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***“How do black women change the economy
so that it works for them?”***

Insight on how worker centers and unions are working together to protect
workers and raise standards

Lola Smallwood Cuevas wears many hats. In addition to her role at BWC, she serves as project director at the University of California-Los Angeles Labor Center, where she helps train the labor movement’s next generation of leaders through the African American Union Leadership School (AAULS)—the first such program in California.

Smallwood Cuevas formerly served as the political and community coordinator for the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1877. At Local 1877, she was a lead organizer who helped wage a seven-year campaign to successfully organize security officers in 2006 and form Security Officers United (SOULA 2006). Through this work, Smallwood Cuevas helped build a dynamic black community partnership with the largely immigrant union. The black community played a key role in winning that campaign. The group also elected an African American woman as its president.

Smallwood Cuevas co-authored the Labor Center’s publication, Women’s Work: Los Angeles Homecare Workers Revitalize the Labor Movement and penned a chapter in the 2010 book Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities, by the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA.

From Smallwood Cuevas, we learn about the power of partnership between unions and worker centers in tackling issues of wage theft and unemployment. She also shows us that utilizing the organizing prowess of black women and the broader African American community can help build an economy that works for everyone.



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When we look at the crisis of employment, it is impossible to disconnect and untangle that from the black female experience. Our role as the heads of households and our role as primary breadwinners historically in our community, make the economy of black women critically important to the economy of the black community overall. So the question of why black women should organize is really about how do black women change the economy so that it works for them?

In the last 25 or 30 years, we have seen the economy as an individual issue. It is as if it is the worker's fault for the way the economy is working because workers aren't working hard enough. But black women's experience absolutely dispels that myth and explodes the lies about what is happening in the workforce. Our experience really points to the fact that women, through a series of regressive policies, have been left behind.

Black women have disproportionately been impacted by the lack of equal pay for equal work—like not granting labor rights to women who provide services in the home, such as

domestic workers. We've been affected by the assault on public sector jobs, vis-à-vis the attack on government. Black women who have been making sure that our government is working—serving as clerks, librarians, as public servants—are no longer workers with the name and title of employee. Now we're independent contractors. We are casual employees or part-time employees, particularly in the retail and customer service sectors where we, as women, are highly represented.

So, the need for black women to organize is really a need to change the black community's economy and our presence in the public sector, in the health care sector, and in the low-wage retail sector. The conditions that exist in those sectors really require us to come together in the ways that we have always traditionally come together. We have to have a shared analysis and also knit together our power to be able to challenge what's happening right now in the economy.

At the BWC, our goal is unionization. We want to see more women and more workers in our community in unions so that they have that binding agreement and a shared seat at the table

with employers to figure out how to make these industries work, and how to make things work for the workers themselves. The role of worker centers is to fight the attack on unions, on American work, on the commitment of being an employee. We're fighting for the right to a job or career that would span a lifetime, and where you would grow in skill, in wages, and have pension benefits.

A lot of what's behind the poverty that is happening in places like Los Angeles, Detroit and Chicago is that the economy is not working for people who work. So worker centers provide community unionism—where communities are standing up and saying, “We believe that workers are a key piece of this economy.” We are reaching those workers who are not in unions. We're reaching workers who are unemployed but want to work, and we bring them to a table with union workers, with workers in really terrible jobs, with part-time workers, and with workers who want to gain access to work. We bring them together to think critically about how we change the nature of work.

At BWC, we're asking, “How do we create access to quality careers? How do we deal with employment exclusion and discrimination that's historic and institutionalized? How do we help

workers in our community overcome real barriers? How do we develop black worker voices?”

What do you do when you're in a job and, let's say, you've done a tremendous amount of work but your employer hasn't paid you? We're working with some restaurants now where workers have not been paid. Even the check-cashing companies won't cash their paychecks because they bounce because employers are not paying them. What do those workers do? They don't have a union. So, that's where the worker center steps in. Our primary role is to protect the rights of workers, to build their leadership, to challenge some of these practices, and to try and raise the standards and the floor across the board. So, it's not that worker centers are all that different from unions, I think the primary goal is the same: to lift up workers, lift up standards, and build relationship and power and voice among workers to challenge some of the conditions.

Increasingly, worker centers and unions are coming together. We're seeing trade unionists and others say, “You know, let's invest time and resources and energy in creating institutions that are not part of the union movement, but are protecting workers and raising the floor across the board.” So, that's been our history, and that's how we see the role of unions and the role of worker centers in the lives of black workers.

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