

# **Bridging Workforce Development & Worker Power**

## *Lessons from California Worker Centers*

### **BACKGROUND**

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to upend the lives of low-wage workers, California Workforce Development (WD) agencies are prioritizing equity and job quality to support essential workers and job seekers in the ongoing economic recovery. Worker centers—community-based organizations led by and for workers—have long served as critical access points for economic opportunity among the most marginalized communities, especially among un-unionized and immigrant populations. While much is known about worker centers' approach to workplace and community organizing, their long-standing role in WD is deeply understudied and poorly understood.

Worker centers and WD are often seen as separate, or even mutually exclusive. Traditionally, worker centers are concerned with changing the policy and political-economic conditions within which low-wage workers labor, done primarily through leadership development, workplace rights enforcement, community organizing and policy advocacy. WD programs, on the other hand, are concerned with aligning worker characteristics with employer needs.

### **PROSPERITY, OPPORTUNITY, AND WORKER EQUITY REIMAGINED (POWER) IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

The POWER in WD team at the UCLA Labor Center starts from the premise that for low-wage workers to thrive, they need concrete pathways for skill recognition and development, and must build power in order to transform the workplaces and communities they inhabit.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the POWER in WD team leveraged its deep-rooted relationships with worker centers and launched a pioneering study on worker centers and their approach to WD that uplifts how worker centers are advancing worker power and racial equity.

# WHO WE ARE

For over 50 years, the [UCLA Labor Center](#) (Labor Center), housed at the [UCLA James Lawson Jr. Worker Justice Center](#), has reliably provided local, state and national policymakers and stakeholders with community-centered, evidence-based research on the most critical issues affecting our state's working families. Building on this legacy, and drawing upon decades of foundational work on worker centers, [the POWER in Workforce Development team](#) at the Labor Center are experts on some of the most cutting-edge workforce development models with worker power at the fore.

## WHAT WE DO



### Applied Research

Conduct participatory, policy-relevant research to highlight worker voices and elevate nontraditional WD models serving the most marginalized communities.



### Evaluation

Develop culturally and racially responsive metrics that more appropriately assess the value of WD programs serving the most marginalized communities.



### Building Alliances

Collaborate with state policymakers and expert organizations serving the most marginalized communities to advance systems change in the WD system.

## FEATURED PROJECTS

Redefining the field of workforce development by bridging community and worker centered approaches in low-wage industries with California's high road approach to WD.

[New Directions in Racial and Economic Justice: How California's Worker Centers Are Bringing Worker Power into Workforce Development](#)

Lead evaluator for the California Workforce Development Board's High Road Training Partnership Initiative (HRTPI), a multi-million dollar investment to advance economic mobility by linking workforce innovation to regional challenges of job quality, equity, and environmental sustainability.

[The High Road to Economic Prosperity](#)

Co-led the formation of the Worker Equity Initiative, a consortium of worker centers, labor leaders, and nonprofit service providers working in collaboration with the Labor and Workforce Development Agency to increase equity in the public workforce system.

[Worker Equity Initiative Repository](#)



## OPPORTUNITIES ON THE HORIZON

**Invest in strengthening the capacity of the research and evaluation to movement hub!**

The depth and breadth of the POWER in Workforce Development team makes us best positioned to conduct research and evaluation at the intersection of worker centers and WD, in order to promote long-term social change for the most marginalized workers. With funding from philanthropic partners equally committed to this work, we can continue to be responsive to the current landscape emerging in the field. We are actively seeking investment for capacity-building and project-based funding to address the state's most pressing WD problems and opportunities.

## LET'S CONNECT!

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