L.A. County's home care workers (see Boris and Klein 2006; Delp and Quan 2002; Mareschal 2006), which was limited to workers who were reimbursed through a state agency, California's In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS), and excluded private-sector workers. At the same time, stricter immigration law enforcement in the public-sector workforce means that most of the immigrant workers in this sector are documented, while many more in the private-funded home care workforce are undocumented.

For those workers on the unorganized margins of the home care industry, fraud and fear are common features of the employer-employee relationship. The home care industry is known for its rampant labor law violations, and one does not have to look far to hear disheartening anecdotes from home care workers. For example, "Gloria," a home care worker and active PWC member, recalls that her former home care placement agency systematically delayed paying employees for two weeks or a month. She recounted an incident involving her former employer at the agency, who offered to help legalize her immigration status. Gloria paid her five thousand dollars for the promised service. Months passed, and her boss put off a conversation about this money. Only when she visited the agency accompanied by a PWC organizer, who explained to the employer the illegality of this practice, was the money refunded. Gloria wondered aloud how many other workers lost money to services promised by her boss and were reluctant to speak up for fear of being reported to immigration authorities or losing their jobs and endangering the revenue stream on which their families in the Philippines depend.¹⁶

In 2003 PWC launched the COURAGE Campaign: Caregivers Organizing for Unity, Respect, and Genuine Empowerment. The campaign aimed to improve working conditions in the home care industry by educating workers about their rights, advocating on their behalf to employers, and demanding legislative change to increase these rights. As the summer 2004 issue of *Balitang AFW*, PWC's newsletter, claimed: "The average wage of home health care workers is only \$65 for a 24-hour shift!" (Pilipino Workers'

Center 2004a). Correcting this problem entailed enforcing existing labor laws and passing new ones.

The educational component of this campaign brought workers *and employers* up to speed about workers' rights. With the help of the Philippine Nurses Association of America (PNAA), PWC offered a training program for home care workers. The program was free to AFW members, and in its first year, 2006, nineteen graduates received instruction on topics ranging from proper lifting techniques for avoiding injuries to their legal right to duty-free meal and rest breaks. For most participants, this was the only formal training they had ever received. PWC also created and distributed a handbook of workers' rights, sending employers a version as well. This booklet explains that home care workers are protected under California wage and hour laws, and notes that "all California workers, whether or not they are legally authorized to work in the United States, are protected by state laws regulating wages and working conditions" (Pilipino Workers' Center n.d.a.). According to a grant proposal dated October 2004, PWC distributed more than 250 employer handbooks and 300 workers' rights handbooks in the twelve preceding months (Pilipino Workers' Center 2004b). PWC's newsletter is replete with reminders for members that undocumented workers have legal rights in this country.

PWC also worked to enforce the California Labor Code by organizing legal cases against employers who members had reported for labor law violations. PWC's newsletter features numerous stories of members who won claims against their employers for unpaid wages and lack of rest or meal breaks. A recent AFW pamphlet states that home care workers have won more than seventy-five thousand dollars in total back wages, a figure in line with the cumulative increases recorded in other organizational documents over the years.

Yet labor law enforcement has limited results when the law is flawed. California law exempts personal attendants (those who spend more than 80 percent of their time with a single client) from overtime pay. Because many home care workers fall under this exemption, PWC initiated a legislative campaign at the local level, based on the model of the Domestic Workers United (DWU) in New York City. Introduced to DWU through its participation in meetings of worker centers organized by Janice Fine through the Center for Community Change, PWC attempted to replicate DWU's successful passage of a citywide Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in 2003 (see Fine 2006, 174–76).

After learning that in California, the state (rather than the city or county) had jurisdiction over this matter, PWC joined a statewide coalition that launched a campaign to pass the Household Worker Equity Bill, Assembly

Bill 2536 (A.B. 2536).¹⁷ The bill was sponsored by Assemblywoman Cindy Montañez and sought to undo the exemption of personal attendants from overtime pay requirements and fine employers who withheld wages. PWC used this opportunity to build the leadership skills of several of its members who made numerous trips to Sacramento to lobby for A.B. 2536. In 2006, the bill was passed in both the state assembly and senate. But a last-minute coalition—between the private agencies that would have been affected by this change, and senior and disability rights lobbies protesting the possible increase in cost of care—successfully convinced the governor to veto the bill. Governor Schwarzenegger justified the veto in a letter to the assembly stating that "I cannot support subjecting seniors and the disabled to additional liability" (Schwarzenegger 2006).

