



The Workers' Edge

The Voice of the Tompkins County
Workers' Center

TCWorkersCenter.org
Phone 607-269-0409



Unemployed and Underemployed
Support Group at the Workers'
Center

On The Edge...
Summer 2010

by Bev Abplanalp

I imagine yourself working in your dream job. Go ahead, you deserve it! Now, a couple of months into this great job, you arrive at a department meeting and see a list of cuts in hours on the white board. This is what happened to me, and it led me to becoming a Community Union Organizer of the Tompkins County Workers' Center.

In April last year, I saw my job at the top of "the list." In my case the hours cut represented my entire job, not just a portion of my job. My initial moment of disbelief was followed by my throat tightening and

thing back from 90% or more of the employers we contact. Actually getting a phone interview or face-to-face interview is rare, possibly 3-5%.

Looking for fresh approaches, I drove to attend weekly participant driven job seekers' meetings in Auburn and in Syracuse. While driving, I thought about the possibility of having such a dynamic meeting for unemployed and underemployed workers in Tompkins County.

Around Thanksgiving, I met Mike Roenke and took him to Auburn meetings until his volunteering led him to a job with a local non-profit. We contacted the Community Union Organizers at the TCWC who enthusiastically received our request to hold a late afternoon meeting so both underemployed and unemployed people could attend. Carlos Guteirrez agreed to collaborate with us. Our group's mission is to advocate for and empower people who have yet to find full time employment that pays a living wage.

We have participant-driven discussions aimed at creating strategies and solutions to positively address challenges and barriers to employment that pays a living wage in our community. We actively engage in networking. We learn ways to become

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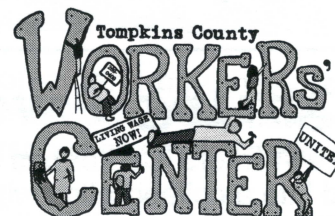


Bev Abplanalp

my stomach attempting to flip over. What would I do to support myself and my partner who was receiving chemotherapy and could no longer work? Would any one notice if I walked out of the meeting?

I quickly counted the weeks of work until the day the cuts became effective. I became a highly proactive job seeker, determined to land another job in those 9 – 10 weeks.

In the sixteen months since, I've met highly talented, enthusiastic people with a great work ethic. We are sending out hundreds of cover letters, resumes and curriculum vitae. We never hear any-



Member Spotlight: Carlos Gutierrez

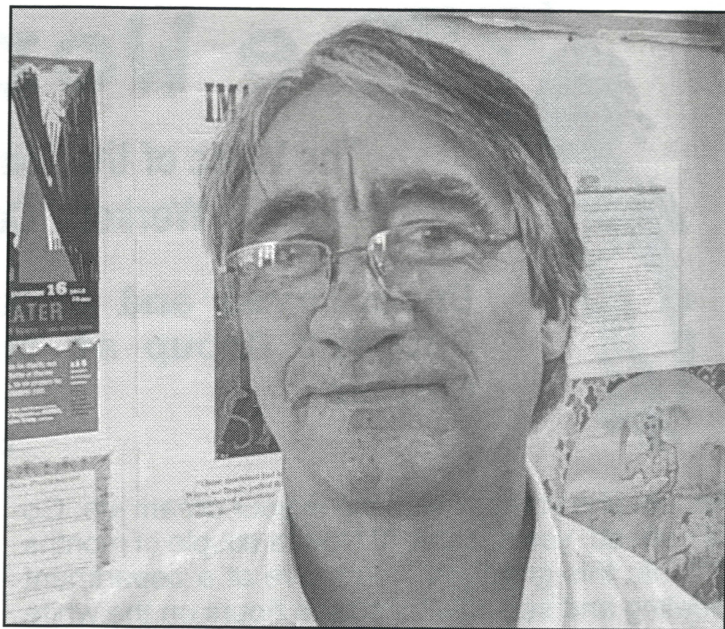
by Julie Gorman

Carlos came to Boulder, Colorado from Chile in 1976 as a political exile. He got into the University of Colorado and earned a Bachelor's Degree in Sociology. Afterwards, Carlos got a job working for the New York State Department of Children and Family Services. Tuition assistance from this job gave Carlos the opportunity to attend Alfred University, where he earned his Master's degree in Community Service Administration. He has also worked with the New York State Department of Labor in the Unemployment Insurance division, and is currently taking civil service tests and looking for steady employment in a related field.

