The Unexpected Power of Informal Workers in the Public Square: A Comparison of Mexican and US Organizing Models

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Abstract

Street vendors in Mexico and day laborers in the United States, both groups of informal workers who labor in public space, face formidable structural obstacles to securing their rights as workers. Despite their apparent vulnerability, these informal workers have built perhaps the most powerful informal worker organizations in their countries. In this article, we explore and explain to the extent possible the sources, forms, and limits of this unexpected power. We explore organizational and strategic commonalities as well as differences and seek to explain both.

Introduction

Unregulated by law or beyond the reach of law, informal work employs the majority of workers in Mexico (about sixty percent of Mexico's total employed population according to the National Survey of Work and Employment [ENOE]) and increasing numbers of workers in the United States.[1] In an apparent paradox, these particularly vulnerable groups of workers have in recent decades often achieved greater successes than their more institutionalized trade union counterparts.[2] In this article, we examine organizations of informal workers who labor in public space and might therefore appear to be especially exposed to repression or marginalization. Our premise is that, despite their apparent vulnerability, these informal workers in Mexico and the United States have built perhaps the most powerful informal worker organizations in their countries.

We focus specifically on street vendors in Mexico and day laborers in the United States. Street vendors by definition work in public spaces, on sidewalks, in public streets and plazas. Day laborers, primarily comprised of immigrant Latino workers in the construction sector, in many cases *solicit* work in

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 89, Spring 2016, pp. 131–152
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doi:10.1017/S0147547915000368

public, on sidewalks, street corners, or parking lots. Both day laborers in the United States and street vendors in Mexico can be understood to work in public spaces they create through their own use, in each case contesting the state's attempts to exclude them. Indeed, the disruption of state-sanctioned land-use plans by these workers means their assertion of the right to work is inherently political.

One would expect such workers to experience abuse at the hands of law enforcement and ferocious competition from other workers who face few if any significant barriers to entering this labor market. These problems do exist, yet workers in these sectors have formed powerful and effective organizations that fight to advance their economic and political interests.[3] Day laborers and street vendors have successfully fought for physical spaces, from day labor centers to street vending districts, in which they can work or solicit work. In the case of day laborers, day labor organizations have also formed an important part of the leadership of some of the most effective social movements in the United States, immigrant rights movements that have recently won important victories despite US failure to enact comprehensive immigration reform.

In this article, we explore, and explain to the extent possible the sources, forms, and limits of this unexpected power. We situate our analysis in the primary concentration of street vendors in Mexico, Mexico City, and similarly the primary concentration for day laborers in the United States, Los Angeles, California.

Through our comparative study of day laborers and street vendors we make the following findings:

- Since there are no state laws formally regulating street vending in Mexico City and the work of undocumented immigrants in the United States, day laborers and street vendors must constantly wage a political fight to create public spaces they can use for work or to solicit work.
- Day laborers in the United States and street vendors in Mexico have different organizing models. Immigrant day labor centers identify primarily as community-based organizations concerned with social justice for immigrant workers and their communities. Mexican street vendors identify as hybrid worker-entrepreneur associations that often form systems of patronage with more powerful political actors.
- Still, day laborers and street vendors deploy a similar general strategy: they self-organize and form alliances to build political power, reaping economic gains.

Conceptual Tools for Understanding the Mobilization of Informal Public Space Workers

Three lines of argument are particularly valuable in understanding how organizations of informal workers do and do not succeed. First, Jennifer Jihye Chun[4] builds on Wright's[5] categories of structural and associational worker power. Briefly, structural power refers to power at the point of production, particularly through the strike, and associational power refers to other forms of power mobilized by workers through concerted action outside that arena. Chun notes that the definition of associational power is quite broad, leaving open the question of what forms of mobilization are effective in which circumstances. To fill this gap, she deploys Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power.[6] Chun argues that precarious and informal workers in South Korea and the United States have engaged in classification struggles contending they are indeed workers deserving of rights extended to other workers. These workers engage in public dramas to symbolically demonstrate their worthiness and determination and win over the public's support. The effectiveness of public dramas suggests public worksites might actually serve as an organizing *advantage*.

Second, Rina Agarwala examines cases in India in which informal workers, rather than leveraging new forms of symbolic power, have activated long-standing repertoires of political power.[7] Considering women construction workers and cigarette-rollers, she finds that their organizations have bargained with elected officials using the promise of "vote banks" of members. Interestingly, reclassification is a *demand* rather than a leverage point, as when organizations demand identity badges that certify women as members of a profession. Symbolic politics enters the mix but primarily via organizations' greater leverage over state governments espousing more neoliberal platforms that tout "flexible" work—giving informal workers a greater moral claim for support.

Finally, a third line of research examines the advantages and difficulties of alliances between trade unions and informal worker organizations[8] and analogous trade union alliances with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)[9] and community organizations.[10] These researchers focus on comparing and contrasting organizational forms, styles, and strategies. Among other things, this set of comparisons brings into relief the strengths of informal worker organizations. In most countries, unions constitute legally recognized market institutions with clearly defined roles. This gives them access to certain legal and political resources and forms of leverage but typically discourages certain types of protest. Unions are also accountable to a well-defined set of members who typically pay dues, whereas many informal worker organizations have much less formal connections to and definitions of their constituencies. For all these reasons, unions tend to have greater access to institutional and financial resources but less flexibility and agility than their counterparts in informal work. Hence, alliances between the two forms are difficult but potentially provide access to complementary resources and repertoires.

