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**SI, SE PUEDE: ORGANIZING LATINO IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN SOUTH
OMAHA'S MEATPACKING INDUSTRY**

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of Sociology/Anthropology

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

University of Nebraska At Omaha

By

Jacquelyn S. Gabriel

April 2004

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THESIS ACCETANCE

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University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree Masters of Arts
University of Nebraska At Omaha

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SI, SE PUEDE: ORGANIZING LATINO IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN SOUTH OMAHA'S MEATPACKING INDUSTRY

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University of Nebraska, 2004

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Faced with declining union density and a growing immigrant workforce, the U.S. labor movement has begun to realize the importance of organizing Latino immigrant workers. However, the “conventional wisdom” among many within the movement is that these workers are “unorganizable.” Labor scholar Ruth Milkman (2002), for example, explains that the “conventional wisdom” is that immigrants are vulnerable, docile persons, intensely fearful of any confrontation with authority, who accept substandard wages and poor working conditions because their standard of comparison is drawn from their home countries, and who therefore are extremely unlikely to unionize. Through an in-depth study of a successful organizing campaign among Latino immigrant workers in South Omaha, this thesis challenges such “conventional wisdom.”

It studies a collaborative campaign between the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) and Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) to organize meatpacking workers. In doing so, it explores the complexity of factors likely to affect Latino immigrant unionization. Specifically, it examines Latino immigrant workers' propensity to support unionization based on a number of their individual and group characteristics. These include: 1) legal status; 2) length of time residing in the United

States and intended length of stay in the country; 3) prior union experience; 4) ethnicity and/or nationality; 5) gender; and 6) age. Regardless of such characteristics, however, this thesis finds that these workers are highly receptive to unionization. Furthermore, it suggests that what is most important in organizing these workers is not so much their individual and group characteristics, but rather the labor movement's commitment and determination to unionize them. Moreover, it suggests that in order to effectively organize such workers, unions should not only commit to organize them, but also should reach out to community-based organizations which have an established relationship with Latino immigrant workers.

Acknowledgements

This thesis could never have been completed without the guidance and support of many people. I must begin by thanking the many South Omaha meatpacking workers who welcomed me into their homes and lives and willingly shared their experiences with me. I regret that they must remain anonymous. What I learned during my time with them transcends this study and includes an even greater appreciation for America's newest and growing working class.

I would also like to thank the OTOC and UFCW representatives and organizers who generously gave their time to participate in this study and to educate me about their organizing efforts in South Omaha's meatpacking industry. In particular, I would like to thank OTOC organizer, Sergio Sosa, whose help with this study proved to be invaluable. He not only introduced me to numerous meatpacking workers in South Omaha, but without this introduction it is questionable whether many of these workers would have participated in this study and been so forthcoming with information regarding their experiences.

In addition, my deepest appreciation and thanks goes to all of my thesis committee members, Dr. Lourdes Gouveia, Dr. Mark Rousseau and Dr. William Pratt, for guiding me through the process and challenge of conducting research and writing a thesis. Their constructive feedback and continuous encouragement were essential in the completion of this study. I would especially like to thank Dr. William Pratt not only for his knowledge of the South Omaha meatpacking industry and its unions, but also for

being so generous with his time. I would like to thank him for the many hours he spent reading drafts and providing very useful suggestions.

I would also like to acknowledge both the Reichenbach Summer Graduate Scholarship and the Claire Parker Phi Delta Gamma Scholarship funds that helped support the completion of this study.

Finally, I would never have finished this project without the support and encouragement of my family and friends. I would like to thank all of them for their support and encouragement. I would especially like to thank my parents, John and Janice Gabriel, for an upbringing that has encouraged a profound appreciation for the working class. Furthermore, I'd like to thank my companion, Dave Obenchain, and my good friend and fellow graduate student, Dawn Irlbeck for always making themselves available in my times of need and helping out in whatever capacity they could. My deepest gratitude goes to them for their endless encouragement and unconditional support.



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List of Abbreviations

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
ASE	Armour Swift-Echrich
IAF	Industrial Areas Foundation
IBT	International Brotherhood of Teamsters
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986
LCLAA	Labor Council for Latin American Advancement
MPS	Millard Processing Services
NLRA	National Labor Relations Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
OSHA	Occupational Safety and Health Administration
OTOC	Omaha Together One Community
QPI	Quality Pork International
REAP	Research, Education, Advocacy and People
RCIU	Retail Clerks International Union
SAW	Special Agricultural Worker
SEIU	Service Employees International Union
TWC	Temporary Workers Committee
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers
UNITE	Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees
UPWA	United Packinghouse Workers of America

Chapter I

Organizing Latino Immigrant Workers in South Omaha's Meatpacking Industry

Introduction

It has already become a truism that the United States has experienced a renewal of mass immigration. In fact, the latest U.S. Census figures demonstrate that this country has experienced the largest immigration increase since the 1920s, and for the first time since the 1930s, one out of every ten Americans is foreign-born. Whereas most U.S. immigrants prior to World War II were European, post-war immigration has been increasingly composed of individuals from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia, with the majority being from Latin America. This increase in Latin American immigration has resulted in Latinos being not only the fastest growing minority group in the United States, but also the largest one, comprising 37 million individuals (Torrez 2003:8).

Also well established is the fact that union density (percentage of the workforce that is unionized) in the United States has reached its lowest point since the early 1930s. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000 alone, the number of union members in this country declined by 200,000 to 16.3 million, which is its lowest point in over six decades. In fact, with only 8.5 percent of the private sector workforce organized, unionization is now at its lowest level since it peaked at 35 percent in the mid-1950s (Bronfenbrenner 2003:21). This decline has resulted in shrinking bargaining power and a loss of political clout for American workers. A problem further augmented by the fact that Latinos, whom are the least likely of all U.S. workers to belong to unions, are the fastest growing members of the U.S. workforce. As labor organizer José La Luz and

labor scholar Paula Finn (1998:172) explain, “Although the Latino workforce in the United States has increased by nearly two-thirds over the past ten years, Latino workers today actually make up a lesser percentage of unionized workers. In 1989, Latino workers accounted for one in ten union members; they now amount to about one in twelve.”

According to a recent report by the National Council of La Raza, it is projected that the number of Latinos in the U.S. workforce will grow by as much as 3.1 percent a year and by 2006 it is projected that more than 17.4 million Latinos will be in the U.S. labor market, representing nearly 12 percent of the country’s workforce (Perez 2000:12). Moreover, recent figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that the number of immigrant workers in the United States jumped to 15.7 million in 2000, up 17 percent from three years earlier, and that they now make up 12 percent of the country’s workforce. However, many scholars estimate these figures to be much higher, since the numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics do not adequately reflect the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States and therefore underestimate the true extent of the Latino presence in the country (Milkman 2000; Bacon 1999; Torres 1995).

Given the increase in both the Latino population and its labor force participation, it is evident that if the U.S. labor movement is to survive and be an effective force in the twenty-first century, it must organize both immigrant and native-born Latinos who have historically been excluded and underrepresented within the movement. In fact, several labor scholars and organizers (Trumpbour and Bernard 2002; Milkman 2000; Cameron 2000; Delgado 2000; Sherman and Voss 2000; Kelley 1999; Mantsios and Sweeney

1998; La Luz and Finn 1998; Flores and Ibarra 1998; Wong 1995) argue that in order to revitalize the U.S. labor movement, unions must incorporate immigrants, as well as native-born Latinos, into their ranks. For example, sociologist Ruth Milkman, (2000) asserts:

At the end of the twentieth century, the challenge of recruiting immigrant workers into union ranks has become increasingly central to the larger project of rebuilding the United States labor movement, which has been in a downward spiral for decades....Labor movement decline has accelerated even as the immigrant population has swelled....Thus recruiting immigrants is an increasingly urgent imperative for the besieged labor movement.” (P. 1)

Likewise, La Luz and Finn (1998:148) argue “In order to survive, unions will have to organize large numbers of Latinos and immigrants and, at the same time, change institutionally to accommodate these new members.”

These trends, renewed mass immigration and declining unionization, are transforming the character of the U.S. economy and will undoubtedly have profound implications for the country’s working class. What happens to the country’s newest immigrants will certainly have a critical effect on the future of the U.S. labor movement. As the United States continues to undergo economic restructuring as a result of the increasing globalization of economic production, U.S. labor unions are struggling to remain viable institutions in the face of declining employment in mature manufacturing industries that have traditionally served as a major source of their membership base (Bronfenbrenner 2003:22). Meanwhile, new immigrants increasingly occupy the key manufacturing jobs that remain, and in many regions of the country they have come to dominate manufacturing job categories, especially arduous low-paying ones such as

meatpacking (Catanzarite 2000; Torres 1995; Gomez-Quinones, 1994). And, as labor scholar Andrés Torres (1995:154) explains, “Labor has had only minimal success in expanding into the reconfigured manufacturing sector where immigrants are concentrated.”

Restructuring, capital flight, managerial resistance and anti-labor legislation have depleted labor’s rank since the late 1960’s (Bronfenbrenner 2003; Torres 1995; Farber 1990). At the same time, the labor movement has failed to organize workers, especially immigrants. As leading labor scholars Ruth Milkman and Kent Wong (2000) explain:

The U.S. is a nation of immigrants, and earlier this century the labor movement’s growth was based on extensive recruitments of foreign-born workers and their offspring. In the years since WWII, however, immigrants have not always been welcome in the House of Labor....In fact, many union leaders took the position that immigrant workers should not be allowed to enter the country, fearing that they would lower wages, undermine unions, or be used as strikebreakers. (P. 2)

Likewise, labor scholar Kim Moody (1997:166) contends, “Until recently, help has not always been forthcoming from U.S. unions, whose leaders and members have often viewed immigrants as either ‘unorganizable’ or simply undesirable.” Moreover, Torres (1995:154) claims, “Internal practices are slow to accommodate the new workforce. The range of problematic attitudes varies from complacency to resistance founded in racism.”

Today, immigrant and native-born Latinos represent the poorest racial/ethnic group in the United States and continue to fall behind economically (Soler 2003; Torres 1995). Their plight has been exacerbated by unfavorable economic trends, which have resulted in their concentration in sectors of the economy that are less likely to have union representation or industries where unions have declined along with wages and working

conditions (Soler 2003; Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000; Catanzarite 2000; Torres 1995; Gomez-Quinones 1994). Waldinger and Der-Martirosian (2000:56) explain that immigrants, especially the less skilled, are more likely to occupy jobs whose characteristics include low pay, unhealthy or dangerous working conditions, limited chances for promotion and minimal job security. Historically, through unionization, immigrant workers have successfully challenged such undesirable employment and have bargained collectively to improve their wages and working conditions. In light of the mitigating effects unionization has on such terms of employment, it would seem that contemporary immigrants, the majority of whom are Latinos, would be leading candidates for unionization.

