

**Commentary:**

**COMMENTARY ON “ANALYZING DAY LABOR FROM  
WITHIN: A CASE STUDY OF DAY LABOR CENTERS  
IN LOS ANGELES”**

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**Abstract**

In this commentary on Patricia Johnson’s article (2013; see this present issue of JISS), I critically analyze her findings and discuss the contributions of her original research about organizational efforts of worker centers of day laborers in Los Angeles, California. While the academic literature on day labor markets is scarce, the study of worker centers and the internal organizational structure underpinning this informal labor niche is even thinner, so the article makes an important and overdue contribution to the topic. The commentary also highlights that the author convincingly shows that certain worker centers are specifically set up to control immigrant workers and avoid conflict in predominantly, white, middle class neighborhoods. Areas of future research are suggested.

**Keywords:** informal economy, contingent workers, day laborers,  
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## COMMENTARY

Day laborers are a highly visible population in most urban and suburban communities across the United States. These are Latin American immigrants who gather on streetcorners to search for work. Known in Spanish as *jornaleros* or *esquineros* (day workers or corner workers), immigrant day laborers who cannot obtain work permits are especially vulnerable to exploitation and employers abuse since they fear losing their jobs, incarceration, and deportation; thus they are hired at extremely low wages and are often underpaid or not paid at all (Malpica, 2002; Valenzuela, 2003).

Day laborers are significant because they form part of the rise in numbers of contingent, nonstandard or casual work in the United States (Peck and Theodore, 1998; Kallenberg, Reskin, and Hudson, 2000). Within the broad spectrum of contingent work, day labor work is characterized by low wages, dangerous or unpleasant working conditions, and lack of job-related benefits. Day laborers are generally the poorest and most vulnerable of all contingent workers (Camou, 2009).

The vulnerability of day laborers as low-wage workers and what these workers represent as flawed immigration policy has generated considerable interest within the social sciences (Valenzuela, 2003; Gonzalez, 2007). A growing body of literature has explored who the day laborers are and why they join the informal economy (Sassen, 2000; Valenzuela, 2003; Malpica, 2011), documented the abuse and exploitation - including the non-payment of wages and lack of benefits - that these workers suffer (Zoellner, 2000; Camou, 2009), examined the issue of illegality of employment (Esbenshade, 2000; Fine, 2006), and studied potential solutions to the problems day labor poses for workers, employers, and city officials (Valenzuela et al., 2006; Cleveland and Pierson, 2009). In the present issue of JISS, Patricia Johnson (2013) has focused on an aspect of day labor phenomenon that is important, but that has received little attention: the day labor centers. Johnson's article *Analyzing Day Labor From Within: A Case Study of Day Labor Centers in Los Angeles* is a richly detailed piece that looks at the rising number and effectiveness of immigrant day labor centers in the United States. The author notes that the day labor centers show considerable promise as a way to ease the problems that result from the presence of day laborers in the informal labor markets. Johnson argues, however, that day labor centers have to be looked at critically and not as the panacea of all day labor problems. In the lines below I would like to expand my commentary on Johnson's article and contextualize her findings in light of the recent research on this new types of worker organizations.

In her article Johnson has given center stage to the day labor centers. Day labor centers, she says, are small, underfunded, understaffed organizations that provide a formal venue for employer and worker to meet. All over the country, day labor hiring sites are being opened and operated by not for profit community-based organizations working closely with day laborers. Such day labor centers, while far from perfect, also

have improved conditions of the workers. While the services offered to the workers vary from center to center, most dedicate their limited resources to representing workers to employers, addressing worker grievances, English instruction, job skill training and job safety, leadership and a collective voice for low-wage workers (Jayarman & Ness, 2005; Fine, 2006).

