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Dollars & Sense Article: “The Vermont Workers’ Center Leads Breakthrough on Healthcare”

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This was published in Dollars and Sense (<http://dollarsandsense.org/>)’s 2011 Labor Day issue (print only). I’m only now getting around to posting it here. The Vermont Migrant Farmworker Solidarity Project has since changed their name to Migrant Justice/Justicia Migrante.

On Sunday, May 1st, thousands of Vermonters gathered in the state capital of Montpelier under the banner of the Healthcare Is a Human Right (HCHR) Campaign. This was the third year in a row the Vermont Workers’ Center (VWC) (<http://www.workerscenter.org>), which coordinates the HCHR campaign, had organized a mass rally for healthcare on this traditional workers’ holiday, but this year was especially significant in two ways. The first was that after years of grassroots organizing by the HCHR campaign and others, the state legislature was on the verge of passing a bill, supported by the governor, that would commit the state to a universal, single-payer healthcare system by 2017. The second, however, was more troubling. The week before this May Day rally, the state senate had added an amendment to the healthcare bill that would have specifically excluded undocumented people from coverage – an amendment that, according to the governor’s office, had “zero percent” chance of being removed from the final bill.

This challenge gave this year’s May Day rally more of the flavor of the other major May Day rallies the country has seen in recent years, with signs supporting immigrants’ rights seen throughout the crowd. Working together with the Vermont Migrant Farmworker Solidarity Project (<http://migrantjustice.net>), the VWC mobilized Vermonters to demand that universal means everyone, that Healthcare Is a Human Right means that we all have a right to healthcare by virtue of being human, regardless of immigration status or any other category.

One of the featured speakers, a farmworker, spoke of the struggles both he and the farmer who employs him have had with the healthcare system. He explained that three years ago, after the barn roof caved in, “We worked in the damp cold all winter and that’s when I got this cough.” He finally went to the hospital and has since paid over \$1000 in monthly installments out of his meager wages. But he does not blame his employer. “The farmer pays us what he can. I know he can’t pay more. His wife is paralyzed. His son is incapacitated. His bills keep piling up. I couldn’t do what he does.”

While some healthcare advocacy organizations had been reluctant to fight the amendment, urging a “pragmatic” approach in order to make sure the overall healthcare bill passed, the VWC and VTMFSP held firm and continued to mobilize grassroots pressure. By the time the bill passed out of conference committee on May 2nd, the amendment had been removed.

The Workers’ Center Movement

The Vermont Workers’ Center and the Vermont Migrant Farmworker Solidarity Project are both part of a wave of new worker-based grassroots organizations which have emerged around the country in the past two decades, often referred to as the “workers’ center” movement. Mostly, though not entirely, based in working-class communities of color and/or sectors of the economy with little or no union representation, these organizations have emerged in part because the traditional “workers’ movement” – the trade unions – has been either unable or unwilling to organize these workers, or to be a vehicle for their political aspirations.

The political and organizational vacuum that workers’ centers have emerged to fill has its roots in the economic changes of the last several decades, in the legal framework of collective bargaining in the United States, and in the political and organizational conservatism of the US trade union movement.

The economic agenda of the corporate elite since the 1970s, commonly referred to as “neoliberalism,” has fundamentally restructured the workplace. Production has been shifted from the vertically-integrated national corporations of the mid-twentieth century to flexible, global supply chains, while services have been increasingly privatized. The large factories and government workplaces that were bastions of union strength have been replaced with myriads of sub-contractors and private service agencies, and this period has also seen a tremendous growth in casual or precarious work, part-time jobs, low-wage “independent contractors,” day labor and other forms of temporary work.

These changes have posed organizing challenges for all of the world’s labor movements, but the legal framework for collective bargaining in the United States, which requires unions to win representation elections on a shop-by-shop basis, exacerbates those challenges even further. Furthermore, certain categories of workers – domestic workers, taxi drivers or port drivers classified as “independent contractors,” public-sector workers in many Southern states, and others – are excluded from any collective bargaining rights at all.

Finally, the organizational and political conservatism of US trade unions has made it difficult for the labor movement to rise to these challenges. Decades of reliance on the government labor boards rather than direct worker action has left many unions unable to even conceive of workers in these new and growing areas of the economy as “organizable.” Unions such as SEIU that have brought in workers as dues-paying members through innovative campaigns have often then buried them in bureaucratic “local” unions which cover multiple states, have tens of thousands of members, and do little to engage their new members as leaders. And the hostility towards radicalism that has been endemic in the labor movement since the anti-communist purges of the 1950s has left few unions with a political vision which could appeal to this new and growing sector of the working class, whose issues are not merely the bread and butter of wages and benefits on the job, but also racial and gender justice; social rights to healthcare, education, and transportation; and immigrants’ rights to live and work in dignity and without fear.

Locked out of or uninterested in joining the formal “labor movement,” workers have created their own organizations, and in recent years these organizations have formed or joined a variety of networks, including the National Day Labor Organizing Network (<http://ndlon.org>), Jobs with Justice (<http://www.jwj.org>), Right to the City (<http://www.righttothecity.org>), the Pushback Network (<http://pushbacknetwork.org/>), Grassroots Global Justice (<http://ggjalliance.org>), the National Domestic Workers Alliance (<http://www.domesticworkers.org>) and the Excluded Workers Congress (<http://excludedworkers.org/>). These networks have begun to have a serious organizational impact on progressive movements in the United States, and have won significant victories. GGJ was crucial in organizing the first and second US Social Forums. The NDWA recently helped secure passage of a convention on domestic work at the International Labor Organization. The Excluded Workers Congress, whose slogan is “Building a Labor Movement for the 21st Century,” has begun to redefine what the “labor movement” is.

