

ACTIVIST NOTEBOOKS: TAKING ON GLOBAL CAPITAL AND WINNING—An Organizer's Reflections on New Labor Strategies

Joann Lo

I have been an activist for almost ten years now. Given the state of injustice in the world, I think I've become more cynical about some things, but at the same time I still have hope that we can transform the world for the better. During the past nine years, I have worked as an organizer both for a union and for a labor center. Presently I am working for Enlace, a strategic alliance of low-wage worker unions and worker centers in the United States and Mexico. Enlace is what gives me hope that, step-by-step, workers, women, people of color, and immigrants are building power in their workplaces, in their communities, and across geographic boundaries.

In many places, however, we are losing the fight. Multinational corporations are consolidating and increasing their power, and governments administer this corporate agenda through neoliberal policies. Millions of workers in the United States and in other countries are not paid the minimum wage, let alone a living wage, and often cannot depend on a steady job. Unions continue to lose membership, and in Mexico, company unions, known as charro unions, are the norm. In the United States, while low-wage workers number over 27.5 million, fewer than two million belong to unions. The majority of low-wage workers are women, immigrants, and people of color.

Over the nine years I have worked as an organizer, I have felt disheartened and frustrated many times. When I worked at the Garment Worker Center in Los Angeles, laborers told me the terrible situations they had experienced. One weekend, two workers, Lupe and Esperanza, were forced to work from Friday morning until Sunday morning, only getting a break of a couple of hours to go home and take a shower. Maria was fired for being pregnant. Lucy and Ismael worked in a factory where rats and cockroaches ran around the floor. What's more, I know these conditions are not unique to Los Angeles. It made me think, what has happened to the human race? Is it even possible to challenge the capitalist system that perpetuates and thrives on these conditions? Can we confront multinational corporations and win? How can we learn from low-wage women workers, in the United States and elsewhere, who are fighting back?

As if challenging global capitalism were not a daunting enough task, there are also internal challenges facing worker organizations on a wide range of issues, such as finding and funding a balance between meeting the workers' immediate needs and striving for broader, long-term goals. How can we develop leaders who are politically conscious and capable of making strategic decisions for the organization? What's the next step if we are stuck in a campaign? How can we evaluate the campaign in a way that helps us to improve and come out stronger? How can I lead others in a way that is democratic and based on consensus and avoid a top-down, hierarchical style? How do we build cross-border labor solidarity?

Enlace has played a key role in helping low-wage worker organizations answer these questions. The alliance was created in 1998 by seventeen low-wage worker organizations in Mexico and the United States that believed that they could learn from each other's experiences. In building Enlace, they believed

they could overcome the challenges they were facing. These challenges included how to regenerate their leadership, how to reenergize themselves to continue forward in their struggles, and how to develop strategies to help workers organize and win campaigns that target injustice.

At Enlace's convention in 2002, member organizations voted for Enlace to focus on campaigns of workers mobilizing for power in the face of transnational corporations. They knew that historically it has been challenging for workers to mount campaigns against multinationals. While many successful models for winning demands from governmental entities already existed, no one knew of a model to win against giant multinational corporations. These corporations often have so much power to influence governments looking to attract foreign investment that governments violate or ignore their own laws to the benefit of the corporations. Corporations also use complex subcontracting systems to shield themselves from responsibility for abuses against workers and so they can move production quickly to another location when workers start organizing in one factory. Member organizations therefore called on Enlace to collaborate with them to empower workers in a context where it feels as if the cards are stacked against them.

One of the ways that Enlace helps organizations take on multinational corporations or other powerful entities is by developing new frameworks, which are processes for people to collectively plan, strategize, and evaluate. The frameworks are continuously modified each time they are taught. Due to the member organizations' mandate to focus on campaigns targeting powerful transnational corporations, Enlace used these frameworks to assist el Sindicato Independiente de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras de la Industria Maquiladora (SINTTIM, the Independent Workers Union of the Maquiladora Industry) in Baja California Sur, and also to assist Servicio, Desarrollo y Paz

A.C. (SEDEPAC, Service, Development, and Peace) in the state of Coahuila, México, in winning campaigns against multinational corporations.

For example, SEDEPAC is a member of Enlace, and in 2000 it developed a campaign to take on the Sara Lee Corporation, one of the largest multinationals in the world. Besides owning the Sara Lee brand of products, the company also owns Hanes, Playtex, Champion, Bali, and many other subsidiaries. This major manufacturing corporation holds 30,000 trademark registrations in over 180 countries. The workers produced clothes for Sara Lee in Frontera, Coahuila, and received an average salary of \$8.00 a day after working ten- to twelve-hour shifts Monday through Friday and part of the day on Saturday. Workers were fired if their production team did not produce the maximum number of 280 shirts per day (over 6 shirts per minute), and many suffered chronic illnesses due to their exposure to chemicals in the factory. Twenty-five workers were fired from this factory in Frontera for organizing for better conditions and pay. In response to the organizing, Sara Lee laid off 700 employees from this factory, primarily selecting workers who had been injured on the job. After a four-year campaign, in 2004, Sara Lee finally agreed to respect the workers' right to organize a union and to freely choose their union without any intimidation or interference by the company. This was the first labor neutrality agreement with a transnational corporation operating in the maquiladora sector in Mexico. Sara Lee also agreed to rehire ten fired worker committee leaders at its other maquila, located in Monclova, Coahuila (five accepted this offer), and to incorporate 200 of the 1,000 workers who were laid off when Sara Lee shut down the factory in Frontera. Sara Lee ended up rehiring 249 of those workers at its plant in Monclova.

