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Protect Immigrant Work Rights—By Making them Owners

Story By [Lorraine Boisseneault](#). Photo By Pearl Gabel.



Members of Si Se Puede, a cleaning cooperative, stand behind Yadira Fragoso after a meeting in Sunset Park, Brooklyn

Statistics show immigrant workers frequently suffer wage theft. One solution pioneered by a Brooklyn center is to launch cooperatives where the workers are also owners.¹

Since leaving Mexico to find work in the U.S. at age 16, Anai Rodriguez has had her share of lousy jobs. She's worked 12-hour night shifts in a factory pasting labels on bottles, surviving on four to six hours of sleep. She's cleaned houses where clients insisted she scrubbed floors on her hands and knees. Her most recent employment, caring for an elderly woman with Alzheimer's, has finally given her satisfaction and a certain amount of pleasure.

Rodriguez is a member of a worker-owned cooperative called Golden Steps, which provides non-medical elderly companionship services. Golden Steps is the most recent cooperative

created by the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. The center has sponsored and developed six co-ops since 2006, three of which are flourishing.

The program has been so successful, it has even caught the city's attention. The Center for Family Life recently received a \$147,000 grant from the New York City Council to train two community organizations in cooperative development, and it plans to continue targeting the immigrant demographic for their cooperatives.

"I was fascinated at the idea of using (cooperatives) as a way to do economic development, community development, and as a way to build leadership among immigrant women," says Vanessa Bransburg, the cooperative coordinator at the center and herself an immigrant from Argentina. Bransburg assists in training the co-op participants and provides leadership support during the weekly meetings the groups hold.

A new business model

Worker cooperatives, such as those that are developed at the Center for Family Life, are similar to unions. The members pay dues and vote on everything from how much they'll charge for their services to how they approach advertising. It's a democratic model well suited to often-exploited workers, such as immigrants.

According to a survey by the New York Immigration Coalition in 2008, 21 percent of immigrant workers were paid less than the legally required minimum wage (\$7.25 for most jobs). Wage theft was experienced by 54 percent, with the average worker losing \$58 of their \$397 weekly earnings; they only earned around \$17,396 for the year.

In addition to other benefits, undocumented immigrants can legally be owners and members of cooperatives, says Tony Robinson, a political science professor at University of Colorado Denver and the co-author of a pamphlet on starting immigrant co-ops. The process, however, is complicated.

"[They're] able to form a business, register a business, and dispense profits, but they can't receive a wage on a regular basis," Robinson says. "The bottom line is that it's ambiguous and tricky."

The Center for Family Life, which makes it a policy of not asking about the status of their workers, has not run into any of the problems Robinson alludes to. It relies on help from the Urban Justice Center, a non-profit that provides legal services to vulnerable residents, to ensure that each new business becomes incorporated. The businesses usually choose to become marketing and referral corporations, Bransburg says. In this type of corporation, every participant is an owner. They share the costs of marketing and make collective decisions, but each participant works for their own specific clients.

The program at the Center for Family Life began when the center's co-director, Julia Jean-Francois, attended a 2006 conference on cooperative development in California. Based on what she had seen in Sunset Park—women standing on corners every morning, hoping to find work cleaning homes or taking care of children—Jean-Francois thought she could find people who might be motivated to participate in a cooperative program.

"(The center was) really interested in taking a risk and creating a new model," Bransburg says. The center approached several women who were in its English classes and family counseling programs and asked if they would be interested in starting a co-op. After the women expressed a willingness to join, the center developed its first co-op, a cleaning business called Si Se Puede. The group was born from the desire to make sure immigrant workers wouldn't be exploited by their clients, Bransburg says.

Not an easy path

But in 2008, the cleaning co-op was still navigating the challenges faced by all new businesses: getting word out about their work and making sure all the members could find clients.

"It took a while for them to get work," Bransburg says. The group passed out postcards at street fairs, went door-to-door, and advertised at the Parks Slope Food Cooperative. "Now it's a very successful enterprise, and because we had such success helping them develop it, we decided to become an incubator for co-ops."

The incubator model is what differentiates the Center for Family Life from other nonprofits that help people start co-ops. The center shares some similarities with programs like those offered by Green Workers Cooperatives, an organization in South Bronx that gives business training for people interested in starting such companies. In addition to classes on business skills, the Center for Family Life also does market research on what types of businesses would be best suited to the needs of the community, provides participants with English lessons, skills training (including anything from CPR classes for the participants in the elderly care co-op, to identifying safe cleaning products for the cleaning group), and pays most of their business expenses for the first several years, Bransburg says.

The center uses grant funding to pay for the new businesses. Eventually the groups either become profitable enough to pay their own office and advertising costs, or they go out of business.

Si Se Puede now has 37 members, some working full-time and others only part-time, and they're training 17 new members so they can meet the demand for their services. They pay all their own operating expenses and occasionally do presentations for the newer co-ops.

"In the beginning when I started to be in the co-op I thought, 'It's not what I want.' I thought it was just about cleaning," says Yadira Fragoso, the current president of Si Se Puede. "I find out that it's not just about cleaning homes. It's more than that."

Fragoso referred to the business skills she'd learned—marketing, public speaking, advertising, developing a business plan. She enjoys these aspects of the co-op, and it has the added benefit of paying more than her previous job.

Fragoso, 38, joined the group five years ago after leaving her job as a manager at Chipotle, where she worked 10 hours a day and made \$250-\$350 every week. Now she makes about \$500 a week working only 20-30 hours for 12 different clients. She has time to be home with her two sons in addition to working and completing her duties as president of the co-op, which include leading the group's bi-weekly meetings.

Some start-ups end

But not all the cooperatives have been as profitable as the cleaning business. We Can Fix It, a handy-man co-op started in 2008, and Color Me, a house painting co-op formed in 2009, both floundered after two years.

The handy-man business ran into a number of problems during its two-year existence, Bransburg says. The industry was already crowded and competitive, and the participants varied in skill level. In addition, there were greater start-up costs than with the other co-ops since they needed trucks and licensing for certain jobs. It didn't help matters that there was a mix of men and women in the group.

"I don't think a co-op can't be men," Bransburg says, despite the fact that all of their successful co-ops have been almost entirely women. "I think it had more to do with the industry and being very competitive. But there was definitely the conflict of the men and women that had to do with patriarchy and being *machisto* in some ways. But then, women can also be *machista*."

Color Me, the house painting business, had similar problems. Some of the participants didn't have the necessary skills and they struggled to promote the business, finally deciding to call it quits after a year and a half.

But failure is an inescapable part of the business world. So is hard work. For Rodriguez, the only woman of her 14-member business Golden Steps who has a client, the work is rewarding. She enjoys spending time with her elderly clients and says it reminds her of taking care of her diabetic mother in Mexico.

The other members, who launched their business in February, sometimes worry they won't be able to find enough clients for everyone, Rodriguez says. Many of them continue working side jobs in addition to attending weekly co-op meetings and passing out fliers to advertise their business around the city. Rodriguez constantly encourages her colleagues not to lose hope.

"For some members in the Golden Steps, it's very hard. For the moment, we don't have jobs," Rodriguez says. "But we work very hard."

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