Carlos got involved with the Workers' Center as part of a community of people who were interested in the subject of Workers' Rights, especially in the idea of Living Wage Rights. That wasn't all that brought him here, though: Carlos had a friend who was fired from Collegetown Pizza around the time of the 2004 Collegetown Pizza labor dispute.

"My friend told me that there were immigrants working there who were being treated badly and living unnaturally," says Carlos. [They were living in a basement.] "They didn't get any overtime pay and often didn't receive their full paycheck. We talked to folks at the Workers' Center, did interviews with my friend and other employees from Collegetown Pizza and then decided to go with a group to talk to the person in charge of the restaurant.

After that, the case was passed to New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer where it was determined that there were several workers, including those that left, who were owed money for working long hours, seven days per week, with no break, no time off, and very little pay. The owner was bullying the employees. That was my first big



Carlos Gutierrez

experience with the Workers' Center." Five workers were given \$7230 in back wages.

Currently Carlos is a Community Union Organizer with the Workers' Center, a Member of our Leadership Team and Base-Building Team and helping to organize the Unemployed and Underemployed Support Group. His main interests are the development of community awareness of labor conditions, labor laws, and discrimination. He is well aware of and respects the strength it takes to work hard every day for a living.

Outside of community and employment projects, Carlos is a husband, a father of four, and a musician. He helps to organize bands with members of the community to give people who may not be considered "professionals" the chance to enjoy what they love.

Thank you, Carlos, for being a dedicated member of the Workers' Center!

Fighting Poverty in the 21st Century

The Workers' Center has entered into a collaboration with the Cornell research project "Fighting Poverty in the 21st Century" in order to better understand what communities and people can do to fight poverty and promote economic human rights. The project will be gath-

ering information using an online survey ("Economic Human Rights in Upstate New York"), and the questions concern food security, job security and benefits, housing, and family status.

The online survey should be ready to go in September, so please consider taking a few

minutes to fill it out. In the meantime if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact Tom Hirschl at 255-1688; tah4@cornell.edu or Pete Meyers 269-0409 or tcwrc@yahoo.com

It Takes A Village and a Community Union To Help Raise a Beloved Community

by Linda Holzbaaur and Pete Meyers

When I first heard about the dream of creating a group of Community Union Organizers (CUOs), I wasn't exactly sure what that would look like. There isn't really a model to follow in this case: we're creating an idea from near scratch. CUOs are not a union in the traditional way and are a teeny bit different than 'it takes a village.' It felt right to have people in our communities looking out for each other but what exactly is a Community Union Organizer?

The answer for me became clear when I heard the stories of the people who we instinctively invited to the earliest meetings. Bev and Mike, suffering prolonged unemployment themselves, met at an out-of-town support group. James came to us when his employer stole thousands of dollars of hard-earned wages from him and his coworkers. Nikki found the Workers' Center when her bosses felt they had the right to snatch the tips of their employees. Eric, a food delivery driver, felt motivated by his religion and morality to defend his coworkers when he witnessed them being mistreated at work.