In addition to research and analysis of organizational factors contributing to successful worker organization and differing organizational forms and strategies, a fourth important body of work for contextualizing these cases examines how social groups reshape and redefine the use of urban space. This work primarily emphasizes a study of these organizations' characteristics and how they have developed and evolved, placing less emphasis on success factors. Note that sidewalks and squares, where street vendors ply their trade, are formally defined as "public," in contrast with "private" shopping center parking lots, a common venue for day laborer job seeking. But we follow Low in viewing public space as *socially* designed.[11] In her ethnographic case study of a public square in Costa Rica, Low finds that the boundaries and meanings of public spaces are contested and negotiated between various users of these spaces. Similarly, in analyzing American postindustrial landscapes Zukin argues public spaces must be understood as culturally produced commodities for consumption.[12] In the neoliberal city the distinction between private and public use of space is blurred, resulting in what she terms liminal, in-between spaces. Thus, the sidewalks of Los Angeles and Mexico City might be public legally, but private storefront owners have the political power to regulate these spaces according to their interests by calling the police or deploying private security officers. Conversely, street vendors and day laborers in Los Angeles and Mexico City may use private parking lots to work or solicit work, thereby subverting private ownership of these spaces through their regular use. Observing the aesthetic effect of these cultural-economic practices on the urban landscape, Crawford describes it as an everyday urbanism blurring state-sanctioned boundaries between various land uses, a type of culturally produced, unofficial mixed use.[13]

As we have noted above, contesting land uses in this way is a *political* act. Thus, Holston describes the activities of migrant street vendors and informal settlers in Brazil as the creation of insurgent spaces.[14] Bayat goes further and argues it is changing the urban form itself, enabling informal workers to create a political copresence in public spaces.[15] Focused on New York City street vendors, Dunn adds these workers form part of a growing street labor movement in the neoliberal, global city.[16] Numerous other studies have likewise examined how informal workers have organized movements to block their exclusion from public areas in the face of urban renewal and gentrification.[17]

In this article, we look at all three issues concerning informal worker organizations: the determinants of success or failure, the nature of alliances, and the determinants of organizational form and strategy. Regarding how informal worker organizations win, we conclude that in our cases, victories came not through symbolic power, but through alliance building and, in some cases, vote banking akin to that described by Agarwala. Alliances with unions have flourished in the United States but not in Mexico due to differences in the political-institutional configuration of the two countries. More generally, the predominant structures and strategies of Mexican street vendor associations and US day laborer groups differ because of differing political opportunity structures and different organizational histories and ideologies.

Methods

We utilize in-depth case studies and process tracing as the other studies have done. A particular innovation is our use of cross-national comparisons to understand difference. Analyses of cross-national differences in informal worker organizing forms and outcomes are few. Chun conducts a South Korea-US comparison, but focuses primarily on areas of convergence rather than difference. One study similar in spirit with the current one is Tilly et al.'s comparison of organization of subcontracted and home-based textile and apparel workers in Brazil, China, India, and South Africa, which places such organizing in the context of regulatory and market structures and political and policy conjunctures. It concludes that all these contexts matter for both the forms and the outcomes of informal worker organizing in that sector.[18]

We compare two distinct sectors across the two countries. This strategy is risky since it introduces multiple dimensions of variation. But street vending and day labor have much in common. Both involve informal work with workers who serve a dispersed customer base, not fixed employers or concentrated supply chains. Both trades occupy public space, with consequent daunting challenges.

And—critically—in spite of those challenges, the movements in those sectors are perhaps the most successful among informal workers in their respective countries in terms of demands won and defense and improvement of their work situation. These successes are both economic and political in nature: They are economic in terms of setting wage floor standards and certain worker protections from employer abuse and police harassment. They are political in terms of establishing their right to use public spaces in the city for work. Our analysis centers on the basis of this success and variation in how it is attained between the two movements.

Our unit of analysis is the organizational case study. Each of the five organizations in the sample is a civil society organization. In Mexico, we conducted in-depth case studies of two organizations, the National Front for Informal Trade (FNCI) and the National Association of Artisans of Coyoacán (ANAC), both located in Mexico City. We interviewed leaders and members of these organizations, and we observed the vending locations and actions, such as meetings and demonstrations.

In the United States, we conducted more limited case studies of three organizations: the National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON), a coalition of about thirty organizations in twenty-two US states, and two member organizations in Los Angeles proper, the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA) and the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN). CARECEN and IDEPSCA handle various social programs in addition to organizing day laborers, in contrast with NDLON, which has a more specialized approach. All three organizations work on two levels: public policy (municipal, state, and federal) and the operation of job centers serving specific neighborhoods. IDEPSCA and CARECEN are worker centers that run such job centers. We underline here the distinction between *worker centers*, a broad category of nonunion organizations organizing, advocating for, and serving workers in a variety of sectors, and *day labor centers* or *job centers*, local facilities set up to match day laborers with employers and provide services to these workers. The most recent inventory of worker centers found 130 in the United States, the great majority of them organizing migrants.[19]

In these cases we interviewed leaders at both levels and observed the normal operation of the job centers (three of IDEPSCA's, one of CARECEN's, one operated by NDLON), and, with the exception of the CARECEN case, we observed special events (assembly, party, workshop, English classes, press conference). We did not interview members of the organizations but observed worker participation in the centers and at special events.