Although immigrants are less likely than their native-born counterparts to be union members, they stand to gain significantly from the benefits unionization offers. Over the last century, unionization has been a vehicle for lifting immigrants into America's economic mainstream. Furthermore, union membership has increased income equality among workers doing the same job in the same industry and union members are at a wage advantage compared to their non-union counterparts. Among all workers, union members earn on average 32 percent higher wages, while for Latinos, the union difference is 54 percent (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000a).

The new realities of the global economy, including an international division of labor and renewed mass immigration to the United States, especially from Latin America, and the associated change in demographics of the U.S. workforce create both challenges

and opportunities for the U.S. labor movement. As a number of scholars suggest, (Trumpbour and Bernard 2002; Milkman and Wong 2000; Cameron 2000; Delgado 2000; Sherman and Voss 2000; La Luz and Finn 1998; Flores and Ibarra 1998) the greatest challenge of rebuilding the country's labor movement as we enter the twenty-first century may be the ability of unions to reach out to the growing number of immigrant workers.

The increased presence of immigrants, particularly Latino immigrants, in the U.S. workforce introduces a host of social, cultural, political and economic considerations that are likely to have a profound effect on unionization in ways not unlike the changes witnessed at the beginning of the twentieth century when the United States experienced a massive wave of European immigrants. Despite the fact that European immigrants were instrumental in establishing the U.S. labor movement throughout the twentieth century, unions have paid relatively little attention to organizing Latino immigrants until recently.

The AFL-CIO's Position On Immigration

Evidence that the U.S. labor movement now acknowledges the importance of organizing the country's newest immigrants is provided in the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations' (AFL-CIO) recent reversal of its long held position on immigration. In 1999, delegates to its twenty-third Biennial Convention formed a "Special Committee on Immigration," chaired by the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE) President John Wilhelm and made up of union leaders from every union affiliated with the federation (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000a:17). This committee was charged

with the task of studying and recommending changes to the AFL-CIO's immigration policy. Adopted in 1985, the policy endorsed the creation of the current system of immigration enforcement, which includes employer sanctions for hiring undocumented workers (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000a:17). In a significant policy shift, in February 2000, the committee called for repealing penalties against employers who hire undocumented workers and granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants currently in the United States (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000a:17). Following the committee's recommendations, on February 16, 2000, the AFL-CIO Executive Council unanimously passed a historical resolution calling for the repeal of employer sanctions as well as amnesty for the millions of undocumented immigrants presently working and residing in the United States (The National Immigration Forum 2000). This resolution, in part, states:

The AFL-CIO proudly stands on the side of immigrant workers. Throughout the history of this country, immigrants have played an important role in building our nation and its democratic institutions. New arrivals from every continent have contributed their energy, talent and commitment to making the United States richer and stronger. Likewise, the American union movement has been enriched by the contributions and courage of immigrant workers. Newly arriving workers continue to make indispensable contributions to the strength and growth of our unions. These efforts have created new unions and strengthened and revived others, benefiting all workers, immigrant and native-born alike. It is increasingly clear that if the United States is to have an immigration system that really works, it must be simultaneously orderly, responsible and fair. The policies of both the AFL-CIO and our country must reflect those goals.

The AFL-CIO believes the current system of immigration enforcement in the United States is broken and needs to be fixed. Our starting points are simple:

- Undocumented workers and their families make enormous contributions to their communities and workplaces and should be provided permanent legal status through a new amnesty program.
- Regulated legal immigration is better than unregulated illegal immigration.
- Immigrant workers should have full workplace rights in order to protect their own interests as well as the labor rights of all American workers.
- Labor and business should work together to design cooperative mechanisms that allow law-abiding employers to satisfy legitimate needs for new workers in a timely manner without compromising the rights and opportunities of workers already here.
- Criminal penalties should be established to punish employers who recruit undocumented workers from abroad for the purpose of exploiting workers for economic gain (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000b:23).

Following the Executive Council’s adoption of this resolution, “the AFL-CIO conducted a series of regional forums on immigrant workers and the realities of their lives – at work, at home and in their communities” (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000b:1). These forums were held in New York, Atlanta, Chicago and Los Angeles to learn more about the problems facing immigrant workers and their families and to find solutions to these problems, as well as to learn more about how to build an understanding between the labor movement and the community to promote immigrant workers’ rights (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000a:17). As a result of these forums the AFL-CIO announced that it would work with its community allies to develop a national campaign to achieve the following goals:

- Promote the vigorous enforcement of work protection laws covering safety and health, wages and discrimination;
- Protect the freedom of all workers to choose to form unions;
- Build a broad anti-discrimination agenda that will fight discrimination against immigrants, women and all minorities;

- Pass a comprehensive amnesty program;
- Ensure citizenship for members of the late amnesty class and adjust the status of those left out of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act;
- Replace employer sanctions with an enforcement mechanism that imposes criminal penalties on employers who recruit undocumented workers from abroad in order to exploit them for economic gain, and enact whistle-blower protections to prevent retaliation against immigrant workers who assert their rights;
- Halt the expansion of – and reform – existing guestworker programs;
- Restore safety net benefits to immigrants and promote access to government services, including education and health care, and increased civic participation;
- Collaborate on a broad-based education campaign for workers and communities about immigrant issues; and
- Support immigrant workers through education, training and advocacy (American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations 2000b:21-22).

Labor relations scholar Vernon Briggs (2000) summarized this historic turnabout in the

AFL-CIO's position on immigration:

At every juncture prior to the 1980s, the union movement either directly instigated or strongly supported every legislative initiative enacted by Congress to restrict immigration and to enforce its policy terms. But in the late 1980s the leadership of organized labor began to waffle on the issue. By the 1990s the labor movement was hesitant to support comprehensive reform, even though the nation was in the midst of the largest wave of immigration it had ever known and the percentage of the labor force in unions was falling. Finally, in February 2000, the executive council of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) announced it was changing its historic position: it would now support immigration and the special needs of immigrants. (P. 4)

As the notion of organizing immigrant workers into the ranks of the U.S. labor movement has become increasingly central to the larger project of revitalizing the movement, labor scholars such as Ruth Milkman (2000:14) argue that the success of the AFL-CIO's new efforts to organize immigrants will ultimately depend on what happens

within its various affiliates, especially at the local level where organizing efforts are concentrated. She asserts, “Extending the revolution that has occurred at the top of the labor federation into these long-established structures is among the most difficult tasks that lie ahead” (Milkman 2000:14).

The Campaign to Organize South Omaha’s Latino Immigrant Meatpacking Workers

This case study of an organizing campaign among meatpacking workers, most of whom are Latino immigrants, in South Omaha, Nebraska, examines the potential for bringing contemporary immigrants into the U.S. labor movement. Specifically, this study assesses the possibilities and challenges of organizing Latino immigrant workers in a devalued U.S. manufacturing industry (meatpacking) where they have become increasingly concentrated and where unionization has diminished. By examining the meatpacking industry, which has undergone substantial industrial restructuring over the last few decades and subsequently both deunionization and a recomposition of its workforce from a predominantly native-born Anglo workforce to one which is increasingly comprised of immigrant Latinos, this study explores how the changing workforce demographics affect unionization and how unions are responding to these changes. Furthermore, focusing on an organizing campaign among primarily Latino immigrant workers, which includes efforts by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) and Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), which is a community-based organization, I explore the complexity of factors that are likely to affect Latino immigrant unionization. Moreover, given the fact that this organizing campaign is a collaborative effort between the UFCW and OTOC, I am able to assess the different

structures and strategies of these two organizations, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of such collaborations.

Questions To Be Addressed

A series of questions guide this study. Are contemporary immigrant workers fundamentally different than their native-born counterparts when it comes to unionization? What are the factors that facilitate, and those that discourage, unionization among contemporary immigrant workers? How does the legal status of contemporary immigrant workers affect unionization? As the demographics of the U.S. workforce change, how are unions responding? Is the labor movement transforming itself to accommodate the shift in the country's workforce demographics? Are unions up to the task of organizing contemporary immigrant workers? What new practices and strategies must be envisioned to incorporate contemporary immigrants into the U.S. labor movement? Which strategies and tactics have been most effective when organizing contemporary immigrant workers, and what are the implications?

The changing demographics of the U.S. workforce and the ways in which unions respond to these changes, particularly their ability to organize immigrant and native-born Latino workers, is extremely relevant in the state of Nebraska, where not only has the percentage of the Latino population nearly tripled the national average between 1990 and 2000, but also where the percentage of unionized workers is well below the national average. Nationwide the Latino population increased 58 percent during the 1990s, while in the state of Nebraska it increased 155 percent, from 36,969 in 1990 to 94,425 in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau). Furthermore, many estimate the state's Latino population to be

even greater given the number of undocumented Latino immigrants residing in the state that are not adequately accounted for in such government statistics. Meanwhile, as a poignant illustration of the divergent trends informing this study, in 2000, the percentage of unionized workers in the state of Nebraska was 8.4 percent, which is nearly 5 percent lower than the national percentage (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001). Moreover, between the years 1999 and 2000 alone, the state's labor movement declined by nearly a thousand members, from 66,000 to 65,000 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001).

The issue of meatpacking unionization is extremely relevant in the state of Nebraska for several additional reasons. First of all is meatpacking's importance to the state's economy. Livestock slaughter and processing, collectively referred to as "meatpacking," is the state's leading manufacturing industry. Second, the industry is often cited as the magnet drawing immigration to the state and has recently been singled out by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for an enforcement effort, dubbed "Operation Vanguard," which resulted in the "voluntary termination" of over 3000 of the state's meatpacking workers. Third, Nebraska's Governor recently created and implemented the industry's first ever "Meatpacking Industry Workers Bill of Rights," which designates the first of eleven rights as "the right to organize." Finally, the industry in South Omaha has recently become the subject of a collaborative campaign between the UFCW and OTOC to organize the area's estimated 4000 meatpacking workers. All of the above point to South Omaha's meatpacking industry as offering an exemplary case to investigate contemporary immigrant unionization and to examine this

crucial juncture in U.S. history when its labor movement is confronted with both declining membership and renewed mass immigration.

In order to understand the complexities of unionization among contemporary immigrant workers, I explore not only the individual and group background and demographic characteristics of these workers, but also the collaboration between the UFCW and OTOC in an organizing campaign among Latino immigrant meatpacking workers. I hypothesize that what is most important in realizing unionization among these workers, is not so much their individual and group characteristics, but rather the labor movement's willingness and commitment to organizing the industries in which they are concentrated and the organizing strategies implemented. Furthermore, given the decline of unionization within the meatpacking industry coupled with the organizational and structural limitations of contemporary meatpacking unions, I hypothesize that community-based organizing and labor-community alliances offer the best approach for organizing today's meatpacking workers. This study not only adds to understanding the factors that affect unionization among contemporary immigrants, but also contributes to understanding the complexity of organizing campaigns. And, it will hopefully help identify possibilities that might apply to other organizing efforts, especially within industries reliant on an immigrant workforce.