What binds this group of people, Community Union Organizers, together – blending their individual stories into the one story of the first ever Community Union Organizers group – was their determination to use their painful experiences to help others overcome their problems. They wanted to share our work so that oth-

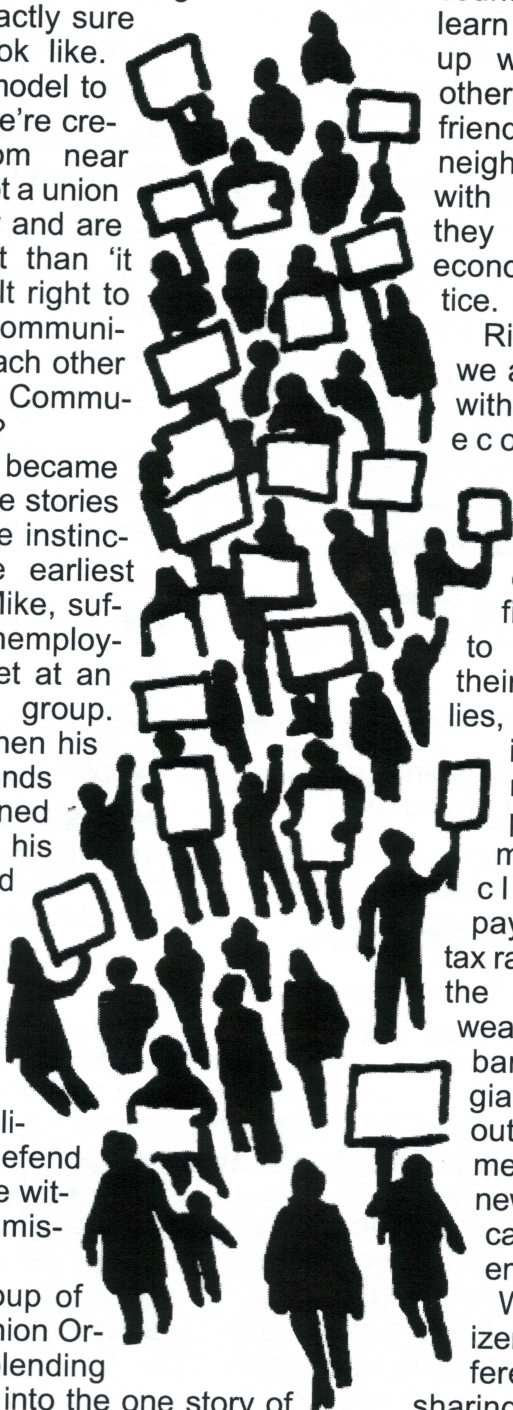
ers in the county could learn to stand up with each other, pulling friends and neighbors up with them as they work for economic justice.

Right now we are faced with many economic problems: workers can't find jobs to support their families, the state is bankrupt, the poor and middle classes pay higher tax rates than the super wealthy. Our banks get giant bailout payments while our people can't buy their kids new sneakers. This insanity must stop but how can an average person really make a difference?

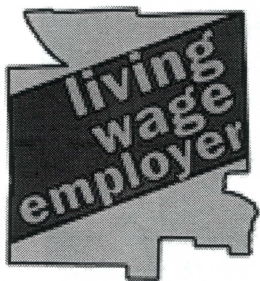
We think that the Community Union Organizers may be one path towards creating a different world. Think of our CUOs: people sharing their stories, pooling their ideas and insights, working together. And we have a request for you, too: won't you join us, share your story with us and help create the bright and hopeful world we want to pass along to our children?

Altering the sense of what a traditional labor union does into a new definition of something we call a Community Union, the TCWC envisions the entire community, countywide, as being the proverbial 'bargaining unit'. We are both upholding the 'social contract' as it presently exists with regards to worker/labor rights as well as 'raising the bar' with regards to those rights when we find that the 'social contract' doesn't measure up to what we collectively think is right. We are using as a springboard of inspiration the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, (specifically Economic Human Rights,) which was ratified by the United Nations in 1948.

To uphold that contract, we need the participation of workers, employers, consumers, and government. In other words, you.



Support our Certified Living Wage Businesses!