In addition to the national case studies, we organized, conducted, and observed two binational meetings (2–3 hours) of leaders of these organizations and some additional organizations of street vendors in Los Angeles. The first meeting was conducted remotely via Skype, and the second was face-to-face at a day-laborer center in Los Angeles. The leaders of the two Mexican organizations, FNCI and ANAC, participated in both meetings while the director of CARECEN, the directors of the day-labor programs, several CARECEN and IDEPSCA laborers, and other members and staff of these two organizations participated in at least one of these meetings. FNCI leaders and ANAC also visited NDLON's national headquarters and the NDLON Pasadena job center, where they exchanged ideas and questions with the NDLON staff and workers present.

We supplemented these direct observations with literature reviews of the two movements and some documents from the organizations. In findings from fieldwork we do not identify the specific person who was a source of information in order to maintain partial confidentiality. When we do not cite a specific source, it can be assumed the source comes from interviews, observations, and documents.

Findings We start the presentation of findings with two overviews: (A) basic profiles of the two sectors, and (B) brief histories of each organization. We then review (C) levels of organization, (D) identities and strategies, (E) organizational models, and (F) a dynamic view of each organization, noting the most significant changes in their environments and how they have reacted to these.

Sector Profiles

Mexico: informal street vendors According to INEGI (Mexico's statistical office), in 2003, the country had 1.6 million street vendors, up more than 50 percent from 1995. By 2012, according to data from the ENOE survey, the total national vendor population was 2.2 million, 4.5 percent of the entire working population. For the largest group of street vendors, 32 percent, according to ENAMIN survey data (2008), the main motivation for choosing this line of work was to seek a supplementary or alternative source of income. This motivation outweighs other motivations such as occupational inheritance (eight percent) or preference for working independently (seven percent).

For many of these workers (thirty-eight percent) monthly income falls in the category centered on 2,700 pesos ($216). Street vendors have variable work schedules, but most (thirty-two percent) work sixteen to thirty-four hours a week. The vast majority of those who sell on the street (ninety-nine percent) lack medical insurance. Most vendors are self-employed (seventy-eight percent), with nineteen percent employees, and only three percent small proprietors who employ others. The median vendor has a high school level of education (thirty-five percent of the total). Sixty-two percent of street vendors are female.

Street vendors, although mostly organized, belong to what Mexico calls civil associations (nonprofit organizations), so that 99.8 percent deny union membership. The number of civil associations changes frequently, and no national survey tracks them. However their numbers in more specific areas such as the Centro Histórico (historic center) of Mexico City are known.

As these workers use public spaces to work, major conflicts arise with government authorities, along with friction with other similar organizations in those same spaces. Despite repeated attempts to regulate or prohibit street trading, in Mexico City there is still no law regulating commercial activity in public space. This regulatory vacuum has pushed vendors to organize and engage governments and political parties. These relations have typically taken the form of corporatism, as with unions and other Mexican organizations.

United States: day laborers In the United States, day labor work refers to persons seeking employment in open-air labor markets located on public streets, in front of home improvement stores (like Home Depot), and in other spaces frequented by the public. These workers usually get short-term manual jobs like yard work, painting, or demolition, especially in residential construction. According to the National Day Labor Survey (2006), day labor work is a national phenomenon caused by employers' search for greater labor flexibility. The phenomenon has grown rapidly, particularly in construction where employers increasingly hire workers only for short-term projects. Increases in immigration also fuel the growth of low-wage day labor, in which most workers are migrants—primarily from Mexico (fifty-nine percent) and Central America (twenty-eight percent)—and three-quarters are undocumented.[20]

Over the past three decades construction sector union density has fallen from about forty percent to less than fifteen percent, leaving large sections of the industry without union presence, particularly the residential section, which is about half the industry. A consequence of union density's decline has been pervasive downward pressure on labor standards. Moreover, the sector has been reorganized: unionized workers have relocated to construction subsectors where pay is higher, while growing numbers of employers have restructured employment arrangements to increase flexibility and reduce costs. Consequently, the residential construction sector depends structurally on day laborers working in informal and contingent employment arrangements, and without union representation.[21]

The 2004 National Day Labor Survey found that day laborers earned median wages of $10.00 per hour.[22] This average can be compared to $12.23 per hour, the median earned by all workers in the residential construction sector that year.[23] However, as day labor employment is unstable, average monthly wages are volatile, and annual income rarely exceeds $15,000, leaving most such laborers below the US poverty line. In addition, a New York-Los Angeles-Chicago survey of more than four thousand low-wage workers found that workers in the residential construction sector represent thirteen percent of those experiencing violations of the minimum wage law.[24] This study also concluded that foreign-born workers experienced wage law violations with higher probability (thirty-one percent) than native workers (sixteen percent).