Chapter II

Literature Review

This research draws primarily from two bodies of literature: 1) factors affecting unionization among contemporary immigrant workers; and 2) the restructuring of the meatpacking industry and its affect on unionization. Although there is an extensive body of literature on immigrant unionization in the United States, for the most part, the focus of this scholarship is on European immigrants. Whereas most of the U.S. immigrants prior to World War II were Europeans, the current situation differs in that post-war immigration has been increasingly composed of individuals from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. Not only have the national origins of contemporary U.S. immigrants shifted from Europe to Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia, but also the volume of immigration to the United States has substantially increased. “The 2000 Census reveals that the percentage of foreign-born in the United States is at its highest since 1930, jumping from 4.7 percent in 1970 to 11.1 percent in 2000. Further, European-born first-generation immigrants continued their proportional decline in the face of increasing Latin American and Asian migration, 78 percent of all foreign-born combined” (Hernández and Glenn 2003:418). Furthermore, the 2000 U.S. Census figures indicate that 51 percent of the 28.4 million foreign-born residents are from Latin America, the majority of whom are from Mexico (Schepers 2003:14).

Another factor that distinguishes contemporary U.S. immigration from earlier periods is the presence of a sizeable number of undocumented immigrants. The 2000 U.S. Census reports that there are 8.7 million undocumented immigrants residing in the

United States, 5.4 million of whom are Latino (Schepers 2003:14). However, many immigration and labor scholars estimate the undocumented population is even greater given the number of undocumented immigrants residing in the country that are not adequately accounted for in such government statistics. For instance, labor scholar David Bacon estimates that there are between 9 and 11 million undocumented immigrants currently residing in the United States (2001b:1).

In addressing the issue of unionization among contemporary immigrants, sociologists Rodger Waldinger and Claudia Der-Martirosian (2000:52) argue that it stands at the confluence of two distinct literatures – one on immigration and the other on unionization – each of which is only peripherally aware of the other’s existence. They maintain, “Labor matters play an important role in the historiography of American immigration, but even the historians have not yet generated a unified framework, integrating the insights from the study of immigration and the study of unionization” (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000:53). Moreover, these two scholars argue that although there are a small number of insightful case studies examining unionization among immigrant workers, of which the best known is Hector Delgado’s 1993 book, *New Immigrants, Old Unions: Organizing Undocumented Workers in Los Angeles*, the contemporary literature is still wanting (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000:52-3). Likewise, Milkman (2000:3) contends, “There have been few efforts to document and analyze the relationship of immigrants to unionism in the contemporary United States.”

The scholarship that treats unionization among contemporary immigrant workers in the United States has focused primarily on organizing campaigns among Latino

immigrants in the Southwest, particularly California, where contemporary immigrants are more heavily concentrated and where they have been at the forefront of high profile organizing campaigns throughout the 1990s. Nearly a third of all the Latinos residing in the United States are concentrated in the state of California. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau figures, approximately 11 million of the 35.3 million Latinos in the country reside in California. Moreover, California became the epicenter of immigrant unionization during the 1990s, where the AFL-CIO scored three of the decade's largest union victories amongst Latino immigrant workers. These victories include the largest organizing campaign in modern labor history, in which 74,000 health care workers joined the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in Los Angeles County. *New York Times* reporter Steven Greenhouse explains that in February 1999, a stunning 74,000 Los Angeles County health care workers, many of them Latino immigrants, voted to unionize after an eleven-year SEIU campaign, which signified the single largest organizing success anywhere in the United States since the 1930s (1999:A1).

The second of these victories began in July 1990 when an estimated 1200 workers at a wheel factory in Los Angeles walked off their jobs in a wildcat strike and six months later, after a successful organizing campaign, voted in favor of union representation by the International Association of Machinists (Milkman 2002:122). Labor economist, Carol Zabin (2000) documents:

At the end of July 1990, over eight hundred workers at the American Racing Equipment Company (ARE), which manufactures automobile wheels, walked off their jobs. After three days the workers, who were almost all first-generation Latino immigrants, ended their wildcat strike but began long-term organizing to improve their working conditions. Six months later they voted in favor of union representation by the

International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM), and in September 1991 they won their first contract. The workers are now working under their third union contract, which offers them significantly higher wages than in their pre-union days as well as employer-financed health insurance and union security. (P. 150)

The third of these victories came in November of 1992 when over 3000 drywall workers, whom install the sheetrock panels that make up the interior walls of modern buildings, joined the United Brotherhood of Carpenters Union, nearly six months after thousands of Mexican immigrant workers, from Santa Barbara to San Diego, walked off the job demanding higher wages, better working conditions and union recognition (Milkman and Wong 2000:169). According to Milkman (2002:121), this campaign yielded a union contract that doubled drywallers' wages in the region and brought a few thousand previously non-union Mexican immigrant workers into the carpenters' union.

Sociologist Hector Delgado, who has also documented these high profile union victories in California, notes:

Los Angeles has become one of the most active sites of labor activity in the country, and Mexican and other Latino immigrants and organizers have been at the forefront of many of the city's labor struggles, including the high profile Justice for Janitors campaign and the Drywallers and American Racing campaigns....In July 1990, more than eight hundred workers, overwhelmingly first-generation Latino immigrants, walked off their jobs at the American Racing Equipment Company and remained out for three days. Six months later they voted in the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers Union (IAM) and in September 1991 negotiated the first of three contracts....A year later, thousands of immigrant construction workers in southern California struck for higher pay and union recognition. Among the more militant strikers were drywall hangers who shut down residential construction throughout southern California (2000a:33-4).

These victories demonstrate the potential for recruiting Latino immigrant workers into the U.S. labor movement.

Factors Affecting Unionization Among Contemporary Immigrants

Leading labor scholar, Kim Moody (1997:166) suggests that throughout the history of the U.S. labor movement, immigrant workers often have been viewed as “unorganizable” although the evidence demonstrates that not only can many of these workers be organized, but also they often take the initiative by organizing themselves. He argues, “Until recently, help has not always been forthcoming from U.S. unions, whose leaders and members have often viewed immigrants as either ‘unorganizable’ or simply undesirable” (Moody 1997:166). Likewise, Milkman (2002) explains the common perception held by many both inside and outside the labor movement regarding the ‘unorganizability’ of immigrant workers:

The conventional wisdom, widely accepted until very recently, is that immigrants are vulnerable, docile persons who are intensely fearful of any confrontation with authority, who accept substandard wages and poor working conditions because their standard of comparison is drawn from their home countries, and who therefore are extremely unlikely to actively seek unionization. For the undocumented, the assumption that immigrants lack real potential as union recruits is especially widespread. (P. 115)

The “Organizability” of Undocumented Workers

The undocumented status of immigrant workers and the legal vulnerability associated with that status are often cited as significant impediments to unionization in industries in which undocumented workers account for a large percentage of the workforce. Scholars such as Vernon Briggs (1984), for example, argued that undocumented workers act as deterrents to unionization, since their fear of apprehension and deportation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) forces them to tolerate low wages and poor working conditions. However, “In his benchmark study of a successful Los Angeles

organizing drive among undocumented immigrant workers, Hector Delgado demolishes many of the arguments about the ‘unorganizability’ of immigrant workers” (Moody 1997:166).

Delgado is frequently cited in the recent literature on contemporary immigrant unionization for his case study of a successful organizing campaign involving immigrant workers, most of which were undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Central America, at a Camagua waterbed factory in Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. His study, which examined the effects of workers’ undocumented status on unionization, challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the “unorganizability” of undocumented workers. Delgado found that “under certain conditions undocumented workers organize to protest and improve their working conditions” (1993:133). He identifies these conditions as follows:

First, the presumed paralyzing fear of deportation is diluted by the rather inconspicuous presence of the INS in Los Angeles and the relative ease of returning in the event of apprehension and deportation....Second, the distinction between short-term and long-term residents made by organizers and some scholars is a critical one in understanding the unionization of undocumented workers. Simply stated, permanent settlers, or long-term residents, are easier to organize than temporary migrants, or short-term residents....Third, the length of time in the interior tends to alter an immigrant’s frame of reference. Initially satisfied that they are making more money than they made back home, they eventually begin to compare their wages, working conditions, material possessions and quality of life to others in Los Angeles who are similarly employed. In some instances and under certain conditions, such comparisons spur efforts to improve their situation. One way to do this, especially if other avenues are closed to them, is to unionize....Another factor mitigating the fear of deportation is the unique occupational niche filled by immigrant workers in the Los Angeles economy. The perception...that certain jobs “belong” to them is reassuring and contributes significantly to a sense of security expressed by Camagua’s workers, and by workers from other firms. Contributing as well to the sense of security has been the union’s increasing interest in

organizing immigrant workers, irrespective of legal status, and the fact that undocumented workers have been deemed “employees” under the National Labor Relations Act by the courts and, thereby, protected by national labor laws. In the Camagua case, the breakdown of paternalistic ties between the owner and workers...also helped to ripen the company for unionization. Finally, the union’s ability to capitalize on the weakened relationship between the owner and his employees, and its determination and substantial commitment of resources to organize Camagua, were key to the successful unionization of the firm (Delgado 1993:132-3).

Rather than viewing undocumented workers as beyond the pale of unionization, Delgado 1993:11) suggests that their organizability depends less on their legal status and more on “labor market forces, the legal environment, organizational capacities and strategies, forms of labor control, migration and settlement patterns and other such factors.” In short, he suggests that the elements that promote or retard unionization among the undocumented are not unlike those that determine the organizability of other workers who are similarly located in the labor market (Delgado 1993:11). He claims, “The difficulty in organizing undocumented immigrants is explained not so much by their legal status as by the factors that make it difficult to organize *any* worker – native or immigrant, documented or undocumented – in most industries and sectors of a declining national economy” (Delgado 1993:134). Moreover, he states, “The elements that promote or retard unionization among the undocumented are not unlike those that determine the organizability of other workers who are similarly located in the labor market (Delgado 1993:11). Milkman (2000) argues a similar point. She maintains, “Immigrant workers, undocumented or not, seem ripe for organizing; the major impediment is not lack of interest in unions on their part, but rather the intensely anti-

labor environment which makes organizing workers of any type difficult in the late twentieth century” (Milkman 2000:9).

Based on his research Delgado (1993) suggests that the state plays a very important role in the unionization of undocumented workers, namely by recognizing them as “employees” under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and thereby protecting them under U.S. labor laws. He states, “The recognition of undocumented workers as “employees,” under the NLRA, has facilitated unionization” (Delgado 1993:16). Moreover, he explains that informing workers that they are protected under U.S. labor law has “helped facilitate the unionization of documented and undocumented workers” (Delgado 2000:32). Delgado also suggests that employer resistance to unionization is an important factor in organizing workers irrespective of their legal status. He states, “Employer resistance is an important factor, if not *the*, major obstacle to unionization of workers, regardless of citizenship status” (Delgado 1993:12). Another important factor in the organization of immigrant workers, according to Delgado, is organized labor’s determination to organize these workers. He claims:

A great deal hinges on organized labor’s willingness, and capacity, to invest the necessary resources to organize workers, regardless of their citizenship status. Significant shifts in the economy and changes in the character of workforces will force organizers to focus much more on organizing immigrants, if it [organized labor] hopes to recapture lost ground. Earlier claims that women and blacks were unorganizable proved not to be supported by the data. Similar claims about undocumented immigrants are similarly unsubstantiated (Delgado 1992:140).