Advocacy Center
Alternatives Federal Credit Union
Ancient Wisdom Productions
ASI Renovations

First Unitarian Society of Ithaca
Green Clean
GreenStar Cooperative Market
Home Green Home
Hospicare and Palliative Care
Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County
Ithaca Carshare
Ithaca Health Alliance
Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services
Ithaca Urban Renewal Agency
IthacaMed
Jeffrey Feirman Building and Renovation
Jewel Box
Jillian's Drawers
Loaves and Fishes
Money with a Mission
Morris' Men's Wear & Morris Too
Multicultural Resource Center
Northeast Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine
OAR - Opportunities, Alternatives and Resources
Ongweoweh Corporation
PPM Homes, LLC
Renovus Energy, Inc.

Shade Tree Auto, Inc.
Significant Elements, A Program of Historic Ithaca, Inc.
Singlebrook Technology, Inc.
Snug Planet LLC
Sparks Electric
Sprague & Janowsky Accountancy
St. Catherine of Siena Church
St. John's Church
St. Luke Lutheran Church
Stone Quarry House Bed and Breakfast
Sunny Brook Builders
Taitem Engineering
Taughannock Aviation Corporation
Temple Beth El
The Frame Shop
The Strebel Planning Group
Tompkins Community Action
Tompkins County
Tompkins County Public Library
Town of Ithaca
TRC Energy Services (Ithaca)
United Auto Workers Local 2300
Upscale Remodeling Corporation
Ward & Murphy (Law Firm)

Autumn Leaves Used Books
Black Box Computer Consulting
Blue Spruce Painting and Decorating
Boyce Thompson Institute
Buffalo Street Books
Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga
CFCU Community Credit Union
Colonial Veterinary Hospital
Community Foundation of Tompkins County
Contemporary Trends, Inc.
Custum Construction
Day Care & Child Development Council of Tompkins County
Downtown Ithaca Alliance
Finger Lakes ReUse
First Baptist Church of Ithaca
First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca

New Edition of the Workers' Rights Handbook Available!

At long last, the Workers' Center has updated our infamous Workers' Rights Handbook, a 2010 edition, in pocket size format. The books are available both online at our website <http://tcworkerscenter.org/docs/may2010wrhb.pdf> Call our office at 269-0409 and we'll send you a hard copy

in the mail! The booklet lays out, in a very simple format, the laws that presently operate as our 'social contract' in the realm of labor. Thanks to Assemblyperson Barbara Lipton for providing an excellent Forward to our handbook!

check out
our blog

tcworkerscenter.wordpress.com

The Tompkins County Workers' Center is a Project Partner with the Center for Transformative Action

Marietta

by Pete Meyers

Towards the end of the Stewart Mott Foundation Conference in Chicago, which four of the TCWC's leaders attended in late June, where we learned about how to develop our Public Narrative, a woman from an organization in Chicago, the Centro de Trabajadores Unidos (United Workers' Center) talked about how a number of immigrant workers were about to be terminated from their jobs with the Marietta Corporation in Chicago, just because of their immigration status. She passed out fliers encouraging people to call the Corporate Headquarters, and when we got the fliers, we realized that the Corporate Headquarters

were located in Cortland, NY, one county to the north of us.

We should not have been surprised. The Tompkins County Workers' Center has gotten a number of calls and visits from workers who complained of unfair and abusive working conditions at the main production facility in Cortland (Marietta produces shampoos and conditioners that appear in hotel rooms all over the world and is a Fortune 500 company.)

In addition, our sister organization in Cortland County, the Cortland Workers' Rights Board, estimates that at least 20% of its complaints over the years have

come from Marietta workers.

On Friday, July 9th, a contingent of seven TCWC members traveled to Cortland to deliver petitions with 850 signatures on behalf of workers threatened with termination in Chicago, as a show of solidarity with the workers and the Latino Worker's Center in Chicago.