Although the legislative component of the home care campaign was stymied, PWC's dedication to serving Filipino immigrants did not prove to be detrimental this time as it had with the parking attendants' unionization drive. In the home care campaign, PWC—although itself an almost exclusively Filipino organization—was a member of a multiethnic coalition that could claim representation of an ethnically diverse industry. The legislative campaign also benefited because it took place in a less hostile arena than the unionization drive: Fine (2005, 156) has argued that low-wage worker organizing increasingly takes the form of public policy campaigns rather than direct labor market interventions because "low-wage workers in American society today have greater political than economic power."

By focusing its own organizing efforts on low-wage immigrant workers of the same ethnicity, PWC was able to address this group's unique needs, customizing its message to suit their distinct class backgrounds and educating its members about their rights, regardless of immigration status. In two later campaigns, focused on remittances and housing, PWC organizers learned what could be achieved for their members through the worker center's ethnic niche and its willingness to engage issues beyond the workplace.

Non-Workplace Organizing: For-Profit Allies and Remittances

Remittances are a major part of recent Filipino immigrants' lives, and over time PWC has significantly shifted the way it has grappled with this issue. The AFW members I spoke with had all immigrated recently and continued to support children or other family members in the Philippines through remittances. On this issue, the worker center has transitioned from having a cooperative relationship with Western Union to promoting a boycott of its services and working with a more equitable competitor to provide lower-cost services. While the latter strategy is better aligned with

the organization's mission, all of these symbiotic for-profit/nonprofit partnerships are possible because of PWC's focus on organizing the Filipino immigrant population.

The remittances that Filipino immigrants send home are a major pillar of the Filipino economy, yet there is also a substantial emotional cost to those who leave family members behind. Remittances from all foreign Filipino workers amounted to \$15 billion in 2006 and are such a sizable portion of the Philippines' economy that they have earned remitters the title "modern heroes" from President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (DeParle 2007). "Luz," an active AFW member, is one of these heroes, and her story reveals the lived experience that makes these remittances possible. As a widow and single mother, Luz secured a tourist visa and left her six children behind so that she could support them with steady and relatively high wages from the United States. But she experienced anxiety and depression during the two years that it took her to petition for two of her youngest children to join her, which she described as "like dying a slow death." Luz is now married to an American citizen, and she recalls the sense of helplessness he felt in watching her cry for hours because she missed her children. However, she has stayed in close contact with them and believes that they recognize her hard work and will take care of her when she is older. Luz's story is a glimpse into the human experience that accumulates along with the large sums of money collected from remittance fees (see also Parreñas 2001, chap. 5).

The large corporate profits in the remittance industry reflect both the sheer scope of this activity and the high fees that companies charge for it. Western Union—the main player in this industry—has developed marketing relationships with immigration organizations like PWC to promote its services. But in 2006 PWC joined with several other organizations in a coalition called TIGRA (Transnational Institute for Grassroots Research and Action) to challenge the company's rates and investment practices. A recent PWC pamphlet states that Western Union has more than ten times as many branches in the world as McDonald's. PWC and other organizations in TIGRA have demanded that Western Union lower its fees and enter a transnational community benefits agreement (CBA) investing one dollar on each transaction back into the communities it serves. As Soriano-Versoza explains, a CBA would at least ensure that Western Union would not make investments that are detrimental to its customers.

Turning away from the small support it received from Western Union, PWC recently began a mutually beneficial relationship with a new—and fairer—player in the remittance industry, Recharge Plus. PWC was introduced to this idea through a project Janice Fine organized with the Center for Community Change (CCC). Following her critique of worker centers for

their overreliance on foundation funding and for their disinterest in income-generating practices such as collecting member dues or through provision of financial services, Fine (2006, 97, 254–55) set out to help worker centers identify new sources of funding.¹⁸ PWC signed on with ten other worker centers and—to address the more pressing need of PWC members—chose a corporate partner that supplied remittance rather than banking services. CCC worked with another organization to search for providers and matched PWC with Recharge Plus, a company that was seeking to expand its remittance service in the Philippines.