Moreover, Delgado (1993:15) claims that organized labor’s determination to organize immigrant workers is in part, but not solely, a question of resources but also of innovative organizing strategies.

Some scholars, however, argue that the organizing climate has changed since Delgado's case study. For instance, Milkman (2000:8) suggests that recent efforts to tighten restrictions on immigration and renewed initiatives to deport the undocumented may have altered the climate in the years since Delgado did his fieldwork. Similarly, Edna Bonacich, a sociologist who has conducted research similar to that of Delgado's with UNITE's Los Angeles Organizing Department, argues:

As Héctor Delgado has shown (1993), lack of legal papers is not a fatal bar to organizing. But it certainly makes it more difficult, as workers fear that if they expose themselves they may face deportation. And since the ILGWA strike reported on in Delgado's book, conditions have worsened for undocumented immigrants. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) made it illegal for employers to hire the undocumented (2000:138).

In addressing the issue of changes in immigration legislation, namely the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, which included "employer sanctions" that, for the first time in history, made it illegal for employers to hire undocumented workers, Delgado (1992) asserts:

Research conducted prior to IRCA challenges the conventional wisdom that undocumented workers cannot be organized because of their fear of apprehension and deportation by the INS. Preliminary research subsequent to the passage of this legislation in 1986 suggests that essentially the same factors that mitigated the fear of the INS and made the undocumented as receptive to unionization as other classes of workers similarly located in the labor market prior to IRCA are operating in the post-IRCA period. The future "organizability" of undocumented workers rests considerably on unions' determination to organize them and whether they continue to be protected by U.S. labor laws. (P. 131)

But other research demonstrates the lack of consensus among scholars as to the effect of legal status on unionization. For example, based on her case study of an organizing campaign among Latino immigrant workers at an ARE wheel factory in Los

Angeles, Zabin (2000:168) argues that legal status does in fact affect workers'

willingness to unionize. She explains:

In 1984 the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 952 tried to organize the facility [ARE] (then called Modern Wheel), but lost the NLRB election 268 to 452. According to several workers, this attempt was sabotaged when the INS raided the plant and deported significant numbers of workers shortly before the election. Although many quickly recrossed the border and came back to work at ARE, the threat of deportation dampened support for the union (Zabin 2000:154).

Likewise, based on their analysis of unionization patterns among U.S. immigrants,

Waldinger and Der-Martirosian (2000) maintain:

Many new immigrants are recent arrivals, altogether too uncertain of their status, standing, and orientation – will they settle down or return home? – to seriously consider unionization. Moreover, a substantial portion of the immigrant population – as many as one out of every four immigrants arriving each year – has an additional fear factor, associated with a condition rarely known earlier in the century, namely, a status prohibiting work in the United States. These “illegal” or “undocumented” immigrants – call them what you will – know all too well that the Immigration and Naturalization Service provides employers with an additional union-busting tool, yet another reason to desist from organizing activities. (P. 50)

Time Residing in the United States and Length of Stay in the Country

Time residing in the United States and length of stay in the country are identified in the literature as likely factors affecting unionization among contemporary immigrants.

A number of scholars, including Milkman (2002; 2000), Delgado (2000; 1993) and Waldinger and Der-Martirosian (2000), suggest that unionism is strongest among the growing number of immigrants who have been in the country longer and who plan on staying. Delgado (1993), for example, argues that the distinction between short-term and long-term residents made by some scholars is a critical one in understanding unionization among immigrant workers. He asserts:

Simply stated, permanent settlers, or long-term residents, are easier to organize than temporary migrants, or short-term residents. Significantly, the former has been growing ever larger in size since the 1960s....The length of time in the interior tends to alter an immigrants' frame of reference. Initially satisfied that they are making more money than they made back home, they eventually begin to compare their wages, working conditions, material possessions and quality of life to others...who are similarly employed. In some instances and under certain conditions, such comparisons spur efforts to improve their situation. One way to do this, especially if other avenues are closed to them, is to unionize (Delgado (1993: 132-3).

Likewise, Waldinger and Der-Martirosian (2000) argue:

For all immigrants, time is likely to be the most decisive consideration, as both interest in the benefits obtained through unionization and the ability to obtain union jobs increase with time spent in the United States. In this respect, time points to the importance of assimilation: because standards change with settlement, the longer immigrants live in the United States the more likely their frame of reference will shift from the conditions prevailing in the country of origin to those prevailing in their new home. However, time does not yield a uniform effect. Workers emanating from groups with a history of circular or temporary migration may be more likely to assimilate in a delayed fashion. (P. 60)

These scholars clarify that time may not work in quite the same way for all immigrants, particularly labor migrants who are part of a circular or temporary migration pattern.

They contend, "Workers emanating from groups with a history of circular or temporary migration will be more likely to retain a dual frame of reference, which in turn reduces the impetus to organize" (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000:59). Therefore, they theorize that Mexican immigrants, as a quintessential labor migration group and with a history of circular or temporary migration patterns, will be less receptive to unionization than other immigrants (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000:70).

Social Networks

Another factor closely related to the settlement patterns of immigrant workers and suggested in the literature as affecting their receptivity to unionization is their “social networks”.¹ Delgado (2000) explains:

The literature on immigrants is replete with references to the importance of social networks in immigration, settlement, and work process. In my own research, such networks played a key role in the unionization process. Family and friendship networks play a key role in unionization both directly and indirectly. Directly, in that these co-ethnic ties are utilized in the recruitment and commitment building phases of organization. Indirectly, because they help workers settle permanently and more comfortably in their new environment. (P. 229)

Similar to Delgado, and based on their own studies of immigrant unionization, Milkman (2002; 2000) and Zabin (2000) suggest that the strong social networks characteristic of Latino immigrant workers facilitates unionization. Milkman (2000), for instance, claims:

The fact that immigrant workers rely so heavily on ethnic social networks for such basic survival needs as housing, jobs, and various other forms of social and financial assistance may also make them easier to recruit into the labor movement than native-born workers. Southern California is famous for its highly atomized social arrangements and weak sense of community, but that reputation is based entirely on the “Anglo” experience. In contrast, L.A.’s working-class immigrants have vibrant ethnic networks and communities rooted in extended kinship ties, as well as the shared experience of migration from particular communities in their countries of origin. The intricate web of social connections among immigrants can be a key resource in building labor solidarity, particularly if unions can identify and recruit key actors in kin and community networks. (P. 17).

Moreover, based on her case study of an organizing campaign among mostly Latino immigrant workers at an ARE wheel factory in Los Angeles in the 1990s, Zabin (2000:

¹ Sociologist Alejandro Portes (1995:8) defines social networks as “sets of recurrent associations between groups of people linked by occupational, familial, cultural or affective ties.”

150) found that “the strong social and family ties among immigrants...contributed to creating the solidarity necessary to initiate and sustain the campaign.”

Union and/or Other Political Experience

An additional factor indicated in the literature as affecting unionization among contemporary immigrants is their union and/or other political experience in their sending countries. Some scholars, such as Milkman (2002; 2000) and Wells (2000), argue that immigrants are more receptive to unionization than their native-born counterparts because they have had previous experience with unionization and oppositional politics in their sending countries. Milkman (2000), for example, suggests:

One reason for their more pro-union views may be that many of today’s immigrant Latinos – especially those from Central America – have some positive experiences of unionism in their home countries. Although this transnational influence is less extensive than it was for their early twentieth-century European predecessors, it is striking that many of the new rank-and-file immigrant union leaders have a history of union activism of left-wing political ties in their native lands. While many immigrant workers are from rural backgrounds, a substantial number arrive in the United States far more acquainted with idioms of unionism and class politics than their native-born counterparts. (P. 9)

Miriam Wells (2000), an anthropologist whose research includes a case study of San Francisco’s hotel industry and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), argues a similar point to that of Milkman, asserting:

Latino immigrants are especially receptive and militant union members. Not only do they often come from countries with strong and legitimate labor movements, but many were union members or leaders there. Moreover, many Mexicans and especially Central Americans engaged in dangerous authority-challenging struggles in the chain of events that led to their emigration. (P. 119)

Previous research, however, reveals a great deal of variance among Latino immigrant workers in regards to their union and/or other political experience in their sending countries and the relationship between this experience and their propensity to support unionization in the United States. As explained by sociologist Edna Bonacich (2000):

Some...Central Americans have had a great deal of experience with political struggles in their homelands, as have some Mexicans, especially those from Mexico City. On the other hand, many have been exposed to corrupt unions or to regimes that assassinate union leaders. These experiences, or lack of any experience of political struggle, may handicap union organizing. (P. 139)

Moreover, Zabin's (2000) previously mentioned case study of an organizing campaign among Latino immigrant workers found that few of these workers had had prior experience with unions or with political activism in their home countries.

Community-Based Organizing

A review of the literature on organizing campaigns among contemporary immigrant workers also points to the importance of community-based organizing (Fine 2001; Zabin 2000; Milkman and Wong 2000; Needleman 1998; Chen and Wong 1998). This literature suggests that the successful mobilization of immigrant workers relies heavily upon the collaboration of both organized labor and community-based organizations. Zabin's (2000) study of a successful organizing campaign among mostly Mexican immigrant workers at a wheel factory in Los Angeles and Milkman and Wong's (2000) analysis of a victorious organizing campaign among thousands of Latino immigrant drywall workers in southern California suggests that the collaboration between the labor movement and community-based organizations was fundamental to the success

of both of these campaigns. Milkman (2000:21) explains that in both of these cases, success was predicated on the combination of bottom-up organizing among immigrant workers themselves, partly rooted in immigrant social networks and communities, on the one hand, and the labor movement's willingness to commit extensive financial and legal resources to support the effort, on the other. Moreover, based in her case study Zabin (2000:167) suggests that in order to facilitate immigrant unionization, "They [unions] can hire bilingual organizers and promote participation and leadership development among workers. They can build upon the social relationships and solidarity among immigrants and work with community organizations that have built ties with the population over many years." She argues, "Though these strategies never assure unionization, the immigrant organizing experiences in the early 1990s suggest that they increase the chances of success" (Zabin 2000:167).