The Vermont Workers’ Center

The Vermont Workers’ Center was founded in 1998 by a group of young, low-wage workers, who envisioned an organization that would fight for “an economically just and democratic Vermont in which all residents have living wages, decent health care, childcare, housing and transportation.” Early campaigns for livable wages and against privatization brought the group into contact with rank and file trade unionists, and in 2000 the group affiliated with the national labor-community coalition Jobs with Justice.

The core work of the VWC in its early years centered around building community support for workers who were engaged in organizing and contract struggles. The VWC articulated the issues that workers were fighting for, such as wages, preserving healthcare benefits, and fighting plant shutdowns, as part of a broader political agenda for livable wages, universal healthcare, or global justice. In doing this, the VWC was able to move other members of the broad working class into taking action in solidarity with particular workers’ struggles. However, even with many union organizing victories in the early part of the new century – many of them into progressive, democratic unions and some of them in large workplaces – leaders of the VWC realized that union organizing alone was not going to build the kind of working-class power needed to realize an “economically just and democratic Vermont.”

The VWC began experimenting with other approaches to organizing. In 2003, the VWC formed a partnership with the United Electrical Workers union (UE) in a campaign to organize all of the retail workers in the state capital of Montpelier. In the fall of 2005, the VWC helped organize a campaign with a group of parents in Burlington, the largest city in the state, when the school district tried to shut down the elementary school in their working-class neighborhood. And the VWC built relationships with other workers’ centers and independent working-class organizations around the country, joining Grassroots Global Justice in 2005 and bringing a delegation to the first US Social Forum in 2007.

In 2008 the VWC launched the Healthcare Is a Human Right Campaign. This campaign was chosen for several reasons:

- The broken healthcare system was an issue in all of the VWC’s work. It was difficult if not impossible for workers to achieve livable wages when the cost of healthcare kept rising.

Unionized workers were increasingly being forced to go on strike to defend their benefits, and non-unionized workers were afraid to organize for fear of being fired and losing their health coverage. Healthcare costs were squeezing public sector budgets, prompting public employers to cut services for the public and demand givebacks from workers.

- It would be a campaign that could truly engage all Vermonters. Most of the VWC's activity had been concentrated in the parts of the state with greatest union density: Burlington and Central Vermont. A statewide healthcare campaign would require becoming a truly statewide organization. Furthermore, the immediacy of healthcare as an issue would make the campaign much more accessible than union solidarity campaigns, which often require would-be supporters to master unfamiliar acronyms and jargon.
- Most importantly, it would allow the VWC, and the state's labor and progressive movements in general, to go on the offensive, after nearly a decade of fighting mostly defensive battles. It would be a campaign in which the VWC could put forward its vision of an economically just and democratic Vermont, not just as a mission statement, but as a goal that could be won, at least in part.

Health Care as a Working-Class Issue

The VWC sees healthcare as a crucial arena for working-class organizing. Much as workers around the country have felt and acted on the need to build worker organizations independent of the AFL-CIO, the VWC leadership believes that the working class needs organizations independent of political parties. "We need to build a powerful people's movement around the basic moral values our communities share: values about taking care for one another and having everyone be able to lead a dignified life," says VWC Director James Haslam.

The economic well-being of almost all parts of the broad working class – from the unemployed and disabled through to "middle-class" workers such as teachers and nurses – is deeply tied to the healthcare system. Healthcare costs eat up wages at the bargaining table. Rising healthcare costs also drive up expenses in public sector budgets; this is then used to justify austerity measures which hit low-income communities the hardest. The employer-based system of healthcare ties workers who do have coverage to their jobs, giving employers more control and helping them to squeeze workers for higher productivity. The entire working class has an economic stake in universal healthcare.

The current healthcare system also divides the working class into separate groups, who perceive themselves as having different interests: "middle class" workers who still have coverage, those who have little or no coverage, and those who rely on Medicare and Medicaid. Striking teachers in Vermont, fighting to preserve their health coverage, face resentment, instead of class solidarity, from other sectors of the working class who do not have coverage. Conversely, the struggle for universal healthcare has great potential for uniting people across boundaries not only of coverage, but of race, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status. As VWC leader Mary Gerish puts it, "The thing that's so great about the human rights context is that it unifies everyone."

Finally, healthcare is an ideal terrain to take on the ruling class ideologies that permeate our society. Healthcare is an issue that is deeply felt. It is, after all, an issue about our very bodies, and those of the ones we love and care about. Most people have an intense commitment to taking care of their families, and of their communities. In healthcare especially, that commitment is in contradiction with

the ideologies of individualism, consumerism and market fundamentalism which are widely accepted, on a surface level, throughout US society. When a healthcare campaign stays grounded in human experience rather than being drawn into the dry realm of cost-benefit analyses, there is an opportunity to transform the way people think about the world.

A New Healthcare Law

On May 26th, Vermont's governor signed the new universal healthcare bill into law. It had taken years of struggle, during which the Vermont Workers' Center engaged tens of thousands of Vermonters through surveys, petitions, postcard campaigns, public hearings and mass rallies. Through human rights hearings, "people's forums" and innovative video projects, the VWC had kept the experiences of regular people with the healthcare system at the front and center of the debate for three years. The VWC had grown from a small organization with a single staff person to a true statewide network, with organizing committees in every county, active volunteer committees for media, education and policy, and most importantly dozens of grassroots leaders with a sophisticated understanding of how political power works.

There are still many challenges ahead. The bill passed this year leaves much to future legislators to decide, including both the scope of coverage and the funding mechanism for the new healthcare system. But the Vermont Workers' Center and its allies will face those challenges with the crucial understanding that politics is not about policy, it is about power, and that the economics of healthcare, like all economics, is fundamentally not about dollars and cents, but about people and their experiences.

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