



Helping People Help Themselves



breaking the cycle of poverty for over 40 years

Catholic Campaign for Human Development
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TACKLING WAGE THEFT, BUILDING JUST COMMUNITIES

BY BETH GRIFFIN

At first, no one was happy. Day laborers congregated on street corners in Port Chester, New York, in 2000, hoping to get work with contractors or landscapers. Workers were never sure if the employer would pay the agreed-on wage. Contractors weren't sure if the laborers had the skills they claimed. Neighbors in the community complained that the "men on the corners" were disruptive. Sometimes fights broke out. There was no shelter from rain or heat and no bathroom facilities.

Tension mounted in the leafy New York suburb of 29,000 people, which was long a welcoming home to successive generations of immigrants. In response, parishioners and staff at Our Lady of the Rosary Church invited the workers to assemble peacefully in front of their Don Bosco Community Center. They offered a safe space, a hot meal, restrooms, and a place to wait during bad weather. Contractors knew where to find laborers.



A business owner hangs a sticker indicating his pledge to offer fair wages to workers.

As the site became better-known, day laborers and staff at the Salesian-run parish also tackled the ugly issue of wage theft. A formidable language barrier between the employers and their prospective employees created communication difficulties, even for those with good intentions. Some of the contractors exploited the immigrant status of the workers to deny them the promised wages, gambling that the laborers either did not know their rights or would not risk making a formal complaint.

Don Bosco Workers grew out of the frustration of exploited laborers and the parishioners who wanted to help them. The group took its identity from the popular name of the founder of the Salesians of Don Bosco, St. John Bosco, a 19th-century Italian priest who worked with youth on the margins of society.

With help from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), Don Bosco Workers, Incorporated evolved from a loosely organized parish program. President Ann Heekin credits CCHD area representative Randy Keesler with producing the then all volunteer group to formalize itself.



Business owners pledge to comply with wage and hour laws.

"Randy helped us transform from a charity to a justice organization in 2006. Early on, CCHD was our primary funding source," Ann says. "The turning point for us was when Randy said we needed to be a worker-led agency and evolve to a justice organization if we were going to get additional CCHD funding."

"When CCHD insisted we establish ourselves as a non-profit organization, that was a game changer," Ann recalls. "Once we were organized as a worker-led justice group in 2012, we began to behave like one. The board of well-intentioned parishioners from neighboring parishes looked to reconfigure itself with workers and people with experience in worker justice."

Ann, a founding board member, became the group's first president in 2012, the same year Gonzalo Cruz became its first executive director.

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From the Director Dear Friends,

Listening to the hum of lawnmowers and leaf-blowers in the middle of spring makes me think about the day laborers who operate a passerbly to pay more attention to the annoying din than the conscientious people who keep the lawns and gardens pristine by their efforts.

Most day laborers are immigrants struggling to support themselves and their families here and in their country of origin. They meet potential employers early in the day, agree on a wage, and get a ride to the job sites. The work is hard and exhausting. And sometimes, there is no pay at the end of the day, because the contractor or landscaper is unscrupulous.

I'm proud that CCHD is helping day laborers get paid for their work. We support Don Bosco Workers, a worker-led organization of 200 Latino and other low-income people in Port Chester, New York, in suburban Westchester County. The group, profiled in this issue of Helping People Help Themselves, started as a parish effort at Our Lady of the Rosary Church. The church and the community population mirror the waves of newcomers to the United States over generations.

People of good will, including established and current immigrants, stepped in to stop exploitation of workers. At last count, Don Bosco Workers tallied more than 900 first-time job placements at its hiring site.

With CCHD funding, the guidance of an active worker-majority board of directors, and a partnership with the Communications Workers of America, Don Bosco Workers also tackled wage theft on a larger scale. They created "No Pay No Way," an educational and advocacy campaign aimed at the scores of popular restaurants, delicatessens, and bodegas in the community. Their early successes are impressive.

Ann Heekin, a longtime volunteer with Don Bosco Workers and now the president of its board, described the group's genesis and evolution to the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, DC, in January. The meeting was held in the middle of a weekend snowstorm that paralyzed the East Coast. I was astounded when Ann appeared for her scheduled presentation, after driving from

New York in the snow. Her heartfelt description of the worker-members and their commitment to seek justice was inspiring.

One of Ann's comments continues to resonate. She said, "The entire community is diminished by wage theft, because it harms the local economy and hurts the responsible business owner." Sadly, I don't think consumers think much about the effect of wage theft, either on the workers or the community.

Ann also said CCHD's insistence that the group be worker-led was the turning point to refocus Don Bosco Workers from a charity to a justice organization. Good to hear!

The Don Bosco Workers were in the spotlight last summer when they were selected to build the president's chair for Pope Francis's September 25 Mass at Madison Square Garden in New York. A small team of day laborers from Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic fashioned the simple oak chair covered with white canvas. It was an unexpected blessing for everyone involved.

In this issue, you'll also read a profile of Sister of Charity Tracy Kemme. She was a CCHD intern in 2014-15 and translated her experiences into a part-time position with the Catholic Social Action office of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. Our intern program is a tremendous way to promote lifelong involvement in social justice.

Thank you for your ongoing prayerful support and encouragement of our work.

Ralph McCloud
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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Workers march in “No Pay No Way” campaign to fight wage theft.

“We adopted fighting wage theft as our primary issue,” Ann says. And CCHD resumed making grants to support its staff of one full-time and one part-time employee.

Today, Don Bosco Workers is a worker-led organization of 200 Latino and other low-income people whose mission is to empower workers to seek just wages and safe workplace conditions. “We conduct Know Your Rights programs, leadership development classes, and OSHA trainings,” Ann says. Some of the training is done in conjunction with Local 1103 of Communications Workers of America (CWA).