Ruth Needleman (1998:73), labor studies professor and former organizer with the Service Employees International Union, suggests that there are both short-term and long-term reasons why cooperation and partnership between unions and community-based organizations can advance organizing efforts, including that building such relationships: 1) maintains a dual focus at work and in the workers' community; 2) addresses workers' family and work-based needs, enabling them to stay in the workforce and participate in self-organization activities; 3) helps workers overcome fears and language, cultural, or legal status barriers; 4) builds lasting networks and support systems to sustain unionism across jobs and locations; and 5) lays the foundation for larger organizing campaigns – by occupation and geographical area – down the road. Furthermore, Needleman points out

the complementary strengths that both unions and community-based organizations have to offer organizing campaigns:

There are some areas in which unions are extremely successful, in part because of their objectives, size, resources, history, and structures. Unions have the experience and staff to reach large but dispersed workforces; to tackle city, state, and even federal policies or practices that stand as barriers to organization; to connect workers to national and even international networks of support; and to ensure representation is achieved, contracts are signed, and improvements are made in wages and working conditions. Given their community roots, emphasis on one-on-one contact, and long-term perseverance, community-based organizations offer many workers a friendlier, more familiar face, support during individual crisis, and training and education over an extended period, at a pace well suited to these workers' overwhelming responsibilities. (Needleman 1998:74).

Additional labor scholars and organizers have emphasized the importance community-based organizations play in the unionization of contemporary immigrants. For example, labor scholar Andrés Torres (1995:154) argues that labor must insert itself into the life of Latino immigrant communities because, "for Latinos, the community, not the workplace, is seen as the focal site for organizing activities." He suggests that local institutions in the Latino community such as community-based organizations, church groups, and advocacy networks, all facilitate the unionization of immigrant and native-born Latino workers (Torres 1995:157). Similarly, May Ying Chen, Vice President of UNITE, and labor scholar Kent Wong (1998:1867) assert:

It is essential that they [unions] build alliances with community organizations and groups....Immigrants' rights groups...and other community-based organizations are potential allies of labor. The labor movement needs to spend time, attention, and resources to develop and expand these relationships, and to forge common agendas. (P.186)

Although community-based organizing is gaining considerable credence both inside the formal labor movement among union leadership, and outside unions among labor scholars, leading labor scholar Kate Bronfenbrenner (1998:12) argues that it has been a previously neglected area of research. By examining an organizing campaign among meatpacking workers in South Omaha, most of whom are Latino immigrants, which is based on a collaboration between a union – the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) – and a community-based organization – Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), this case study aims to fill some of this void. In addition, Bronfenbrenner explains that until recently, very little research has examined the organizing process itself. She states (1998):

Although there has been considerable macro-level research documenting the magnitude of labor's decline, there has been much less micro-level research that looks intensively at the organizing process itself, particularly the role played by union strategies and tactics. Furthermore, much of the academic research suffers because the samples are small, the databases are limited, and the researchers lack an understanding of how the union organizing process actually works. Most industrial relations research on private sector organizing continues to focus primarily on elections and employer variables easily accessible from NLRB data. From this research we have learned much about the influence of environmental factors, the National Labor Relations Board, and workers' attitudes towards unions. Despite the great volume of research, however, few studies examine the actual process of union organizing campaigns and the importance of union characteristics and strategies in determining election outcomes. (P. 8)

Here too, through a case study of an organizing campaign among Latino immigrant meatpacking workers, this research project looks to fill some of the gaps in research regarding the actual organizing process.

Unionization Among Latino Immigrant Workers Outside California

For the most part, research regarding contemporary immigrant unionization has focused on California, an area in which Latino immigrant workers have been historically concentrated. Meanwhile, little research has focused on unionization among contemporary immigrant workers in other geographic locations, such as the Midwest, where there has been a rapid increase in the Latino immigrant population. The last decade alone has seen a significant growth of the Latino population in the Midwest, especially in Nebraska, where the number of Latinos grew 155 percent, from 36,969 in 1990 to 94,425 in 2000 (Orosco 2001:10). Accompanying the growth of Nebraska's Latino population has been a decline in the state's percent of unionized workers. As of 2000, this percentage had fallen to 8.4 percent, which is nearly 5 percent lower than the national average (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2001).

By focusing on an organizing campaign in the meatpacking industry in Nebraska, an industry which is not only dependent on Latino immigrant workers, but also often cited as the principal incentive of Latino immigration to the state, this study allows me the opportunity to examine the claims put forth in the literature regarding contemporary immigrant unionization and to test the degree to which they hold true in different geographical areas.

In addition, both Nebraska and its meatpacking industry have recently become the focus of national immigration legislation as the INS singled out the state's meatpacking industry for the implementation of Operation Vanguard, an immigration enforcement operation. This operation, which reviewed employment documentation, specifically I-9

Forms, for every meatpacking worker in the state, resulted in termination of nearly 3500 workers. In short, after reviewing some 24,000 meatpacking workers' records and finding approximately 4,500 discrepancies, an estimated 3,500 workers quit their jobs rather than face federal immigration officials to verify their employment status (Gouveia and Juska 2000:337). Operation Vanguard was not an isolated incident of the INS targeting the state's meatpacking industry. Throughout the last decade, Nebraska's meatpacking industry experienced numerous plant raids by the INS, the latest of which took place during the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign and resulted in the deportation of over 200 workers, despite an internal policy directing INS agents not to initiate immigration enforcement actions during labor organizing campaigns. Consequently, the circumstances surrounding this study differ markedly from the situation Delgado described in his benchmark case study in which there was a "rather inconspicuous presence of the INS" (1993: 33).

The Meatpacking Industry

The second body of literature this study draws from is that of the meatpacking industry. This industry represents a prototypical case for analyzing contemporary immigrant unionization. It represents a textbook example of post-World War II industrial restructuring in the United States, which has resulted in a near elimination of unionization and a change in workforce composition from a primarily Anglo native-born workforce to one that is overwhelmingly comprised of Latino immigrants.

Although there is a great deal of research on the meatpacking industry, an aspect that is missing from this research is contemporary meatpacking unionization. The

majority of literature on the industry and unionization (Warren 2000; Halpern and Horowitz 1999; Fehn 1998; Page 1998; Herod 1998; Horowitz 1997; Halpern 1997; Stormquist and Bergman 1997; Pratt 1996; Fink 1997; Deslippe 1993; Barrett 1987; Halstead 1986; Fogel 1971; Brody 1964) has focused on the rise and decline of unionization within the industry and the historical role both race and gender have played in meatpacking unionism. However, relatively few studies have analyzed the relationship between the industry's contemporary workforce, which consists of mostly immigrant and native-born Latinos, and unionization.

The most recent meatpacking literature emphasizes the industry's restructuring and how it has affected rural communities (Broadway 2001; Gouveia 2000; Grey 1999; Bjerklie 1996; Stull, Broadway and Griffith 1995; Benson 1994; Lamphere, Stepick and Grenier 1994). As anthropologist Mark Grey explains, "For the most part, the meatpacking literature has documented the impacts of newcomers on rural communities..." (1999:16). However, the ethnographic research offered by Grey (1999), as well as Deborah Fink (1998), Carol Andreas (1994) and a few others, has yielded insights into the nature of work in the modern-day meatpacking industry and the experience of contemporary meatpacking workers. Still, what is missing from the current meatpacking literature is: 1) how unions are responding to restructuring within the industry, especially the changing demographics of the industry's workforce; and 2) how contemporary meatpacking workers are organizing to improve their wages and working conditions. As a study of an organizing campaign among contemporary meatpacking workers, the majority of whom are Latino immigrants, this project partly fills such a void.

To understand the dynamics of unionization among contemporary meatpacking workers we must consider how modern-day meatpacking is conditioned by historical changes within the industry. In many respects, today's meatpacking industry manifests striking similarities to the industry at the turn of the twentieth century, when Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel – *The Jungle* – first brought the hazards of the industry to the public's attention. In spite of the fact that meatpacking has undergone substantial restructuring during the second half of the twentieth century, newly arrived immigrants, poor working conditions and powerful industrial oligopolies still characterize the industry. And, just as the immigrants of the past suffered from the brutal working conditions of the labor-intensive industry, contemporary meatpacking workers suffer from repetitive motion disorders associated with disassembly line production. Although meatpacking unions were ultimately able to organize the industry and improve workers' wages and working conditions during the first half of the twentieth century, meatpacking unionism was unable to resist the industrial restructuring that characterized the second half of the twentieth century.

Economic and Industrial Restructuring

In many respects the meatpacking industry is an exemplary case of the economic and industrial restructuring that has characterized post-World War II America. Over the last few decades, U.S. industries have undergone a number of structural changes. For instance, technological innovations and the subsequent mechanization of production have led to a decline in employment in the U.S. manufacturing sector and a shift in the overall U.S. economy to the service sector. These same technological innovations, coupled with

a favorable international trading and investment regime, have given companies greater geographic mobility and thus the ability to search for regions that offer cheaper production. This has resulted in capital flight from advanced industrial countries to lower-cost, less-developed countries (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton 1999).

Accompanying these structural changes, the U.S. economy has experienced an intensification of international competition. Faced with increasing international competition, industries began experimenting with strategies to increase their profits by reducing labor and other costs. These strategies not only included shifting operations to lower-cost locations, but also restructuring and reorganizing operations and labor processes to achieve higher productivity and mobilizing new and cheaper pools of labor (Held et al. 1999). These strategies are certainly evident in the meatpacking industry, which over the last few decades has undergone dramatic restructuring including changes in the production process, a wave of plant relocations from urban areas to sparsely populated rural communities, a significant reduction of wage scales, deunionization and workforce recomposition (Stanley 1994:134). As geographer Michael Broadway (1994:30) explains, "Meatpacking is clearly representative of the overall changes that have occurred in the wider U.S. economy. Technical innovations and capital mobility have enabled new packing companies to locate their plants to rural areas close to feedlots in right-to-work states and away from unionized urban areas." And because many of these rural areas lack adequate labor supply, especially for an industry that is physically demanding, dangerous, low paying and well-known for its high turnover rate, the industry has gone beyond the locales in which its plants are located to actively recruit

workers, particularly Latino immigrants (Broadway 2001; Grey 1999; Stanley 1994; Lamphere et al. 1994).

Restructuring of the Meatpacking Industry

Prior to 1860, localized companies provided most of the meat in the United States because there was neither the refrigeration nor the transport capacity to allow for the perishable product to be shipped significant distances. However, innovations in refrigeration and consolidation of the railroad system facilitated the transformation of meatpacking to a mostly urban industry (Staggs 1986; Brody 1964). As a result of a series of related innovations in production, processing, transportation and marketing, the industry emerged during the late nineteenth century near railroad terminals in urban areas set within the extensive farming landscape of the Midwest (Herod 1998:266). From the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, cattle were transported by railroad from production areas to urban areas where they were slaughtered in multistoried facilities located adjacent to the stockyards where the cattle were sold. This method of production continued throughout most of the twentieth century, until an Iowa-based meatpacking company, Iowa Beef Packers (IBP), pioneered revolutionary changes in the industry.

The “IBP Revolution.” In what came to be known as the “IBP revolution,” Iowa Beef Packers changed the character of the meatpacking industry through innovations in both processing and marketing (Broadway 1995:17-8). The company’s innovations and cost-cutting strategies initiated an entire reorganization of the industry, which has resulted in modern-day meatpacking (Broadway 2000; Stull, Broadway and Griffith 1995; Lamphere et al. 1994).

