

## DAY LABORERS' UNION CREATES BUZZ IN CHICAGO

BY BETH GRIFFIN

The explosion of the service sector of the U.S. economy provides a huge opportunity for low-income immigrant workers, but it also creates abundant temptation for unscrupulous employers to perpetrate wage theft, sexual harassment, and other abuses on employees who have little recourse to prevent it.

This is the latest in a long legacy of mistreatment of immigrants, according to Elisa Ringholm, development director of Latino Union of Chicago, a grassroots organization of day laborers and domestic workers supported by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). “Sadly, abuse and discrimination are common among the immigrants who work diligently to care for our children and parents, build our homes, and grow our food,” she says.

Latino Union was founded in 2000 by women immigrants from Central and South America who were employed through temporary labor agencies to clean homes and offices and work in factories and warehouses. Statistically, the Midwest is the worst region in the country for day laborers, who experience workplace injuries and wage theft at higher rates than elsewhere. Wage theft occurs when workers are denied their promised or negotiated pay.

“The women organized to denounce abuses and improve conditions,” Elisa says. “They were the first to do this in Chicago, and they created a buzz in the community.”

Latino Union is organized on the “worker center” model, which supports the rights of temporary laborers who are traditionally excluded from union



Photo by Jessica Zurcher, CCHD

LATINO UNION WAS REPRESENTED AT THE FEBRUARY 10, 2013, AWARD CEREMONY IN WASHINGTON, DC, BY DIGNA MORALES AND ERIC RODRIGUEZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR.

membership and protective legislation. Elisa says the group represents a new labor movement, one that is specific to the changes in the global and local economy.

“Our organization works at the criminalized intersection of immigration and labor,” Elisa says. “With international trade agreements and the globalization of corporations, there has been a change in the composition of the U.S. work force. Many of our members were forced to migrate here because of impoverishment at home. Immigrant workers are in a precarious position, devoid of many basic rights,” she explains.

From a humble start, Latino Union has evolved into an organization that trains community leaders to articulate needs and press for just solutions to problems faced by workers and their families. It

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

*Dear Friends,*

Happy Easter! The familiar Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving offered us an opportunity to reflect on the day-to-day reality of our neighbors who “go without” every day. They may be without jobs or homes or education or justice. With the grace of God, our pre-Easter sacrifices and temporary discomforts sharpened our focus on helping others find permanent solutions to the deep pain of poverty.



Latino Union in Chicago, described in these pages, is a CCHD-funded organization that embodies the struggle for justice among marginalized, low-wage workers. Their persistent efforts to secure safe, dignified conditions for immigrant domestic workers and day laborers strike me as a 21st-century witness to the example Jesus gave us. They are walking with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, who so often work unnoticed and live in the shadows of our communities.

With local and national CCHD grant support, this impressive organization has formed alliances with groups that once overlooked them. As a result, Latino Union is improving employment standards and conditions for people throughout Chicago. Most recently, the group promoted state legislation to recognize the rights of domestic workers and end 75 years of exclusion from the protection of labor laws.

Latino Union members want to work, and they want to help others without work. I heard about one member, Jose Luis G., who lost his restaurant job and became a day laborer. After taking training classes with Latino Union, he became a sought-after day laborer who developed his own clientele—and then hired other Latino Union members to work with him. In the process, he created the first OSHA safety training program in the United States for day laborers. It accommodates diverse literacy levels and adjusts to the experience of immigrant workers. He now “trains the trainers” and is responsible for bringing health and safety knowledge to more than 500 laborers in six cities. What a great example of how a thoughtful grant can impact hundreds of people.

I hope you will join me in welcoming Dr. Jonathan Reyes, who came to the USCCB late last year as the new executive director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development. As the president and CEO of Catholic Charities and Community Services in the Archdiocese of Denver, Dr. Reyes led a huge, successful, compassionate service organization and demonstrated a keen facility for maintaining and promoting its unique Catholic identity. We are already benefiting from his experience and perspective.

Thank you for your ongoing support. It enables us to reflect the light of Christ to the most vulnerable in our midst.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ralph McCloud'.

Ralph McCloud  
Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development

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## break the cycle of poverty

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also offers skills and safety training and provides job opportunities.

Members led a four-year campaign to open the Albany Park Workers' Center, which serves as a hiring hall, organizing hub, and education facility that provides a safe space to meet with potential employers and negotiate wages and jobs. Latino Union also founded the first worker center in the Midwest, which helped raise the average hourly wage paid to day laborers by 200%. "The workers know their rights and have established a wage floor and written contracts," Elisa says. "We've also been able to eliminate wage theft, which contributes to the stability of families."