Employing a case study approach, Johnson zeros in on a day labor center in the city of Los Angeles (she refers to this day labor site with the pseudonym of "The Center") and provides a solid ethnographic analysis of the inner-workings of this immigrant organization. Her description of the day-to-day activities of The Center, drawing extensively on the voices of activists, staff and particularly the workers, give insight in to how these day labor centers function. Johnson informs her readers that the primary goal of The Center is to offer day laborers a "safe" space to wait for work: a place where they will be offered a fair wage, a place where they are less likely to experience nonpayment or underpayment of wages, and place that shields them from extreme temperatures. Workers are assigned jobs on the first-come basis, and are encouraged to organize in a safe and orderly fashion to meet with potential employers. Moreover, the workers agree to work for no less than agreed upon minimum wage. More than just a place to wait for work, The Center frequently offered GED classes, English Classes, occupational safety and health workshops (dental hygiene, HIV, STDs) and immigrant and worker rights advocacy. Staff and volunteers work on behalf of day laborers to ensure that workers are paid the full amount of their promised wages. According to the in-depth interviews conducted by Johnson with the workers they noted that the "wage claim service was the most valuable service offered" at the non-profit organization. The end result is that "The Center," and other day labor centers like this one, foster incentives to organize and, therefore, increase the bargaining power of day laborers in such a way that they no longer play the subservient role of wage takers. Upon organizing, the bargaining power of day laborers increases. Under certain conditions, this increase in bargaining power leads to better outcomes for all day laborers; namely, higher wages and better employment.

Despite the impressive strengths of "The Center", Johnson is at her best in presenting the limitations of the non-profit organization. In fact, Johnson judges all worker centers quite harshly. Three principal limitations are highlighted in her critique of "The Center". First, Johnson notes that "The Center" is hierarchical in its organizational structure. She mentions that most day labor centers contend that they are democratic but in reality they are not. Referring to her ethnographic analysis of the "The Center," she notes that worker opinions and inputs are not taken into consideration when important decisions are made at the organization site. Johnson center her discussion on the tension between what the day labor center means to the organizers and contrast this with what the day labor center means to the day laborers. The organizers focus on the establishment of a community and worker's rights, and indeed, some day laborers shared this sense of

meaning. But other day laborers – the majority according to Johnson – were only interested in “The Center” to the extent that it would generate jobs.

Second, Johnson highlights the inability of “The Center” to provide employment to a good number of the workers at the site. She explains that “The Center” suffers from low levels of employment and consequently the day laborers leave the day labor site and join adjacent streetcorner pick-up-spots. According to Johnson day labor sites should measure the success of their programs not by the number of day laborers participating in “The Center” (including those who are only there to take advantage of the free resources offered by the day labor center) rather than by the number of day laborers they successfully match with employers. When asked by Johnson what they most want from “The Center”, day laborers simply stated – to find a job. This finding is not new but should be given special attention among those researching the day labor phenomenon. Further research might focus on charting the progress of day labor centers and how they compare to informal sites over time. Currently, informal hiring sites outnumber the formal sites. If day labor centers have flourished in certain communities, why are there so few of them? What are the politics and economics involved in establishing a day labor center? While the case study on “The Center” attempted to answer this question, not all communities respond equally. More field research is highly encouraged in order to get a firm understanding of the day labor market. As indicated in Johnson’s study, what is presented in the media and disseminated through word of mouth merely scratches the surface. If the objective is to shed light and reach accurate conclusions, field research is almost indispensable. Patricia Johnson’s research is a move in this direction and this piece will contribute, along with the work of Fine (2006) and Camou (2009), to a better understanding of this new type of non-profit organization.

The third and final limitation raised by has to do with the minimal resources that “The Center” has to offer in order to reach its full potential. A disproportionate part of the funding of these day labor centers derives from private funding and, to a lesser extent government money. This form of securing funding for an organization is not sustainable in the long run. Johnson recommends that “The Center” change its tactics as to how to generate work for the day laborers by actively recruiting employers to “The Center”. This approach certainly makes much sense but the author does not give concrete direction as to how to put this into practice. This recommendation carries its own limitations. Mainly, that these day labor centers operate as 501(c)(3) organizations and, by law, have no authority to negotiate employment contracts. In fact, employer compliance with center-imposed regulations like minimum wage or minimum hours is strictly voluntary. Case study evidence suggests worker centers are limited in improving collective employment terms (Gordon 2005).

The power imbalance between day laborers and employers can be balanced by augmenting the bargaining power of day laborers. This can be achieved by organizing day laborers and, in the process, dissipating the competition between them. When

organized, day laborers have strength in numbers and can make collective decisions like refusing certain jobs, demanding higher wages, or refusing to work for less than a minimum wage. The day labor center essentially bring day laborers who were previously dispersed together and organizes them into a collective unit that makes rules, enforces them, makes decisions, and represents one voice. This evens out the power imbalance that was previously present in their relationship with employers. While the day labor centers may not be the perfect solution, it is one that has shown the best results.

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