Brief histories of the organizations Street vending in Mexico City dates back to the pre-Hispanic era, when the *tianquiztli* (Náhuatl for "market" and precursor of the current *tianguis*) served as the main provisioning system for the Mexica.[25] The contemporary explosion of street vending, however, traces its origins to two major twentieth-century changes in Mexican economic policy. First, mid-twentieth century import substitution promoted urban industrialization but unintentionally attracted large numbers of surplus rural migrants, many lacking even the basic educational qualifications required by manufacturers. These migrants constituted a ready supply of informal workers and pursued a variety of subsistence activities, including street vending.[26] At the same time, migrant populations and their descendants outstripped existing provisioning channels, creating a demand for additional, informal shopping options.[27] The forces driving supply of, and demand for, informal street vending intensified with the ascendance of neoliberal policies from the 1980s forward, which led to slower growth and repeated economic crises.[28]

Meanwhile, in parallel with these broader economic changes, successive Mexico City governments sought to "cleanse" the historic center of street vendors, compelling merchants to fight for the right to sell. The city's thoroughfares were also reoriented from pedestrian to automotive, as Stillerman describes in the case of Santiago, Chile, putting further pressure on foot traffic-dependent vendors.[29] These policy initiatives to impose order on the city have intensified in recent decades.[30] Cross finds Mexico City street vendors have repeatedly taken advantage of structural weaknesses in the political-administrative apparatus of the Mexican state to defend their ability to occupy public space.[31] In fact, during various attempts at relocating and displacing street vendors by Mexico City mayors (Uruchurtu in the 1950s and Solis in the 1990s), street vendor associations paradoxically emerged politically stronger, leveraging political alliances with local officials to remain free of regulation.[32]

Traditionally, Mexico City's street trade was linked to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, which ruled Mexico for more than seventy years and once more holds power) in a form of patronage: vendor organizations were permitted to establish markets in exchange for support and advocacy on behalf of that party's politicians.[33] Since the more center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) won Mexico City's government in 1997, PRD corporatism has also appeared. According to Zaremberg, the PRD's rise to power stimulated splintering of formerly PRI-affiliated organizations, increasing competition between leaders and encouraging them to promote new ways of legitimizing their positions, ranging from social protection to cultural activities.[34] The new situation precipitated the creation of a large number of small, formally constituted civil associations. The crackdown on vendors and *tianguistas* (vendors in the *tianguis* weekly street markets in rotating locations around the city) also led leaders to expand ties with organizations representing other informal workers such as taxi and minibus drivers.

The National Front of Informal Commerce (FNCI) was created in 2004 by David Arévalo Mendez, expanding on a series of earlier organizations predating Arévalo but headed by him since the 1990s. Arévalo rose to prominence as the leader of the street vendors in commercial areas of San Antonio Abad 1 and 2, on the outskirts of Mexico City's historic center. The Front is not exclusively limited to informal retail, though the organization's main base is second-hand clothing vendors. FNCI also has nominal members outside Mexico City in the states of Mexico and Puebla, but they do not actually participate in federation activities. The FNCI seeks to defend the right to sell in public spaces and to obtain services and support from public authorities, and to date it has successfully achieved these goals.

The National Association of Artisans of Coyoacán (ANAC) is a smaller organization, organizing only artisan merchants in the historic center of Mexico City's Coyoacán neighborhood. The ANAC emerged as a split (one of several) from ANAURMAC, the first Coyoacán artisan merchants' organization, in the mid-1990s. While the Coyoacán Craft Tianguis was operating, ANAC won significant gains, particularly defending its members' vending space from competitor organizations as well as from authorities seeking to evict vendors. But government intensified its push in 2008 and evicted all vendors. After a year of fighting, ANAC and other vendor organizations won the right to occupy a government-provided building but continued to claim the right to sell again in the square. At the time of writing the organization is weakened, vendors remain in the building (without certainty of space in the long run), and ANAC is at the point of accepting this outcome.

In the US case the emergent political power of immigrant day laborers grew out of expanded migrant streams in the late twentieth century. Mexican migration to the United States predated US absorption of half of Mexico's territory through annexation and war from 1845 to 1848 but expanded with recruitment by agriculture and the railroads in the late nineteenth century.[35] Migration grew again in the early twentieth century with the push of the Mexican Revolution and the pull of continued expansion of agriculture and railroads, plus US First World War production. Mexican migrants were exempted from restrictive laws passed in the teens and twenties but were admitted or deported based on employer need, especially with the 1924 establishment of the border patrol.[36] The Bracero Program (1942–1965) further enlarged the flow of Mexican migrants, and though the 1965 immigration reform ended that program and established a sharply reduced Mexican quota, it did little to reduce inflow from Mexico while rendering much of it illegal.[37] The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act extended amnesty to recent migrants but failed to address future inflows, encouraging migrants to come while, for the first time, making it illegal to hire migrants—shunting large numbers into shadowy illegality and vulnerability.[38] Meanwhile, the Mexican economic policy changes mentioned above sent large numbers of peasants and others North looking for work from the 1950s forward. Central Americans joined the inflow in large numbers later, impelled by the civil wars of the 1980s as well as economic restructuring processes similar to those in Mexico.[39]

With the merging of these Mexican and Central American streams of immigration Los Angeles became home to the largest concentration of low-wage, immigrant workers in the United States beginning in the 1970s. These immigrant workers brought with them political traditions of resistance and organizing, and as the scale of migration and consequent worker congregation in day labor hiring sites grew, these traditions found expression in worker center organizing.

The Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA) originated in Los Angeles in 1984 as a popular education organization, first among Central American migrants (mainly Salvadoran) who fled that era's civil wars.[40] IDEPSCA then expanded to include other Latin American migrants, especially Mexicans. It launched its day labor work a few years later and in 1992 opened its first day labor center in Pomona, a distant suburb of Los Angeles.[41] It began a process of collaboration with other organizations, such as the Coalition for Humane Immigration Reform Los Angeles (CHIRLA), and the City of Los Angeles to open more centers. CHIRLA, also founded by Central Americans, itself had launched in 1988 the first campaign for day laborer rights. CHIRLA won the fight with the city to establish the first day labor center in the United States in 1989 and then opened more centers. However, the city later ended its contract with CHIRLA, at which point CARECEN and IDEPSCA took over the management and operation of the day labor centers.[42] At the height of its day labor work, IDEPSCA managed six centers, but as a result of recent budget cuts today it operates only four.