It occurred to us that part of what potentially makes some awareness-raising around the Marietta Corporation compelling is the fact that it is a huge corporation that has production facilities all over the world and is headquartered in Cortland, NY, very close to our own door.

Do you know of anyone who is working or has worked at the Marietta Corporation in Cortland? Please contact our office at the Tompkins County Workers' Center at 607- 269-0409 or TCWRC@yahoo.com.

Let Justice Roll Down Like Waters

Adam Smith, who is considered by many the father of modern economics, wrote about the "invisible hand of the market," which guides the free market to produce an optimal result for all. From this seed has grown an idea that freedom of the marketplace is its own kind of morality. It seems, in fact, that the marketplace has become the primary guide to morality for our society.

Yet all of the world's major religions recognize that there are more important moral standards than those offered by the marketplace. The scripture shared by the Jewish and Christian traditions clearly states "You shall not defraud a poor and needy hired servant, whether he be one of your own countrymen or one of the aliens who live in your comminute." [Deut. 24:14-15]

We see from examples in our own community that market forces are not enough to ensure that workers are not defrauded. For example, current standards in the marketplace permit businesses that pay wages that keep workers below the poverty level to flourish. The Worker's Center focuses its efforts on stopping wage theft here in our own county, with a NY State Depart-

ment of Labor investigation eight months ago finding a number of businesses had denied local workers the wages guaranteed by law. And we see a multinational hair salon corporation, Regis, forcing its hairstylists to sell products at unreasonable rates just to keep their jobs! These are just a couple of examples, among many, of how workers are badly treated. It is time for each of us to reach back to the core values of our own hearts, of our own religious or philosophical traditions, and to bring those values with us into the marketplace.

It is time for us as a community to share a moral vision of how we want to treat one another and a vision of what our community could be. May it be one where we "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24)

Rev. Darcey Laine is one of the members of the Religious Task Force for a Living Wage, which is an active affiliate of the Tompkins County Workers' Center. This task force addresses issues of justice

from a faith perspective. Anyone interested in this perspective is encouraged to join.

Contact the Workers' Center at 269-0409 for more information.



Unemployment

Continued from Page 1

proactive about our rights in the workplace.

Sharing talents, skills, and resources are at the heart of our efforts. Our groups' members coach each other on how to respond when a job applicant is told that he/she has too little job experience or is told he/she is overqualified for a job. A new phrase that experienced job seekers hear is that the employer is seeking someone with "high" energy. This is used as a frequent cover to discriminate against mature workers. These are topics that bring knowing glances from participants in our group. They have been there.

At the other end of that spectrum, young people have related their experiences of applying for work, seeing the "hiring" sign or job announcement still posted, and being told there is no opening when they inquire about the status of their application. "What's up with that?" one young man recently asked.

We see increasing temporary employment, or the use of temporary employment services to hire workers without the cost of paying benefits. Temporary positions distort the picture of unemployment and under-employment. People who accept these temporary wages are making desperate efforts to support themselves and the families. They fall victim to companies who use this method to escape their responsibilities to provide workers with basic benefits such as health insurance and sick leave.

We frequently hear that the NYS Department of Labor identifies Tompkins County as an area of low unemployment. Talking directly with local job seekers paints a disturbing picture of employers regu-

larly receiving 80 - 125 applications for one job, something human resource departments tend to try to keep quiet.

The Unemployed and Underemployed group is collaborating with local organizations and student groups to raise awareness about ongoing unemployment. We will soon be announcing an event in the fall. Come join us in solidarity. We invite you to join our planning committee.

Write to your local, state, and federal representatives to tell them that you support further extensions of unemployment beyond 99 weeks; because our communities and our country are not creating jobs fast enough to put people back to work. And, circle October 2nd on your calendar, a day when local people will be traveling to Washington, DC to join with underemployed and unemployed people throughout the country to propose further legislative action. We will tell midterm candidates that we will be voting this November!