Unlike its predecessors, IBP constructed plants in rural towns close to the supply of cattle. By locating its plants close to the cattle supply, the company was able to reduce the transport costs and the costly shrinkage and bruising associated with shipping cattle long distances. Locating close to the cattle supply also enabled IBP to reduce its costs by purchasing cattle directly from farmers and eliminating the middleman (Broadway 2000:38). In addition, IBP changed the actual structure of the meatpacking plant facility. Unlike the older meatpacking facilities, IBP built single-story facilities, which instead of utilizing gravity to move the animals through the plant used a powered chain to transport them along a disassembly line. “Under this system, workers are stationed along a line and perform the same task as each animal passes by” (Broadway 1999:66). The new system proved to be much more efficient than the traditional gravity system used in multi-storied plants and therefore resulted in significant gains in productivity (Broadway 1999: 66). This “disassembly line” mode of production, which was made possible by technological innovations and increased mechanization, also allowed for the reduction of labor costs by eliminating the need for highly skilled butchers, who could be replaced by “unskilled” laborers able to perform repetitive tasks. Subsequently, IBP used this “deskilling” as rationale for reducing wages and avoiding the terms of industry-wide union contracts that had been established, arguing that less skill was required in their newer plants than in the older ones (Broadway 1999:66).

Accompanying this “disassembly line” mode of production has been an increase in work-related injuries and illness, the most common being related to repetitive motions. As Broadway (1995:20) explains the most common injury among line workers is carpal

tunnel syndrome, a disorder that occurs when too much pressure is put on the median nerve that passes through the wrist to the hand. The rapid, repetitive nature of work on the disassembly line and the management's regulation of line speed are generally credited with the syndrome's high incidence in the industry. Furthermore, Broadway (1995:20) notes, "Injury and illness rates for meatpacking workers have increased since the 1970s, and meatpacking proved to be the most hazardous industry in America throughout the 1980s, with an incidence rate for injuries and illness triple that for manufacturing as a whole." As of 2000, meatpacking remained the most dangerous industry in the United States. As Eric Schlosser, an award-winning investigative journalist, reports:

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, meatpacking is the nation's most dangerous occupation. In 1999, more than one-quarter of America's nearly 150,000 meatpacking workers suffered a job-related injury or illness. The meatpacking industry not only has the highest injury rate, but also has by far the highest rate of serious injury – more than five times the national average, as measured in lost workdays. If you accept the official figures, about 40,000 meatpacking workers are injured on the job every year. But the actual number is most likely higher given the industry's well-documented history of discouraging injury reports, falsifying injury data, and putting injured workers back on the job quickly to minimize the reporting of lost workdays (2000b: 40).

Boxed Beef. In addition to relocating and restructuring plants, an additional IBP innovation, known as "boxed beef," further lowered the company's costs and facilitated the reorganization of the meatpacking industry. Horowitz (1997: 250) explains, "IBP founder Currier Holman saw an opportunity to dominate the beef trade by attaching breaking and boning operations to the slaughterhouses and bypassing both the wholesalers and the supermarket warehouse. This innovation quickly became known as

‘boxed beef’ because of the manner in which the meat was shipped.” Moreover,

Broadway (1995) describes:

In 1967, IBP constructed a plant in Dakota City, Nebraska to produce a new product – boxed beef. Boxed beef increased the company’s market share and lowered its transportation costs. Instead of shipping carcasses to its customers, IBP removed fat and bone at the plant, thereby retaining valuable waste materials, such as entrails for pet food, and shipped vacuum-packaged proportions according to retail specifications. Vacuum-packaging appealed to customers, since it reduces shrinkage, which is caused by exposure to air, and adds to the product’s shelf life. The innovation also allowed meat wholesalers and supermarkets to lower their labor costs by eliminating most of their skilled butchers and contributed to an increasing demand for the product. IBP responded by constructing additional large slaughter-capacity plants close to feedlots in the High Plains during the 1970s and 1980s (P.19)

In short, boxed beef reduced costs in two significant ways. First, meat producers and retailers saved money because boxed beef eliminated the skilled meat cutters who had previously broken down carcasses into customer cuts. Horowitz (1997:251) explains that in effect, boxed beef eliminated the need for a separate “fabrication” stage in between the slaughterhouse and retailer, which subsequently eliminated most of the skilled meat butchers. He describes, “Boxed beef effectively transferred the work of skilled, union butchers from the fabrication warehouse to the packinghouse, where the tasks were deskilled and performed by low-wage, nonunion laborers (Horowitz 1997:251). Indeed, Horowitz (1997:251) notes, “According to a 1987 survey, boxed beef’s primary attraction to retailers was its reduced labor requirements.” Second, companies saved transportation costs by eliminating the practice of shipping bones and scraps, and in their place shipped more meat. Horowitz (1997:251) explains, “Because these meatpacking companies no longer paid to ship unusable bones and meat scraps, savings in transportation expenses allowed them to undercut prices of firms that shipped beef in carcass form.” Boxed beef

not only increased IBP's share of the meatpacking market, but also, with its cost advantage, encouraged restructuring throughout the industry.

The structural transformation of meat production and processing was accompanied by corporate restructuring, in which older unionized facilities were forced to abandon their traditional system of production in order to remain competitive with the aggressive new facilities. Basically, because the new facilities were much more economical, the older, urban-based, and mostly unionized firms were forced to cut their costs in order to remain competitive. Consequently, the innovations introduced by IBP resulted in the shutting down of older packinghouses and the reopening of modern, technologically advanced facilities in rural, livestock producing areas. This restructuring, eventually meant that the plants located in union strongholds were closed and moved to non-union rural areas, while the older plants that remained in urban areas either demanded wage concessions or closed their older unionized facilities and reopened them at lower wage levels. According to Craypo (1994:75) these trends resulted in the closure of more than 400 meatpacking plants and the loss of some 40,000 jobs between 1972 and 1987. Moreover, he explains that the number of workers covered by union contracts declined from 70,000 in 1976 to 30,000 in 1983 (Craypo 1994:75).

As a consequence of the rapid decline of unionized plants, local meatpacking unions were reduced in size or completely eliminated. The unions that managed to hang on lacked the resources, both financial and in terms of actual manpower, needed to organize the new plants. Thus, they focused on mere survival, which resulted in union mergers and concession bargaining.

The Formation of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW)

In 1979, in an attempt to gain back some strength that was lost with the restructuring of the industry, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen Union merged with the Retail Clerks International Union to form the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). This merger combined approximately 700,000 retail clerks and 500,000 meatpacking workers into a single union of 1.2 million members (Skaggs 1986:204). As a result, the UFCW became one of the largest unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Today, the UFCW represents approximately 1.4 million workers in many different industries, but concentrated in retail food, meatpacking, poultry, and other food processing industries (United Food and Commercial Workers 2001a).

The majority of unionized meatpacking workers in the United States are represented by the UFCW. However, there are also a number of meatpacking workers represented by other unions such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). For instance, economist Charles Craypo (1994:76) notes, “In 1992 the Teamsters (IBT) had beefpacking contracts with IPB at Pasco, Washington (a relatively small plant) and Amarillo, Texas; with ConAgra at Garden City, Kansas; and with Excel at Fort Morgan, Colorado. It also had contracts in porkpacking.”

While the merger of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union and Retail Clerks Union provided clear advantages for both unions; for example, the advantages associated with gains in resources and absolute numbers, many argue that this merger came with a

cost to the meatpacking membership (Fink 1998; Page 1998; Halpern 1997; Horowitz 1997; Andreas 1994). Fink (1998), for example, argues:

The logic of the merger was that if workers were to face larger and more determined anti-union companies, they needed a larger base of power and deeper pockets. The other side of such a merger was that meatpacking workers became one corner of a larger organization, and they could not necessarily count on their agenda becoming a priority of the entire union. (P. 60)

Moreover, labor historian Roger Horowitz (1997), in documenting meatpacking unionists' sentiments regarding the merger, notes:

Omaha unionist Max Graham, while working for the UFCW, used the analogy of "a shot of whiskey" to compare the organizations. "When we was the UPWA [United Packinghouse Workers of America], we was little but powerful. Then we joined the Amalgamated and we got like a mixed drink. Now it looks to me like we're a shot in a quart of Squirt." (P. 264)

At the time of the merger, meatpacking workers represented less than ten percent of the newly established UFCW's membership (Horowitz 1997:265). Consequently, the Retail Clerks dominated the organization (Horowitz 1997:265). They dominated the UFCW not only because they made up the majority of the newly formed union's membership, but also because their membership base was increasing while the Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, on the other hand, were experiencing difficulties in expanding their membership. Andreas (1994:72) explains, "While membership in the Meat Cutters union had been declining, membership in the Retail Clerks union had increased, because service jobs were beginning to replace manufacturing jobs in the 1970s." Furthermore, Page (1998), asserts:

Meatpacking had always been somewhat of a secondary concern for the Amalgamated and when the UFCW was created, packinghouse workers became an even smaller fish in a rapidly expanding organizational pond

dominated by retail workers. Given the traditional bargaining practices in the retail field and the fact that packinghouse workers account for only a small fraction of the UFCW's total membership, the union's leadership has not always taken an aggressive stance in the meatpacking industry. In fact, in 1987 the UFCW leadership chose to abandon its yearlong organizing drive at IBP plants – over the objections of its packinghouse division chief – as part of a backdoor “sweetheart” agreement with IBP that kept some plants unorganized while allowing the union into other plants, although under terms quite favorable to the company. (P. 288)

Concession Bargaining. As Page (1998) indicates, the restructuring of the meatpacking industry and the resulting decline in union membership and strength, not only resulted in union mergers, but also led to concession bargaining between unions and the industry. Horowitz (1997) explains:

Concessions accelerated almost as soon as the UFCW formed. In 1980 and 1981 at least two dozen companies asked for concessions while contracts were in effect. Many threatened to close their plants if the union did not comply. Despite opposition from the packinghouse division, at least a half-dozen firms secured concessions by making agreements with local unions. In these instances, the contracts were approved by UFCW President William Wynn over the objections of Anderson [Director of the UFCW's Packinghouse Division] (P. 266)

Moreover, Horowitz (1997:266) details, “In December 1981, with one year left under the national contracts, threats of plant closings persuaded the UFCW and the packinghouse division to grant concessions at five major packing companies with thirty thousand workers.”

Throughout the 1980s, the meatpacking industry effectively forced concessions from the UFCW. Although dozens of local strikes erupted against the industry's concessionary pressures, they were universally defeated (Horowitz 1997:268). By 1990, Horowitz (1997:276) reports, “Union concessions brought meatpacking wages 20 percent

below the average for manufacturing. Real wages (adjusted for inflation) plummeted 30 percent between 1979 and 1990.”

