

You Are Not Alone!

Better Working Conditions through Community Organization

*An interview with Jorge Anguiano
by Kelly Malone*

Working conditions are dangerous for Latino immigrant laborers. To find jobs, they often stand in front of hardware stores waiting for contractors to pick them up for a day of work. They don't know what job they will be asked to do, what the pay will be, or what the conditions will be. If they try to negotiate their pay or point out dangerous conditions, they'll probably lose the job.

For 18 years, Casa Latina, a member of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, has been on a mission to change these conditions. Casa Latina organizes day laborers so that they can earn a living wage in safe working conditions and with a voice at work.

Jorge Anguiano used to get work by standing in front of Lowes or Home Depot. Now he gets his jobs through Casa Latina's Workers' Center. In this interview, he discusses how his work life has changed as a result.

What is it like trying to get work by standing in front of Lowes or Home Depot?

It is difficult. You can't be sure what the pay rate will be. And you don't know what type of job you will be doing. There is no time to ask or negotiate, because you just have to jump in the truck or you don't get the work.

It sounds like there are a lot of unknowns.

Yes, that is true. One time, I was working in Phoenix, Arizona. We were standing on the street, and a man asked us if we wanted a seasonal job in Washington state cutting branches for Christmas decorations. He said he would charge \$300 for transportation and would take that out of our pay.



He said he did not want any workers who spoke English. Why? Because he knew that once we were in Washington, we would have to stay. Usually, that type of job pays \$1,200 dollars per week. I knew we were not going to make that much, and that was okay. But the first week, he took out the \$300 from my pay and gave me only \$50.00.

Can you talk about some of the differences between finding jobs on the street and being hired through the Workers' Center.

One difference is higher pay. At Casa Latina, we earn \$15 per hour for gardening. Instead of rushing a truck, we hold a raffle for choosing who goes out on a job. We also have a Workers' Assembly where we make rules for how we will work. Before we go out on the job, the dispatcher tells the employer our rules about safety, equipment, and wages. In the old days, we had no negotiating power. But now we do, thanks to the Workers' Center.

Do the employers treat you any differently because you're part of the Workers' Center?

Yes! When we are hired through Casa Latina, the employers trust us more than someone who picks us up at the Home Depot. The customer knows the reputation of Casa Latina. Also, when we get jobs through the Workers' Center, there is a better chance that the job will go well. The employers treat us better, so we feel proud and want to do a really good job for ourselves and for Casa Latina.

How does Casa Latina help ensure the workers' safety on the job?

To be eligible for the raffle, you have to take a four-hour safety training that Casa Latina developed and is approved by OSHA. So every worker knows the rules, and the dispatcher discusses these with the customer before you go on the job.

Do any employers ignore those rules?

Oh, yes. They do sometimes. On one job, we had to move gravel up and down about three flights of stairs. It was very slippery. We tried to explain to the employer that the conditions were very dangerous, and the employer didn't like that. In this case, we finished our work that day, but we refused to go back the next day.

What do you do when you arrive at a site and the employer asks you to do dangerous work?

We call the dispatcher, and the dispatcher explains to the employer that the conditions are unsafe. If the employer doesn't want to make the working conditions safer, the dispatcher will send someone to pick us up if the van is available, or we take the bus, or if one of us drove, we give the others a ride. We lose pay for the day, but we show the employer that we are serious and we are united. We all leave together. The employer will have no one to do the work.

So let's talk some more about the increase in wages. How does that affect your work?

We take pride in getting paid more per hour, and we know we have to do a really good job. We offer trainings so that workers will get more skills. For example, if you are doing a gardening job, you have to know so many types of plants. You don't want to pull up an expensive plant because you think it's a weed.

Say someone is new, and he doesn't know the plants and maybe digs up the wrong ones.

That happened one time, and the customer called to complain. The dispatcher gave us the complaint, and we took it to the Workers' Assembly. We decided that if the person who made the mistake wanted to keep gardening, he would need to

take the workshop. And, while he was learning, he could go out with someone who is more experienced. We can help each other this way.

What else does the Workers' Center do?

We offer English classes to those who want to improve their English. I think it should be mandatory for workers to take the ESL classes. The women

who do domestic work have to take 20 hours per month of English classes. I think we should, too.

Why is learning English important?

It is important for all of us to be able to reach out to the community. We're not always going to be welcome in the community because they don't understand us. But we're here in the community whether people like it or not. And we need to have a stronger voice. We need to learn how other people think and how things work, and we'll feel more comfortable because we'll have a sense of pride and feel a part of things. It takes a long time. We as workers need to work harder to get involved out there.

Kelly Malone is a writer and editor in Seattle. She writes grants for Casa Latina. Jorge Anguiano is a member of Casa Latina <casa-latina.org>.

Find a Workers' Center

Restaurant Opportunity Center <rocunited.org> helps restaurant workers win fair wages and benefits, and it offers education and training.

Interfaith Worker Justice <iwj.org> has a list of workers centers all over the country.

Or...search for "workers center" + your city or region and find a workers' center near you.