CARECEN, the Central American Resource Center, was founded by a group of Salvadoran refugees as a service center and organization for Central Americans in Los Angeles, gaining nonprofit status in 1983. Like IDEPSCA, CARECEN manages several programs besides organizing day laborers. It began day labor organizing in 1988, around the same time as CHIRLA.[43] CARECEN has operated several centers (including the Pasadena center we visited, now operated directly by NDLON) but at the time we write has only one, in Pico-Union, a Central American neighborhood.

The National Day Labor Organizing Network (NDLON) emerged as a coalition after a process of incubation in Los Angeles. Several organizations (CHIRLA, IDEPSCA, CARECEN) began to coordinate their efforts in the nineties, and in 1999–2000 IDEPSCA conducted a leadership school that attracted participants from organizations nationally. NDLON was formed in 2001 as a national network, initially under the auspices of CHIRLA, and finally became an independent nonprofit in 2008.[44] At each step of this evolution, links between Salvadoran leaders played a vital role, and indeed the Salvadoran Pablo Alvarado, cofounder of IDEPSCA, advanced from CHIRLA organizer to founder and current director of NDLON. However, the member organizations of laborers NDLON are open to any nationality or ethnicity. NDLON coordinates struggle at all levels including making national policy. It remains based in Los Angeles.

Levels of organization Although they serve different groups of workers, the form of these organizations is very similar in both countries. In the Mexican informal trade organizations, there are three levels of organization. The basic unit is the organization in a specific place, like a public square. Above this, there are groups focused on a particular type of commerce. For example, in the case of FNCI, there are associations of *vagoneros*, vendors selling inside subways and transit stations, and *tianguistas*, who sell used clothing. At the top are federations like the FNCI.

American day labor organizations also have three significant levels. The basic unit is the single day labor center or even the corner where day laborers congregate when there is no physical center. Next come organizations like IDEPSCA and CARECEN, which can cover several centers and corners in addition to other programs. The centers are not organized around specific types of work. In fact, centers we observed included construction workers (mostly men), domestic work (mostly women), and cleaning (both). At the top level is a single association, NDLON, although a few centers exist outside NDLON (e.g., two centers operated by the Youth Policy Institute [YPI] in Los Angeles).[45]

Identities and strategies Informal street vendor associations in Mexico function in part like a small business association, but work in the street primarily involves *working* owners, typically along with unpaid family members and, in some cases, a few waged assistants. The center of gravity of mobilization is the work of vending, not property owners' interests, since the proprietor does not own the selling area and occupies a precarious place in the city's economy and spatial configuration. Thus, street vendor movements should be considered predominantly movements of *workers*—though not *wage workers*—for the right to ply their trade.

The centerpiece of Mexican street vendor organizations' strategy is negotiation with public authorities. The ANAC and FNCI negotiate the right to sell and to obtain services, using varied tools. The FNCI has a large membership and leaders, particularly Arévalo, are sophisticated in electoral bargaining, so electoral support is their biggest card to play. They also use contacts with the media and sometimes turn to protest. On the other hand, ANAC relies more on protest, demonstrating their legitimacy as a group of artisans and embarrassing the authorities—using symbolic power. For example, ANAC members undertook sustained protests in the face of municipal attempts to displace them in 2002 and 2008–2009.[46]

Day laborers' organizations of Los Angeles utilize a broader range of strategies, taking a form that researchers have characterized as a combination of labor intermediaries, unions, and community organizations.[47] Like *intermediaries* (temporary worker agencies, training institutions) they serve job-seekers by regularizing and making transparent the distribution of jobs among applicants, by assisting in the acquisition of new skills, and by formalizing the contract in terms of salary and duties. But also like intermediaries, they serve employers by selecting skilled and capable workers and maintaining a predictable supply of labor. Acting like *unions*, the centers try to raise wages and other employment standards and to defend workers' rights. In both of these instances, the organizations build on day laborers' identities as workers.

But the parallels with *community organizations* are perhaps their most interesting aspect. Dziembowska, Narro, and Theodore each explain the success of day labor organizations as a result of two elements with roots in community organizing movements instead of other organizational models.[48] First, the organizations consistently use popular education techniques to engage laborers, cultivating a loyalty that goes beyond an instrumental level. Leadership development is a core activity. Second, from the beginning, at the neighborhood level where a center or day labor corner is located, the common practice has been to maintain an ongoing dialog with every actor with an interest in the situation (including neighboring business owners), which transforms into negotiation when conflict emerges.[49]

In addition to popular education and multilateral dialog, day labor groups use a variety of other strategies. Litigation has been widely used—for example filing lawsuits for unpaid wages or collaborating with the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF) to contest (with great success) municipal laws against soliciting work in public.[50] Sometimes they also press for legislative changes. Locally, for example, they won an ordinance requiring large home improvement stores to establish a hiring center in their parking lots. At the national level, the main focus is advocating for immigration reforms.