With local and national grants from CCHD, Latino Union is helping members improve their skills and professionalism so they can become independent contractors who hire others. "There is a deep willingness to learn and to work," Elisa says. "The Workers' Center was never meant as a long-term employment solution for each person; it's about providing tools to become independent."

The success of Latino Union has drawn attention and support from trade unions, which had overlooked day laborers in the past. "They are allies now, because they see that our work with the people at the bottom of the economic barrel raises the standard for everyone," Elisa says.

Latino Union is also building a multi-racial base, including African-Americans, Caribbean Islanders, Filipinos, Eastern Europeans, and others who work as nannies, caregivers, and housecleaners. "Often, our communities are pitted against each other, but we recognize the need to unite to change the system," Elisa says. "We are open to any worker who wants to improve conditions for themselves or their community."

Successful initiatives include the Chicago Coalition of Household Workers, formed in 2010 as a movement to recognize the dignity of domestic work and promote state legislation to protect the rights of domestic workers. Elisa says that because the history of domestic workers is rooted in slavery and dominated by women and African-Americans, it suffers from dated federal regulations that limit wages, fail to protect against abuse, and deny both overtime pay and the right to organize.

To create jobs and a new revenue stream for the organization, Latino Union established Café

Chicago in 2011. The project buys organic and fair trade coffee beans from women's cooperatives in Latin America and Africa, roasts them in Chicago, and packages them for weekly distribution to local restaurants and stores. Café Chicago employs six Latino Union members in a contemporary social action model that connects local and international initiatives for self-sufficiency.

Elisa says Café Chicago "demonstrates how thirsty our society is for something different that raises up the dignity of workers. . . . And the coffee is really good," she adds.

Latino Union is led by low-income people, including several staff who began as members of the organization. "CCHD is an invaluable partner of ours and has helped us maintain and grow our commitment to being a low-income-led organization," Elisa says.


The director of the Office for Peace and Justice in the Archdiocese of Chicago says Latino Union's work to address the root causes of poverty and empower the immigrant community reflects the Gospel mandate. According to Anthony Suarez-Abraham, "Latino Union is a prophetic voice in Chicago and a witness to the truth and salvation of Jesus Christ." 



Photo by Jessica Zurcher, CCHD

IN RECOGNITION OF ITS EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE POVERTY AND ENHANCE THE DIGNITY OF INDIVIDUALS, LATINO UNION RECEIVED CCHD'S 2012 SISTER MARGARET CAFFERTY DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE AWARD, NAMED IN MEMORY OF THE LATE PRESENTATION SISTER WHO SERVED AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS AND A MEMBER OF THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' COMMITTEE FOR CCHD. PICTURED ARE RALPH MCLOUD, DIRECTOR OF CCHD, DIGNA MORALES, AND ERIC RODRIGUEZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF LATINO UNION.

# COSTA RICAN WOMAN SEEKS JUSTICE FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS

BY BETH GRIFFIN


Digna Morales found a good job when she arrived in Chicago from Costa Rica in 1985. She was paid the state-established minimum wage (\$3.35/hour) to do housecleaning, laundry, and other chores for a family of four. Soon, Digna was asked to fill in for the children's nanny and cook meals for the household but was not paid extra for the new responsibilities. After three years, she asked for and was promised an hourly increase of 25 cents, which she considered fair.

When the money did not materialize, she asked again. Her answer came in the form of an unexpected afternoon visit from the husband while she worked alone at the house. As he tried to kiss her, he explained that her salary would increase by \$1 an hour if she accepted his sexual advances. When she rebuffed him and said she would not be treated like a prostitute, he threatened her. Digna left and waited outside for the wife's return. Hearing Digna's description of the events, the wife said it would be best if she left their employ. The children cried, clung to her, and begged her to stay. Digna lost her job and had nowhere to turn,

in part because she did not know that domestic workers had any rights.

In the intervening years, Digna held housecleaning, child care, and elder care jobs to support her family. She joined a community organization in her Albany Park neighborhood and heard about Latino Union when she was invited to participate in the first national study of domestic workers. She transitioned from interviewee to trained, certified interviewer and "saw that other domestic workers faced the same abuses as I did—or worse," she says.

As a member of Latino Union, Digna began to reach out to organize other workers to understand, protect, and defend their rights. "I've heard a lot of domestic workers talk about discrimination, unjust firing, and not receiving full payment for their work," she says.

Digna is a co-founder of the Chicago Coalition of Household Workers and is now an organizer at Latino Union. "Latino Union is very important and needed. It is serving a lot of people and letting them know they don't have to put up with humiliation and discrimination," she concluded. 

## 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, the Catholic Campaign 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  
Catholic Campaign for  
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