The decline of organized labor in meatpacking has meant that unions no longer exercise pressure on the overall level of wages and working conditions in the industry. Inside the plants, this decline has been accompanied by a return to the system that characterized meatpacking at the turn of the twentieth century, which was so vividly captured and described by Upton Sinclair in his groundbreaking exposé of the industry, *The Jungle*. Similar to the turn of the last century, today, the flow of casual labor in and out of meatpacking plants draws on workers who have the most limited employment options. Whereas at the turn of the last century, these workers were mostly newly arrived European immigrants, today’s meatpacking workforce is comprised mostly of immigrants from Latin America.

Recomposition of the Meatpacking Workforce

Coinciding with the restructuring of the meatpacking industry and the decline in meatpacking unionization has been a rapid recomposition of the industry’s workforce. Over the last few decades, this workforce has undergone dramatic changes, in which the composition of the workforce has shifted toward nearly complete reliance on Latino immigrants. Although workforce composition within the industry varies considerably from plant to plant, industry wide, the number of Latino immigrants has increased dramatically, especially in the Midwest where they typically make up half or more of the workforce (Gouveia and Saenz 2000; Broadway 2000; Craypo 1994; Stanley 1994).

While conventional explanations of the deterioration of unionization, as well as wages and working conditions, in the meatpacking industry generally assert that the changing workforce demographics are to be blamed, Stanley (1992:113) argues that while the employment of immigrants in the industry has coincided with this deterioration, it has been more the result of this deterioration, rather than its cause. Moreover, she claims, “While the deterioration of wages and working conditions in the industry was not caused by the influx of immigrant and refugee workers, their presence made it easier for meatpacking firms to slash wages, speed-up production, and weaken or eliminate labor unions” (Stanley 1992:115). She explains the relationship between industrial restructuring, workforce recomposition, and deunionization in meatpacking as follows:

A key effect of the industry’s restructuring has been the decline of union strength. The relocation of packing plants allowed firms to escape or avoid union contracts, and organizing efforts in the new plants have proven difficult because of high employee turnover. The presence of large numbers of foreign-born workers has also hindered organizing attempts. Most entered the industry as union strength was declining and in areas where unions were non-existent. The unions are often viewed as ineffective since they have not been able to protect workers from wage-give-backs and line speed-ups. In an effort to recruit foreign-born members, the unions now employ bilingual organizers. While there have been a few successful organizing drives in recent years, these have been largely confined to new plants in old packing towns with strong union traditions. Key segments of the industry, including many of the largest plants, remain unorganized. (1992:114).

In short, the changing workforce demographics in meatpacking have been an integral part of the process of industrial restructuring. Demand for immigrant labor, to a great extent, was created by the industry as companies pursued restructuring strategies, which made meatpacking employment less attractive to native-born workers. Formerly characterized as a relatively high-wage manufacturing industry, today, meatpacking

wages have fallen well below the national average for manufacturing. Page (1998:288) reports, "In 1971, wages in meatpacking were 117 percent of the average for all manufacturing; today, they are less than 80 percent of that average." Likewise, Bacon (1999:20) reports the average meatpacking wages are now between \$9 and \$10 an hour, the same level, adjusted for inflation, that they were at twenty years ago and \$4 lower than today's average manufacturing wage. Associated with the declining wages and dangerous working conditions that characterize today's meatpacking industry, labor turnover at most plants is estimated to be as high as 100 percent annually (Grey 1999; Schlosser 1998; Hackenberg, Griffith, Stull and Gouveia 1993; Stanley 1992). This turnover has necessitated a constant flow of new labor supplies, which largely has been filled by Latino immigrants.

For the most part, jobs in the meatpacking industry are unattractive to native-born workers who have more options and are therefore more likely to refuse such jobs because of their low wages and hazardous working conditions. Grey (1997:22) explains, "For most Anglo production workers, packing jobs are jobs of last resort...The difficult and repetitive nature of the work and the recent history of low wages created the reputation of packing jobs that does not inspire Anglo labor." Given the physically demanding nature of meatpacking work, the hazardous working conditions, and the low pay, it is not surprising that employment in the industry has become increasingly less attractive to native-born Anglo workers who may have more employment options. Conversely, immigrant Latino workers, often with less employment opportunities, are likely to be attracted to meatpacking jobs because neither English proficiency nor previous work


experience are required, and because, by national standards, these are relatively well-paying jobs (Stanley 1994, 1992). Also adding to the equation is the fact that meatpacking employers, driven by small profit margins and the desire to keep labor costs as low as possible, have become increasingly dependent on the low-cost labor that immigrant Latino workers provide and therefore have actively recruited among this population.

Recruitment of Immigrant Workers. As low wages and difficult working conditions reduced the meatpacking industry's attractiveness to an Anglo workforce, employers began recruiting immigrant workers into the industry (Stromquist and Bergman 1997:9). A number of scholars, including Gouveia and Saenz (2000), Grey (1999), Stromquist and Bergman (1997), Cooper and Grey (1997) and Stanley (1994) have documented how immigrant workers have been recruited, both directly and indirectly, into the meatpacking industry. These scholars have documented how meatpacking employers recruited immigrant workers directly by employing a staff of recruiters who travel to areas of high unemployment both within and outside of the United States border to secure workers. For example, based on her research examining the process of immigrant incorporation into the meatpacking industry in the Midwest, Kathleen Stanley (1994) explains:

Some of the largest companies employ a staff of labor recruiters who target areas with high unemployment. The recruiters travel to these areas, conduct interviews, and offer jobs to those willing to migrate. Workers who move more than one hundred miles receive 16 cents per mile in compensation and advances of up to \$200 to help them get settled. In 1990 informants indicated that most new recruits were arriving in the Midwest from southern Texas and northern Mexico. (P. 139)

Similarly, based on his 1997 case study of immigrant meatpacking workers at a Hog Pride Pork plant in Storm Lake, Iowa, Grey (1999) asserts:

Newcomers to Storm Lake with whom I became familiar were Mexican Mennonites. About seventy had migrated to Storm Lake from Mexico and Texas in order for the male household heads to take jobs at IBP....The men were directly recruited by IBP and its agents at their settlements in Chihuahua Province. With job offers in hand, and the assistance of IBP's agent (whom the workers also paid), they easily obtained green cards to enter the United States legally. (P. 248)

Recruitment of workers into the industry also takes place through workers' social networks. Informal local, national, and international social networks based on kinship and friendship ties among Latino workers are used to inform Latino immigrants about meatpacking jobs, which subsequently facilitates further migration (Grey 1999; Stanley 1994; Gouveia and Stull 1995). Meatpacking employers frequently utilize these kinship and friendship ties to recruit workers into their plants by offering bonuses to workers who recruit additional workers. As Stanley (1994:139) describes, "Workers at some plants receive bonuses for recruiting family members and friends. A typical bonus is \$150 if the new recruit makes it past the probationary period, which is usually 90 or 120 days." 

In addition, immigrant workers have been recruited into the meatpacking industry through local and state employment agencies, as well as through federally supported job placement programs. Stanley (1994) explains the ways in which federal programs have been utilized to recruit workers into the meatpacking industry:

The structure of federally supported job-placement programs has had an important impact on the recomposition of the labor force in the industry. Programs designed to promote self-sufficiency among refugees and to move seasonal agricultural workers into permanent employment have encouraged these individuals to take meatpacking jobs.... Because in the Midwest meatpacking jobs are plentiful and open to non-English-speaking

workers, the service providers must often encourage their clients to apply for these jobs even when they themselves have reservations, which many do, about the working conditions in the plants. Other federal programs also encourage meatpackers to hire certain categories of workers. According to one state employment official in Kansas, the meatpacking firms make “extensive” use of two employment programs that result in significant subsidies to the industry. Under the Job Training Partnership Act, federal funds will pay for half the basic wages of disadvantaged workers during the initial training period. In rural areas, this program is frequently used to help move seasonal agricultural workers into full-time employment in meatpacking. Another important program is the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit program designed to help disadvantaged workers escape chronic unemployment. Under this program employers can claim tax credits equal to 40 percent of the first \$6,000 of qualified wages paid to the applicant during the first year on the job. (P. 140)

Workforce Recomposition and Unionization. Regarding the changing demographics of the meatpacking industry’s workforce and what it has meant for unionization, very few scholars have taken up the issue and those who have deliver mixed conclusions. Scholars such as Grey (1999, 1997) and Horowitz (1997) argue that the changing workforce demographics, more specifically the recruitment of immigrant workers, has impeded unionization. Horowitz (1997), for instance, claims:

The flow of casual labor in and out of packinghouses draws on workers who have the most limited options. Packinghouse workers travel in a cyclical pattern from plant to plant in the Midwest, seeking new employment after layoffs or trying to find slightly better wages and conditions. Packinghouse companies aggressively recruit Mexicans and Southwestern Asians and are able to use federal job training programs to subsidize the transportation and training costs....This fundamental recomposition of the meatpacking labor force has impeded unionization. (P. 277)

Similarly, based on his research at a Hog Pride Pork plant in Storm Lake, Iowa, Grey (1999:21) maintains, “Although several Latinos were active union members and some were even shop stewards, the Latino propensity to treat Hog Pride jobs as temporary

threatened the historical sense of what union members were suppose to do. Indeed, large-scale turnover and Latino migration in particular undermined the power of union leaders by preventing union activism.”

Several other scholars, such as Herod (1998), Fink (1998) and Andreas (1994), however, argue that it is organized labor and unions themselves that have been slow to respond and adapt to changes within the meatpacking industry and therefore share responsibility for the decline in union membership and strength in the industry. For example, based on her case study of a unionized meatpacking plant in Perry, Iowa, Debra Fink (1998:151) pointed out that Anglo meatpacking union leaders may have accepted Latino members, but they were unwilling to give up white privilege to achieve a broader and more cohesive union voice. She maintains:

The union was not limited to white workers, and not all white workers were members, but its local leadership and the majority of its members were white. It was attempting to include Latino and black workers....Yet the union was ambivalent with respect to the prospect of giving up white privilege in exchange for a broad and more united collective voice (Fink 1998:151).

Likewise, based on her research at a Monfort meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado, sociologist Carol Andreas (1994:147) explains that even though the UFCW has been attempting to organize immigrant meatpacking workers, many of these workers may feel that the union, which initially supported the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act that provides sanctions against the hiring of undocumented workers, “is not their best defense against company abuse.” Moreover, she notes:

Most union policy-makers are older white males, far removed from the plant floor. Few union officials speak Spanish. If today’s meatpackers are to be organized from within their own workplaces, they may have to be so

– at least initially – with little assistance or encouragement from the union (Andreas 1994:108).