To press for legislation, or changes in regulations, administrative practices, and policing, the US day labor organizations—like the Mexican vendor groups—use protest, negotiation, and dialog. Negotiation is used primarily at the municipal level, for example, to obtain permission to stay in place and get resources to provide services. Dialog, again, is used primarily at the neighborhood level. Protests back up negotiation when other means fail, ranging from resisting a proposed antisolicitation ordinance in the city of Los Angeles in 1989 to ongoing protests challenging restrictive US national and state-level immigration policies.[51]

A key to all these strategies is alliance formation. In FNCI, due to its more vertical structure, with power concentrated at the summit, alliances—with political parties, journalists, and others—are likewise concentrated in the organization's upper levels. ANAC does not have the same concentration of power and thus forms horizontal alliances with peer organizations. In no case are there alliances with unions because Mexican unions organize only formal workers (with some exceptional cases like the small Authentic Labor Front [FAT] which also organizes self-employed producers).

Among US day labor organizations, all three organizational levels form alliances. At the national level, NDLON has as its most important allies the civil rights organization MALDEF and the main trade union federation in the country, AFL-CIO. (Earlier, there was also a strong alliance with the second federation, Change to Win [CTW], but the union linking NDLON and CTW, the Laborers' union, moved to the AFL-CIO.)

The alliance with MALDEF follows naturally from the litigation strategy, but the AFL-CIO case merits more explanation, especially in the context of the lack of union allies in Mexico. At first worker centers and unions in Los Angeles harbored mutual suspicion,[52] and difficulties in worker center-union collaborations persist.[53] For example, the Laborers' union, like most unions, excludes nonmembers from its workplaces, but day labor organizations adopt a principle of nonexclusion, which has hampered the functioning of some organizations locally shared by the two partners. But in the midst of these inauspicious circumstances, the two sides have established a series of agreements, culminating in the 2006 NDLON-AFL-CIO cooperation agreement. A day labor movement leader explained that the driver for formalizing the alliance was, and is, existential crises for both organizations. For the AFL-CIO and its member unions, the crises are membership loss (particularly acute for the Laborers' Union whose members work in jobs requiring less training) and the defection of unions particularly active in organizing new members to Change to Win in 2005. For NDLON, the crisis was the threat of state and national level anti-immigrant and anti-day-laborer laws. In the agreement, NDLON gained access to massive political and financial resources, and the AFL-CIO acquired an affiliate able to successfully organize an important group of workers where traditional unions have failed. The union federation also burnished its legitimacy by embracing marginal, low-wage workers, implicitly challenging images of unionists as well-paid workers motivated by narrow self-interest.

This union-worker center alliance built on a broader historical alliance between insurgent immigrant communities and traditional labor unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Southern California dating from the early 1990s. Immigrant communities' insurgent traditions, when matched with the resources of large international unions like SEIU, resulted in landmark labor victories such as the Justice for Janitors campaign.[54] These successes disposed both the union movement as a whole to value immigrant organizing initiatives, and community-based worker centers to value unions' strategic capacities.[55]

At the level of individual day labor organizations, the groups form political alliances with municipal and other proimmigrant groups as well as groups offering specialized expertise, such as lawyers (e.g., in a coalition to win a law against wage theft) or health-care providers. At the level of the day labor center, the main form of alliance is expressed in the multilateral dialog with neighbors.

Models of organization Mexican informal commerce has three main models of organization. The first is organizations that function like a protection racket, exacting member payments in return for protection. The second model, and a common one, is vertical, service-oriented groups organized around patronage. FNCI's participation in patronage has gained much for its members through exchanging promises of votes and political support for adoption of policies favorable to the membership. However, it remains hierarchical, with little member voice or participation in decision making. The third (rare) model is democratic organizations, such as ANAC, which has committed to give voice to their members without regard to party affiliation. In fact, ANAC leaders are critical of all parties.

From what we know, day labor organizations in the United States are confined to variants of the last two models. The groups we studied are all democratic. But these organizations do not exhaust the organizational types of day laborers in the United States. A leader in the movement described two organizational models: the empowerment model used by all our case study organizations and the service provision model. According to this source, the service model is more vertical and conforms to the conventional model of social service NGOs—not identical to clientelist Mexican organizations, but sharing many traits in internal organization. He claimed that the empowerment-oriented groups are affiliated with NDLON. We assume that in Los Angeles the Youth Policy Institute (YPI) can be classified under the service model.

Organizational dynamics The organizations we studied have undergone massive changes in their environments. What interests us is their ability to adapt to these changes. Politically, the most significant change for FNCI (actually for its antecedent organization) was Mexico City's shift from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in 1997, when government in the federal district became elected rather than appointed. Like the vast majority of Mexican popular organizations, FNCI's predecessor organization had strong patronage ties with the PRI, which for decades exercised one-party rule. But Arévalo and his followers responded pragmatically to the 1997 policy shift, successfully negotiating with PRD governments, even after supporting their electoral rivals. Another challenge for both organizations came in 2008 with an intensified policy of preserving historic centers. Again FNCI adapted its strategy and managed to stay in the center. Meanwhile, the ANAC has had greater difficulty and seems to have accepted the government-mandated enclosed space.