PWC's alliance with Recharge Plus offers members significant savings and also creates a major funding source for the worker center, while furthering the organization's mission. To remit the same amount of money that would cost \$10–\$15 with Western Union, or \$9 with the Philippines National Bank, Recharge Plus charges \$1.50. The company also invests a portion of its earnings into communities in the Philippines. By brokering these concrete benefits, PWC leaders hope to gain the trust of more low-wage Filipino workers and encourage them to participate in other campaigns. PWC also stands to gain from Recharge Plus' success. In June 2007, the company offered PWC a \$100,000 budget to recruit thousands of members at the Festival of Pilipino Arts and Culture (FPAC), an annual festival held in the San Pedro neighborhood of Los Angeles. While PWC set more modest recruitment goals and requested a smaller initial budget from Recharge Plus, PWC has begun actively recruiting people for the remittance service at this and other events, often adding to AFW membership as well. Information about Recharge Plus is always accompanied by information about PWC, and the Recharge Plus card members receive includes PWC's logo. Here PWC's Filipino membership and interest in matters beyond the workplace helped it create an alliance with a for-profit company that the center hopes will increase its visibility in the Filipino community, give members concrete benefits, encourage greater member participation, and help it access a large source of funding.

Non-Workplace Organizing: Nonprofit Allies and Affordable Housing

PWC's offices are located in Los Angeles' Historic Filipinotown, a neighborhood that is home to approximately 7 percent of L.A.'s Filipino population according to the 2000 Census. The neighborhood is in the midst of gentrifying: the occasional rooster still announces the arrival of dawn, but many of the local garment factories are shutting down and will likely soon be converted to apartments for young, middle-class, white residents. In 2005, at one of the regular meetings of an antigentrification task force, PWC's executive director Soriano-Versoza met the representatives of the

Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC), a nonprofit interested in working with PWC to secure affordable housing for Filipinos. Foundations are PWC's main source of support, and its Filipino membership has attracted a wide range of funders whose goals ranged from Catholic outreach, immigrant rights, and low-wage organizing to the elimination of tobacco use among Asian/Pacific Islanders. The unique mix of private and public funding LTSC raised for this project illustrate how PWC's ethnic composition can both attract and alarm funders.

LTSC is a community-based organization that for the past three decades has been creating service programs and coordinating community development projects to serve Asian and Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles who struggle with "language or cultural gaps, financial need, or physical disabilities."¹⁹ PWC's Filipino members, as part of the larger category of Asian/Pacific Islanders, attracted the attention of LTSC in 2005. The organization proposed to help PWC secure enough capital to build a forty-eight-unit affordable housing complex. LTSC helped PWC design the financial package, which includes affordable housing funds (from the L.A. Housing Department), tax credits that can be sold to companies, and private loans.²⁰ The rent money will be used to pay off low-interest loans on the land. The building will be located on PWC's current property and will include space for PWC offices located on the ground floor. PWC, LTSC, and another partner that is a nonprofit developer will share the developer's fees, and ownership of the property will ultimately rest with PWC.

In May 2007, I sat with Soriano-Versoza and the public artists who would help make the building "strikingly Filipino." They discussed the list of potential names, several of them in Tagalog. We looked at the architect's renditions, and Soriano-Versoza explained how they had studied and incorporated aspects of Filipino designs into the building's color and design. Given all of this planning, I was surprised to learn that PWC would not have a say in who would be awarded units in the building. This determination would instead be made by an independent management company that would follow federal guidelines. These guidelines prohibit any ethnic or racial criteria to allocate housing, as this would constitute a denial of service based on race or ethnicity. Why would LTSC and PWC work to secure federal funding to build affordable housing that they would be barred from offering to the ethnic groups they serve?

In this case, a law designed to prevent discrimination against minorities inhibits an organization from serving a particular minority population. Yet while PWC cannot allocate units exclusively to its members, the organization is nevertheless able to increase their chances of securing this housing within the bounds of the law. Applying an idea borrowed from another

group in its network, PWC will guide members on how to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles of the application process, thus significantly increasing these applicants' chances of admission.