Tough decisions are part of the daily life in households throughout Tompkins County whose budgets have been stretched to the breaking point due to underemployment and unemployment. The emotional well being of people facing limited local job opportunities is on the line. Be visible. Show your concern. Offer your resources: your time, your caring ear, and your network of contacts. Tell the Workers' Center about job openings. Create a new job that pays a living wage. We meet every Thursday from 4:30 - 6pm at the Workers' Center above Autumn Leaves Bookstore on the Ithaca Commons. Please join us!

*Bev Abplanalp is a Workers' Center member and also is the producer of **U&U and me too: unemployment and underemployment in our town** which airs at 9pm on Thursdays, Time Warner Cable Channel 13*

Medicare for All! Rally

Far Right, Rebecca Elgie of the Tompkins County Health Care Task Force speaking at a rally cosponsored on July 30th by the Workers' Center at DeWitt to celebrate the 45th birthday of Medicare. The rally also focused on Medicare's importance to many people, its cost-effectiveness and its his-

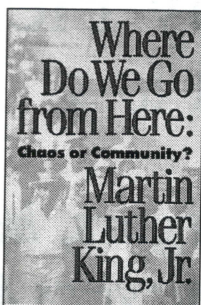
tory. And the fact that we need Medicare for all people!



Mark Your Calendars: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Build

On October 18th, at 6:30 p.m. at the Greater Ithaca Activities Center (GIAC), the Tompkins County Workers' Center will be part of a Public Event designed to unveil the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Build Project (<http://mlkcommunity-build.org>)

The six-month Community Read will be focusing on MLK, Jr.'s final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Six com-



munity organizations will take turns holding community events, once monthly, to focus on one of the six chapters of the book.

In addition, the Workers' Center will be holding a Reading Circle of its own that will begin not long after October 18th. Please contact our office by calling 607-269-0409 or TCWRC@yahoo.com if you're interested in being a part of this important project!

Did You Know?

The long-term sustainability of the Tompkins County Workers' Center is dependent, ultimately, on people such as yourself. For the past couple of years, through our affiliation with Jobs with Justice, we have instituted a Sustainers Program where you can support the Workers' Center in an ongoing way (monthly, quarterly, biannually) by using your credit card. This becomes money that we know we can count on through thick and thin. If you are able to afford even as little as \$5.00 a month, we'd be greatly appreciative!

Just go to

https://afl.salsalabs.com/o/4023/c/200/shop/custom.jsp?donate_page_KEY=26

I Want to Get Involved in the Fight for Workers' Rights!

\$_____ individual Annual Membership
Due=One Hour's wage or \$7.25 if not working
During the next year, **I'LL BE THERE** at least five times for someone else's fight, as well as my own. Contact me with Rapid Response Alerts.

signature

Your name (please print)

Home street address

city

state zip

phone(s)

email

Send to: TCWorkers' Center, 115 The Commons, Ithaca NY 14850

You'll receive a laminated card in the mail or at a meeting. Great to have you with us!

is a member of the Tompkins County Workers' Center (TCWC)

During the next year, **I'LL BE THERE** at least five times for someone else's fight, as well as my own. If enough of us are there, we'll all start winning.

TC Workers' Center, 115 The Commons
Ithaca 607-269-0409 www.TCWorkersCenter.org

I'll be There...

...standing up for our rights as working people to a decent standard of living

...organizing working families to take strong action to secure better economic future for all of us

...fighting for secure family-wage jobs in the face of corporate attacks on working people and our communities

...supporting the right of all workers to organize and bargain collectively in the workplace.

Come one! Come all! Our Annual Labor Day Picnic!

Monday September 6, 11 to 3
Stewart Park



*Hamburgers, hot dogs,
veggie burgers & drinks
provided. bring a side
dish to share.*

Entertainment by Ithaca's
own Gunpoets!

Need Help? Try the Workers' Rights Hotline! 607 269-0409

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115 The Commons

Ithaca NY 14850

TCWorkersCenter.org