For US day labor groups, the most formidable political challenge has been escalating persecution of the country's undocumented immigrants, along inaction on comprehensive immigration reform. This change struck first at the state level in Arizona and elsewhere, but as a leader described, there has also been an "Arizonification" of federal immigration policy. This change in the political landscape called for a national response, and indeed NDLON negotiated the alliance with the AFL-CIO and redirected its resources to block restrictive policies, to advocate for reforms, and to mobilize local organizations to likewise redirect their activities. The United States has not yet adopted an immigration reform, but so far day labor organizations have survived, and with the support of a broad coalition and the increasing weight of the large Latino voting bloc, reform seems a matter of time. In the meantime, NDLON has been central in achieving smaller victories, such as the right for undocumented migrants to obtain drivers licenses in many states[56] and the 2014 presidential executive order known as DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents), which extends the 2012 DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) by granting temporary legal residence to undocumented parents—including many day laborers, among others—of children whose migration status is legal.[57]

Another challenge facing day laborer groups was the 2008–2010 Great Recession, which precipitated the virtual collapse of the construction sector. When there is insufficient employment, competition and even desperation undermine solidarity and reduce centers' ability to provide adequate opportunity for a critical mass of workers. Economic decline also reduced government resources, resulting in funding cuts to city-funded job centers. Organizations in Los Angeles reeled from this economic assault with centers closing, downsizing, and losing membership with the reduced opportunities for employment. Continued high unemployment rates also sharpen resentment of migrant job seekers. However, the organizations have continued to survive and fight into an economic recovery.

Thus, on the whole these organizations have demonstrated impressive ability to adapt to changing circumstances. FNCI's patronage model has successfully adapted to a new party and new policies. However, ANAC's participatory model, effective in mobilizing membership, has placed limits on the size, scope, and connections of the organization, leaving it weak against overwhelming repression. The reaction of the US day labor organizations to anti-immigrant policies appears to have been effective, and their strategic efforts to build a base and broader coalitions have allowed them to successfully mobilize resources and allies despite their relatively small size and the fact that their organizations remain limited in other respects. Likewise, they have survived the years of deepest economic downturn.

Discussion and Conclusions: Comparative Lessons

There are striking similarities between the two national sectors compared in this study. In each case, the activity is seen by many as a nuisance, but it also serves useful and even necessary economic purposes. There are disputes over the use of public space. Mexican street vendor associations and day laborer organizations in the United States are both compelled to develop political power because they lack economic power. To build political power, they seek a balance between negotiation and confrontation, using both as appropriate. In each case, organizations function from the neighborhood level to the metropolitan or even national level.

Perhaps most importantly, the organizations in these two sectors win in similar ways. The causal chain can be represented as self-organization → alliances → political power

Self-organization creates basic legitimacy and credibility (of the promise of votes or other support, or threat of protest), which are the keys to acquiring allies. Self-organization also builds organizational capacity, crucial to making effective use of allies. Alliances, then, are the path to political power, which, as we noted above, is essential because these worker dispose of little economic power. We hasten to add that the victories have been modest, constituting a basic defense of these workers' right to work and standard of living.

This generalization suggests that associational power, rather than symbolic power, is the main cornerstone of organizational success in both cases. (Classification struggles do not emerge as a theme.) The FNCI story is strikingly similar to Agarwala's account of bargaining by Indian informal worker organizations driven by the "vote bank."[58] Yet symbolic power intertwines with associational power in interesting and sometimes unexpected ways in these histories. Day laborer organizations tap the image of the "deserving," hard-working immigrant in winning public support for their right to solicit and carry out work. More unexpectedly, the relatively powerful AFL-CIO also wins symbolic points by taking up the cause of excluded workers of color. ANAC mobilizes symbolic power when it represents its members as authentic artisans worthy of occupying a historic plaza—though ultimately FNCI's vote-bank politics has proven more potent. Alliances also are central to these movements' successes—but the unions at the center of recent research on labor alliances are only one of many allies in the United States and are not a factor in Mexico. Certainly these organizations have displayed the strategic flexibility highlighted in non-trade-union groups by analysts of union-"other" labor alliances.

The self-organization … political power chain additionally suggests, a priori, some of the contextual variables that are likely to shape *different* organizational forms and strategies. The *political environment* (government policies, party structure, stance of the dominant party) is likely to mold both opportunities for self-organization and possibilities for alliances to wield power. The *institutional environment* (the mix of unions, NGOs, and other organizations, the laws structuring them, and their own political and strategic perspectives) is likely to particularly affect possibilities for alliances. *Workforce characteristics* will likely condition self-organizational outcomes. And, stepping away from context, *organizational history and ideology* seem prone to shape both self-organizational capacity and alliance building.

All of these differences do in fact emerge in the comparison between the two countries. Like Chun,[59] we find some convergence in strategies, and like Tilly and colleagues,[60] we find critical divergences. Identifying these divergences offers added analytical leverage on how winning (and losing) organizational forms and strategies emerge and what alliances are built.

To start with, Mexican street vendor associations focus on politics proper, while US day labor groups devote much energy to internal leadership development and dialog with neighbors. ANAC, with its focus on encouraging participation, is a partial exception in the case of Mexico. Correspondingly, the most common form of organization among Mexican street vendors is vertical service providers tied to patronage networks (consistent with the findings of Cross and other analysts)—again, ANAC is exceptional—whereas US day laborers are mainly organized in a participatory manner (although YPI is an exception).

In Mexico City street vendors come together with dual identities, as proprietors and as nonwaged workers. This duality results because most vendors are not wage workers, but rather self-employed, though often at the margins of survival. Day laborers in Los Angeles, by contrast, are indeed wage workers and unite as such. But day laborers are not organized as employees in the narrow sense of a union but are instead also integrated into activities typical of labor intermediaries and above all community organizations. Thus, in both cases there are elements of hybridity in the organizations.