PWC's ability to increase its members' access to this public good illustrates what Tilly (1998, 148) has called "opportunity hoarding." This is a common practice within immigrant networks, especially in the labor market: people share information about jobs with family and friends and therefore channel the flow of their acquaintances to create ethnic niches (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). In this case, PWC is serving its members by providing them with information about how to navigate the bureaucracy of public funding. But the organization has also altered the eligibility criteria for this funding, thereby increasing access to this resource for its members and other undocumented workers. The management company initially wanted to request Social Security numbers from applicants in order to check their credit ratings and search for criminal records. Recognizing that this would disadvantage undocumented immigrants—who often lack valid Social Security numbers—PWC and LTSC successfully convinced the company to request an alternative proof of identity, thus enabling the same background check while not excluding undocumented applicants. Thus in addition to helping steer members through bureaucratic hoops, PWC and LTSC also successfully helped lower the hoops for all.

PWC expects that the receipt of these immediate benefits—affordable housing and discounted remittance services—will encourage members to become more engaged in long-term projects. It is too soon to tell whether this approach will have its desired effect, or whether the organization's campaigns will remain largely staff driven. Meanwhile, PWC's strategy of building its membership through the provision of services, rather than strictly adhering to anti-imperialist advocacy, has received its share of criticism. The organization has weathered strong disapproval and charges of being too reformist from more radical organizations that were once close allies. But the organization remains confident that by creating tangible benefits, it can recultivate the sense of *bayanihan*, demonstrating to these and other members the value of working together to solve shared problems.

Conclusion

PWC's exclusive focus on organizing Filipinos has influenced its ability to help its members address both workplace and non-workplace issues. A closer look at PWC's experience offers important insights for other groups considering organizing along ethnic lines. For activists building a worker center, advancing the efforts of an already organized immigrant social

group, or leading a labor union with a significant immigrant membership, the PWC case demonstrates some of the strategic pitfalls—as well as the potential opportunities—of organizing immigrant workers along ethnic lines.

The ethnic focus has had mixed results in PWC's workplace campaigns. Its Filipino-only identity hindered an early effort to unionize a multiethnic—though heavily Filipino—group of parking attendants. PWC's first workplace campaign thus revealed that monoethnic organizations can be handicapped in multiethnic unionization drives. The defeat of this effort to create an independent union led the organization to cast a wider net to attract Filipino membership spanning several occupations and industries. Discovering that a large number of its members were home care workers, PWC was able to engage in occupation-specific organizing customized to the cultural needs and expectations of the Filipino immigrant population. Although the home care worker coalition was unsuccessful in passing legislation that would have secured additional rights for this occupational group, PWC did educate many workers about their rights and made some headway in reminding employers of the existing labor laws, while demonstrating that flagrant violators would be pursued. Thus PWC's second workplace campaign showed that organizing one ethnic group in a diverse industry can facilitate admission into a multiethnic coalition, which can then press for changes in the broader industry.

Some of PWC's most creative and successful organizing and service-delivery projects have involved issues beyond the workplace and have been enabled by the ethnic characteristics of its membership. PWC was able to create two symbiotic relationships with for-profit and nonprofit organizations seeking access to its members. PWC's relationship with Recharge Plus gave the company direct contact with remitting Filipinos, reimbursing the worker center and allowing it to offer a more competitive rate to members while steering them away from the detrimental business practices of Western Union. Similarly, the ethnic identity of PWC's membership helped the organization work jointly with the Little Tokyo Service Center, an organization channeling private and public funds to help match Asian/Pacific Islanders with affordable housing. In this case, PWC's ethnic composition helped establish the organizational connection that launched the project. This effort faced real obstacles, but ultimately they proved surmountable. The tangible benefits created by these alliances reflect and contribute to PWC's success in building a membership of low-wage Filipino immigrants, a population that previously had little representation among Filipino organizations in Los Angeles and had been largely overlooked in the broader immigrant organizing in the region.