“We also empower workers through an organizational structure that places the decision-making authority in the hands of the members through a general assembly and an active, engaged, worker-majority board of directors,” she says.

Don Bosco Workers has effected significant change in the hiring and payment process, Ann says. Workers pay a nominal membership fee to join. Potential employers sign a contract agreeing to a daily wage that averages \$120. If wage theft occurs, laborers have recourse through the Don Bosco Workers wage theft recovery unit.

In reality, Ann says, “99 percent of the people who ask our help recovering wages are not members of the organization. They’re unaffiliated and we help them go through Small Claims Court or the Department of Labor.”

“Our workers know their rights. They will ask for overtime after 40 hours a week and they’ll make sure they

get breaks, too. The bad actors are less inclined to come to Don Bosco, because they have to sign documents and meet our director,” she says.

“If wage theft happens, we contact the contractor and see if we can get him to do the right thing,” Ann smiles. In addition, new software developed by the National Day Labor Organizing Network is helping workers keep track of their hours, identify honest employers, and share information about unscrupulous ones.

In 2014, Don Bosco Workers launched its first wage theft campaign, No Pay No Way: Wage Theft Is Bad for Port Chester. “Our goal, and that of our CWA partners, is to make Port Chester a wage-theft-free zone,” Ann says. “We decided to focus on community advocacy, rather than take a strident, in-your-face approach.”

The effort moved on two parallel paths. Don Bosco Workers asked 80 local businesses, including scores of popular restaurants and bodegas, to make a verbal pledge to comply with wage and hour laws. Those who agreed were given colorful window stickers to display.

At the same time, the group organized year-long picketing of a restaurant/market that cheated six former cooks, cleaners, and cashiers out of

earned wages. The case was prosecuted by the attorney general of the State of New York, and the business owner ultimately pled guilty to failing to pay minimum wage and overtime. She made partial restitution and is on probation until she repays \$47,000 to the workers.

Ann says, “We want to expand this to a countywide campaign to promote responsible business owners and shine a light on the others. We want to make the point that wage theft is bad for workers and the community, even if people are not persuaded from a moral standpoint,” she says. “When bad actors rip off workers, they rip off all of us.”

With CCHD help, Don Bosco Workers, Inc. is advancing the dignity of workers and giving them a voice to secure economic justice and build support within the community.



Cardinal Timothy Dolan visits the Don Bosco Workers to admire the chair for Pope Francis that day laborers from Mexico, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic constructed.



Day laborers of Don Bosco Workers construct the chair for Pope Francis to use at Mass in Madison Square Garden during his visit in 2015.

Former Intern Spotlight: Sr. Tracy Kemme

"The CCHD internship program is forming social justice leaders for our nation. It gives young people the tools and opens the doors to engage in this ministry beyond the internship commitment." That's how Sister of Charity Tracy Kemme describes an opportunity that CCHD offers in 30 locations throughout the United States each year.

Sr. Tracy completed a year-long internship with the Catholic Social Action office of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati. She now promotes Catholic social teaching to parishes and religious education programs from the same office as part of a CCHD intern alumnus program.

The highlight of Sr. Tracy's internship was the opportunity to "meet the people who are making change," she says. "I had a good grasp on Catholic social teaching coming into this position, but I grew in understanding of the principle of subsidiarity. I certainly claim that I believe in a preferential option for the poor, but the internship was a good challenge to see how I could live it out."

As a CCHD intern, Sr. Tracy built on her volunteer experiences working with immigrants and low-income people living on the margins of society in Ohio, Texas, Mexico, and Ecuador. She helped promote the CCHD annual campaign and Multimedia Youth Arts contest, arranged parish speakers, and met with current and prospective CCHD-funded groups.

"The leaders in the community groups are amazing, committed movers and shakers," she says. "I learned from them determination, persistence, and the importance of hope and believing in a better world."

"Most importantly, I experienced more fully the essentiality of collaboration in making change and the ways we can reassign the distribution of power, allowing those affected by the situations to effectively change them," Sr. Tracy says.

The intertwining themes of empowerment, faith, and justice run through Sr. Tracy's reflections both on her internship and her formation as a religious sister. "The internship solidified social justice as a central tenet to the practice of my faith," she says. "CCHD's model of insisting on low-income leadership of projects is essential to involving people in the process. I had never seen such an intentional focus on empowerment, but it showed me the importance of not speaking for others; for collaborating with our brothers and sisters to train them to give voice, be empowered, and feel strengthened in a situation."

Sr. Tracy works part-time at the Catholic Social Action office and serves as the Latino ministry coordinator at a local parish with a large Guatemalan population. She says her experience with CCHD, "makes sure my ministry there is not top-down, but more of an advocacy for empowerment and a more just society."

The CCHD internship program invites summer, semester- and year-long candidates. More information is available at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/get-involved/internships/cchd-internships.cfm>.



Photo courtesy of Sr. Tracy Kemme.

What Is CCHD?

Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Catholics and friends of CCHD across the country help poor and low-income Americans to help themselves and their communities out of poverty.

Since 1970, CCHD has contributed over \$280 million to more than 7,800 low-income-led, community-based

projects that strengthen families, create jobs, build affordable housing, fight crime, and improve schools and neighborhoods. CCHD requires that projects develop community leadership and participation so that their solutions to poverty will be long-lasting and effective and so that CCHD's investment in people will help break the cycle of poverty. CCHD also educates Catholics about the causes of poverty and seeks to build solidarity between impoverished and affluent persons.



An initiative of the
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