The main struggle in our Mexican cases is precisely for the right to sell in publi and for the monopoly on this right in certain places. Day laborers in the United States also fought for the right to seek employment in public areas. But they avoid a monopoly on this right, with an organizational model that recognizes the permeability between job search within a center and outside of the center, and that puts a high value on friendly relations with the entire population of day laborers. Most importantly, they seek to intervene in debates about immigration policy, as the vast majority of day laborers are migrants, many of whom are undocumented. Another distinction in the field of public policy is that the Mexican vendors use negotiation and promises of political support to vote as their main tools of political pressure (along with protest in some cases), while in the US day laborers also frequently use litigation and legislation.

The differences in organizational form and strategy in both cases arise from each movement's history and institutional environment. The history of informal street vendor organizations in Mexico is that they were born out of the struggle for the right to sell. The organizations sought (and seek) to effectively eliminate and overcome these challenges. Leaders are vendors or sometimes lawyers or political operatives (and sometimes gangsters) who know how to navigate the political system. The US day labor movement, by comparison, was organized by leftist Salvadoran refugees in the United States who sought to organize Salvadoran populations and then migrants from other countries by applying models of popular education and community organizing incubated in Central American resistance movements. This different trajectory leads to two important differences in outcome. By drawing on traditions from other countries, they provided new solutions to the organizational problems that mainstream unions and community organizations in the United States had not been able to solve. But also, being an immigrant population and largely undocumented, day laborers are always vulnerable and lack the right to vote. Without the vote, a patronage-based service model is much less attractive.

Environmental divergences also help explain organizational differences. In Mexico, seven decades of PRI corporatism consolidated a patronage system and the PRD continues to maintain this status quo in the Mexico City government. This political matrix is more hospitable to organizations that accommodate to patronage. Enforcement of the law is quite discretionary: it can be applied selectively and with much flexibility. In American cities there are also patronage systems, but since day labor workers can't vote, these patronage structures are largely irrelevant for them. US cities are closer to the rule of law—though, of course, still with discretion and selective enforcement—which means the organizations place more importance on litigation and legislation. In the United States, changes in the content and application of immigration law have been very consequential for day laborers. For example, the amnesty program in the reform of 1986 (IRCA) and provisions for resettlement of Central American political refugees gave permanent residency or citizenship to many leaders of the day labor movement. But as previously explained, increased repression against immigrants in recent years has forced changes in strategy.

Another distinction is found in the origins of the two lines of work. In Mexico, selling on public streets is a centuries-old tradition with pre-Hispanic origins, which gives it certain legitimacy. In the United States, there was a history of day laborers in the early twentieth century, but it was not a well-known tradition when it was reinitiated by the new wave of migrants in the late twentieth century. New policies—whether permissive or restrictive—were called for in response to these activities viewed as new (and often unwelcome).

It is also worth noting some parallels and divergences found in the most important alliances of the two movements, and the determinants of success and failure. Regarding alliances, both began with localized struggles and formed the partnerships appropriate to this form of struggle. In Mexico, street vendor groups based on a patronage model such as the FNCI created vertical alliances with politicians as sponsors. Democratic street vendor groups like ANAC created horizontal alliances with peer organizations. In the United States, day labor groups began their work in their local areas, allying with supporters in local government and local community organizations. But then the day labor fight became national as they became part of the heated debate over immigration policy. This change of scale required NDLON to reach for vertical alliances, establishing partnerships with the civil rights organization MALDEF and with the AFL-CIO.

To analyze the determinants of success, again it is useful to distinguish between two types of struggle. One type is highly localized. Here unity can be maintained for self-organization and active participation and dialog with the affected community, as practiced by the ANAC and the US day labor organizations. In a hyperlocal environment, participatory strategies can work even more effectively than vertical strategies associated with a powerful partner. But broader changes in policy can require new strategies. In Mexico City, the renewed launch of a centralized policy to "cleanse" the historical centers and in the United States, the increase in anti-immigrant repression and the spread of state laws against immigrants called for coalitions with large and powerful allies. To achieve such alliances one must have something to offer to a desirable partner. In Mexico, the change favored a patronage model based on exchanging votes for support, and put more autonomous organizations like ANAC on the defensive. In the United States, NDLON could offer the AFL-CIO an ability to organize "unorganizable" workers and an image boost, and the two have intervened jointly in the immigration debate.

Thus changes in the political environment may change the requirements for success and alter the fortunes of organizations. But economic changes can do the same. The US economic downturn and slow recovery presented a formidable challenge to the day labor movement.

These comparisons suggest further implications for a more general analysis of informal worker organizations. Common challenges, such as control over public space, tend to result in elements of convergence in the practices of these groups. Above all, one should expect an important role for politics because most informal workers, organized or not, have little economic power. The institutional and political environment is important, as evidenced by the influence of corporatism in Mexico and the weight of immigration law in the United States. But the history and ideology specific to an organization and its founders and top leaders also matter. Success demands sources of new strategic ideas, and also flexibility in an economic and political landscape constantly in flux. Creativity and flexibility are essential, but so is strength to prevail. For these organizations, when faced with large-scale challenges, this strength comes primarily from alliances with already powerful groups. We doubt that the self-organization → alliances → political power model represents a universal formula for successful informal worker organizing, but its appearance in both cases suggests that it is worth probing the prevalence of this approach. Overall, the similarities and differences between Mexican associations of street vendors and US day labor organizations teach us much about the limitations and the potential of organizing informal workers.

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