2. Organizing Workers along Ethnic Lines

1. Over the course of a year beginning in March 2007, I made frequent visits to PWC to interview the five-person staff, to participate in the organization's internal meetings and public events, to shadow the executive director, and to receive feedback on drafts of this chapter. I also conducted one-hour in-depth interviews with five adult and four youth members of PWC, and had informal conversations with several other adult members. Finally, I reviewed the organization's newsletters, grant applications, press releases, newspaper clippings, and membership database.

My inability to speak Tagalog and non-Filipina background posed some limitations but also offered some advantages in conducting this research. While all members spoke and read English, many were more comfortable speaking in Tagalog. Therefore while issues of *Balitang AFW*, PWC's newsletter, are almost exclusively in English, member meetings were conducted primarily in Tagalog. PWC staff translated these proceedings for me. My non-Filipina identity may have influenced the information that informants revealed to an "outsider," but combined with my lack of affiliation with any Filipino organizations, this may also have been an asset insofar as it encouraged respondents' frankness and sense of confidentiality.

2. American-born founders Jay Mendoza, Aquilina Soriano-Versoza, John Delloro, and others began working to launch PWC in 1995, and Philippines-born organizers Lolita Lledo and Dong Lledo joined in 1997 and 1998 respectively. In 2000, Soriano-Versoza replaced Mendoza as executive director on his move to another city, and American-born Strela Cervas joined as an organizer.

3. In addition to these two groups of organizations, the field of Filipino immigrant organizations also includes social and religious organizations such as hometown and regional associations that connect immigrants based on homeland geographic ties, alumni associations which bring people together based on their scholastic ties, and Filipino ministries that serve the largely Catholic population.

4. Jay Mendoza, interview by author, January 24, 2008.

5. Lolita Lledo, interview by author, October 25, 2007.

6. <http://www.pwsc.org/about.htm>.

7. While migrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border can (though at significant risk and cost) evade spotty border enforcement, those who fly from abroad cannot get past immigration authorities without a valid visa (which they can then choose to overstay and thus reside in the United States without proper documentation).

8. Aquilina Soriano-Versoza, interview by author, August 13, 2007.

9. Mendoza, interview.

10. Names of all members have been changed to protect their privacy.

11. Aquilina Soriano-Versoza, interview by author, June 21, 2007.

12. PWC leaders point to the more active youth membership as evidence that a main problem for adult members is their lack of free time. In 2006, PWC started a youth membership organization, called Youth Unite! with 50 active members who are predominantly recent immigrants. The relatively low numbers of adult participants at the worker center stands in marked contrast to attendance by youth members, who now meet twice a week to have discussions, plan fundraising events, and participate in other activities. Most youth members are in their early 20s and although they work, by living at home they have less financial responsibility relative to their older counterparts. PWC very actively encourages their participation in the worker center, offering access to a band room, computers, couches, and games inside the main office which help make the worker center a bustling teenage hangout.

13. Mendoza, interview.

14. Home care workers provide health-related services, housekeeping, and personal care to the elderly or disabled in their homes or in residential care facilities (i.e., those that do not provide licensed medical care). For a profile of this workforce, see Montgomery et al. (2005) and Yamada (2002). PWC staff use the terms *caregiver* and *home care worker* interchangeably,

but because caregiver is an umbrella term that includes many other occupations, I use the term home care worker.

15. The organization's current records indicate that 30% of AFW members are home care workers. Strela Cervas, an organizer, suggests that this may underestimate the actual number of those currently working as home care workers, as some respondents may have reported their previous profession in the Philippines.

16. Gloria explains that she trusted PWC's guidance to stand up to her boss because of her longtime friendship with one of the organizers, dating to when they both lived in the Philippines.

17. The other coalition partners are the Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), the San Francisco-based Mujeres Unidas y Activas (MUA), and La Raza Centro Legal.

18. PWC's funding comes primarily from private foundations, government grants, and individual donors. Similar to other worker centers (Fine 2006, 219-23), the \$24 in annual dues are requested, but not actively collected, from members.

19. <http://www.ltsc.org/aboutus/aboutus.html>.

20. Working in partnership with nonprofit developers, some unions have also made affordable housing a part of their strategies, one of the most notable being the Boston-based Local 3 of the Bricklayers Union during the 1980s (Wilson 1985).