Another part of the victory for the workers was severance pay and workers' compensation for injuries. Mexican law requires a company to provide

employees that it lays off with a severance based on the minimum wage of 42 pesos per day (about \$4.00 a day). Sara Lee agreed, however, to give 100 percent of the amount the workers were earning based on the number of shirts they produced per day. By the time Sara Lee shut down this factory in Frontera, workers on average were earning 98 pesos per day (close to \$10.00 a day). The workers therefore were able to win from Sara Lee double the severance pay required by law. SEDEPAC and thirty workers are now negotiating benefits (similar to a worker's compensation package) for the injuries they suffered while working for Sara Lee (and because they can no longer work due to these injuries).

So how did Enlace provide assistance to SEDEPAC and the Sara Lee workers? First, Enlace helped SEDEPAC's leadership team figure out the necessary roles and positions on that team in order to launch a struggle against Sara Lee and win. Enlace provided training for leaders who, in turn, trained others and developed more leaders. The trainings included how to develop a rap or a message, how to conduct a power analysis of the company, and how to plan an event or an action so that nothing falls through the cracks. Enlace also provided SEDEPAC with a framework to continually evaluate their internal structure and their campaign strategy.

Second, Enlace helped SEDEPAC research Sara Lee's corporate structure and business plan. The strategy was to get the company's attention by jeopardizing the realization of its future plans. Lastly, Enlace and SEDEPAC organized synchronized actions around the world on the same day. This required recruiting new allies and calling on old ones.

Throughout the campaign, multiple actions took place internationally. The last transnationally coordinated, multisited day of action that finally got Sara Lee to

the negotiating table was orchestrated for 23 January 2004. While the workers were making a demand on the local plant manager in Frontera, México, allies in New York were making the same demand to a large shareholders' meeting, and allies in Chicago were making the same demand to the board of directors of a university of which Sara Lee's CEO is a trustee. At the same time, allies in Paris were making the demand to a key distributor, while allies in Mumbai were making the same demand to the Asian headquarters of a pesticide subsidiary of Sara Lee.

Through this campaign against Sara Lee, Enlace learned what worked to win against a multinational corporation and developed a new integrated organizing approach. This approach is reflected in the three main areas in which Enlace helped SEDEPAC: (1) increase the internal capabilities of the organization; (2) impact the company's business plan and its planning executives; and (3) externally carry out internationally synchronized actions.

Enlace next took this new integrated organizing approach to Baja California, where they used it to help the independent union SINTTIM win a struggle against unfair labor practices in 2004. The workers there were facing the multinational corporation Pung Kook, a backpack and luggage supplier for Land's End, Adidas, and Patagonia. Pung Kook fired union leader Raquel Espinoza and shut down its maquila in response to the workers' organizing effort. In late 2003, Pung Kook left without paying the workers' severance pay as required by Mexican law. A year later victory resulted in the following:

- Pung Kook, which is based in Korea, was forced to reestablish itself in North America to justly compensate the workers.

- The workers received over one year's pay at a higher rate than required by law for plant closure victims.
- Espinoza, the union leader, was paid \$10,000 for being unjustly fired and was given the company bus.

SINTTIM, which is run completely by volunteers, continues organizing with workers in the maquiladora sector of Baja California, and Enlace is working with them to use the integrated organizing approach to build power for workers in that industry.

This year we are hoping to raise funds to develop a collaborative campaign with one of our U.S. members, the Workplace Project in Long Island. The Workplace Project, founded in 1992, is the only nonprofit organization on Long Island that organizes Latina/o immigrant workers for better working and living conditions. Because anti-immigrant forces are gaining steam in the United States, the long-term goal of the campaign would be to shift popular sentiment in Long Island to embrace the civic participation of immigrants and to create effective campaign tools that can assist proactive pro-immigrant efforts in other parts of the country. It is not enough to react to terrible measures such as Proposition 200 in Arizona or HR 4437, which if passed by the Senate would make undocumented immigrants felons. We want to proactively promote and protect immigrants' rights at all levels of society.

The most fulfilling aspect of working as an organizer is being part of the process by which people develop into leaders and lead new effective struggles against the increasingly unjust labor practices of multinational corporations. Now that I am working with Enlace, I am happy that I can continue this work and be a part of a binational, multicultural alliance that is taking on

transnational corporations, poverty, racism, and sexism. The great majority of organizers who participate in Enlace and who stand out as leaders in their organization are women—women in Mexico and African American women, as well as immigrant women and children of immigrants in the United States from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, China, Korea, and many other countries and regions in South Asia and the Caribbean. I am excited to be part of this alliance of organizations that is winning more power for low-wage workers.