Although the prevailing explanation for unionization's decline in the meatpacking industry suggests that the changing demographics of the industry's workforce hinders unionization, recent events illustrate that across the United States Latino immigrants are at the forefront of revitalizing meatpacking unionism. For example, in June 2000 at a Dakota Premium Foods meatpacking plant in South St. Paul, Minnesota, workers, mostly Latino immigrants, stopped production for nearly eight hours during a sit-down strike. This strike instigated a union organizing campaign that resulted in the workers voting in the plant's first union, UFCW Local 789 (Rivera 2001:3). As journalist Marco Antonio Rivera (2000) reported:

Workers at Dakota Premium, the majority of whom were born in Mexico and Central America, shut down production on June 1st, 2000, for seven-and-a-half hours to protest working conditions and production line speed in particular. The sit down strike initiated an organizing drive that culminated in a union victory seven weeks later when the meat packers voted 112 to 71 to join the UFCW. (P. 3)

In addition, on February 26, 2001, hundreds of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers staged a wildcat strike against northeastern Colorado's largest employer, Excel Corporation, demanding better wages and working conditions (Aguilar 2001). Journalist Roger Calero explained the strike as follows:

Nearly 400 meat packers at Excel Corp.'s plant in Fort Morgan, Colorado staged a wildcat strike February 26 to protest working conditions and demand a three-year contract with higher wages and benefits. The walkout began one day after the union members, most of whom are Mexican and Central American immigrants, rejected a six-year contract in a 917-59 vote...the strike ended with the unionists drafting a list of 14 demands to be included in the contract negotiations. (P. 7)

Also in 2001, immigrant meatpacking workers at Long Prairie Packing located in Long Prairie, Minnesota, stopped production in the boning department and demanded that the bosses slow down the speed of the production line (Fruit and Malapanis 2001:7). Most recently, unsatisfied with their union representation at a Swift and Company meatpacking plant in Greeley, Colorado, Latino immigrant workers spearheaded an effort challenging and ultimately forcing the resignation of their union's (UFCW Local 990) entrenched leadership (Swanson 2002).

Through a case study of an organizing campaign among Latino immigrant workers in South Omaha's meatpacking industry, not only am I able to examine the extent to which the fundamental changes that have occurred within the meatpacking industry over the last few decades, specifically the transformation of the workforce from a predominately Anglo native-born workforce to an increasingly Latino immigrant workforce, affects contemporary meatpacking unionism, but also assess the degree to which these changes have fostered changes within meatpacking unions themselves. For example, this study elaborates how union structures, cultures, strategies, and tactics have or have not been modified as a result of industrial restructuring and the need to accommodate the changing demographics of the meatpacking workforce. Furthermore, given that the meatpacking industry in many ways exemplifies the structural changes that have occurred in the overall U.S. economy, specifically declining unionization and changing workforce demographics, it offers a textbook case for exploring key factors affecting contemporary immigrant unionization. This study adds to our understanding of the factors likely to affect labor organization among contemporary immigrants.

This study builds on research in several areas, including: 1) contemporary immigrant unionization; 2) community-based organizing and community-labor alliances; and 3) meatpacking unionism. Little research has explored unionization among contemporary immigrant workers, especially workers in the Midwest. Furthermore, although much literature exists on the meatpacking industry and its unions, little of this research has focused on contemporary unionization among the industry's predominately Latino workforce. From the vantage point of the UFCW/OTOC campaign to organize South Omaha's meatpacking workers, the majority of whom are Latino immigrants, this study provides a needed addition to the research and literature.

Chapter III

Methods

This research is based on a case study in which I utilize a combination of qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, as well as a review of institutional histories and documents from a variety of organizations such as the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), the AFL-CIO's Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and its affiliate Omaha Together One Community (OTOC). In addition, I utilize public records and media sources as supplemental evidence and to crosscheck field observations and interviews.

This research is based largely on a case study of the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign among South Omaha's estimated 4000 meatpacking workers. This campaign officially began and was publicly announced in June 2000. As explained in a UFCW press release:

More than four thousand people, the majority of whom are new immigrants, work in Omaha's meat packing industry. Latino workers are fighting to improve working conditions and gain basic respect on the job. The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) and Omaha Together/One Community (OTOC) will announce a joint organizing campaign with new immigrant workers at a press conference on Tuesday, June 20, 2000, at 1:30 p.m. The new organizing campaign is committed to mobilizing workers to stand up for their legal rights on the job with the backing of the largest meat packing workers' union in the country, the UFCW. (United Food and Commercial Workers 2000a)

The UFCW, which represents over 1.4 million workers, is one of the largest private sector unions in the United States. This union, formed in 1979 with the merger of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union and the Retail Clerks International Union, is affiliated

with American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). For the most part, the UFCW has union jurisdiction over the meatpacking industry in the United States, representing an estimated 250,000 meatpacking and food processing workers (United Food and Commercial Workers 2003). In Omaha, the union is represented by UFCW Local 271, which is under the direction of the UFCW Northcentral Region 6.

OTOC, which is a community-based organization, is the other organization participating in the campaign among South Omaha's meatpacking workers. Founded in 1992, OTOC represents over forty member organizations, most of which are religious congregations. Its parent organization is the Southwest Network of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). The IAF is a national network of community-based organizations, which represents the largest and oldest institution for community-based organizing in the United States (Dahle 1999:294).

Phases of Data Collection

This research is informed by several phases of data collection. The first of these phases took place during the summer of 1998 when I participated in the national AFL-CIO's Union Summer Program. As a Union Summer intern I spent four weeks in Fox Valley, Wisconsin, working with several local unions, including the UFCW, on various organizing campaigns. This experience informs my research in that, as an intern, I had the opportunity to experience organizing campaigns from their inception. As a participant in these campaigns I was able to observe many aspects of the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions' structure, culture, organizing strategies and tactics. These

campaigns utilized what are commonly referred to as “traditional” union organizing strategies, which include handbilling, housecalling, authorization card signing, and worker committee meetings. Directly participating in these strategies has allowed me to evaluate their effectiveness. These are some of the same strategies the UFCW utilized in its organizing campaign among meatpacking workers in South Omaha. Parallel to my experience, the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign analyzed here was initiated once Omaha was declared the site for the AFL-CIO’s 2000 Union Summer program.

The second phase of this research occurred while I was working as a Graduate Research Assistant on a project that focused on the incorporation of Latino immigrants into two rural communities in Nebraska that have meatpacking plants as their primary employers. Data collection for this project consisted of interviews with various community members, including meatpacking workers, meatpacking industry representatives, union representatives, community and political leaders, business owners, law enforcement and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials. My particular data collection consisted primarily of interviews with representatives of the UFCW Local 22. All of the members of Local 22’s full-time staff, including the President, Secretary-Treasurer, and Business Agents were interviewed. In addition, interviews were conducted with the following: 1) meatpacking union stewards; 2) former and current meatpacking workers; 3) the manager of a sanitation company, which subcontracts the third shift or “sanitation crew” at several of the meatpacking plants throughout rural Nebraska; and 4) INS officials. In addition to these interviews, I

collected and analyzed secondary data such as public records and historical documents regarding the meatpacking industry in these two rural Nebraska communities.

Through this research I was able to gain a better understanding of the meatpacking industry, its workforce and unions, prior to conducting research and interviews associated specifically with the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign in South Omaha. Because UFCW Local 22 has had union jurisdiction of the meatpacking industry throughout the state of Nebraska, it was primarily through this research project that I first gained an understanding of the structure of meatpacking unions in Nebraska. This research allowed me to gather background information on the union and its membership, which informs my current case study. Furthermore, gaining both workers' and organizers' perspectives prior to interviewing individuals involved in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign helped structure and inform my interviews and data collection.

The third phase of this research includes my participation in the Nebraska Lieutenant Governor's Task Force on *Immigration Enforcement in the Workplace*. This task force was a year-long effort to research and analyze the effects of recent immigration legislation and enforcement, specifically an enforcement effort dubbed "Operation Vanguard," on various institutions in Nebraska, including the state's economy, livestock and meatpacking industries, social services and agencies, workers, immigrants and communities. The task force was composed of representatives from the aforementioned institutions as well as representatives from advocacy organizations, religious communities, labor unions and academia. In addition, representatives from the INS as well as Nebraska's congressional offices served as ex-officio members of the task force.

I, too, participated in the task force as an ex-officio member. This allowed me to learn more about the ways in which employers construct their arguments regarding the number and kinds of workers they need and the type of immigration policies most beneficial to them. My participation in the task force also allowed me to establish contact with a variety of actors in the meatpacking industry, and through these contacts I was able to tour a meatpacking plant and interview industry representatives.

In addition, as part of the task force, I assisted Dr. Lourdes Gouveia in the construction and implementation of a survey of meatpacking industry human resource directors and union representatives at more than forty meatpacking plants identified by the INS as targets of its enforcement operation, Operation Vanguard. The primary focus of this survey was to ascertain the effects of INS enforcement operations, particularly Operation Vanguard, on wages and working conditions in the meatpacking industry. Also of importance was how INS enforcement efforts within the meatpacking industry affect unionization. Most importantly, my participation in task force meetings, along with conversations with union representatives who participated in the task force, allowed me to explore the relationship between immigration and unionization, particularly how immigration legislation and enforcement efforts affect unionization. By assisting in the survey of union representatives, I had the opportunity to investigate the results of INS operations on both meatpacking workers and unions.

Finally, my participation in the task force allowed me to evaluate the extent to which unions, local meatpacking unions in particular, are taking up the issue of immigration and are involved in issues affecting immigrant workers. The involvement of

unions, or lack thereof, in such “task forces” demonstrates to some extent their commitment to addressing issues relevant to immigrant workers and their communities. The participation of unions in the Lt. Governor’s task force exemplifies how immigrant concerns alter the traditional representational roles and responsibilities of unions, and furthermore, how unions attempt, or neglect, to address the issues concerning immigrant workers. Union representatives participating in this task force were not outspoken in their opposition to INS enforcement operations. In fact, they had very little to say about Operation Vanguard. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the national AFL-CIO had not yet reserved its position on immigration and therefore its affiliates were still operating under the federation’s historic exclusionary position, which supported restrictive immigration policies such as employer sanctions.²

The final and central phase of this research began in November 1999, when I first attended an OTOC “Temporary Workers Committee” meeting held at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish Hall in South Omaha. This meeting was my introduction to community-based organizing and the organization of workers outside the official U.S. labor movement (the AFL-CIO). Following this meeting, I began observing additional OTOC meetings and “actions,” in which I was invited to participate. Within months of

² In 1999 the AFL-CIO formed a Special Committee on Immigration, which was charged with the task of studying and recommending changes to the AFL-CIO’s immigration policy, particularly its position on employer sanctions. In February 2000, this committee recommended changing the policy that endorsed the creation of employer sanctions. In a significant policy shift, the committee called for repealing penalties against employers who hire undocumented workers and granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants currently in the United States. Following the committee’s recommendations, on February 16, 2000 the AFL-CIO Executive Committee unanimously passed an historical resolution calling for the repeal of employer sanctions and supporting the organization of immigrant workers (The National Immigration Forum 2000).

my initial participation, OTOC and the UFCW formed an alliance to organize South Omaha's estimated 4000 meatpacking workers. Observations of this unique labor-community alliance allowed me to witness and analyze an unprecedented organizing campaign, which is now being touted by the national AFL-CIO and a number of its affiliates as a promising model for organizing immigrants. Tracking the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign from its inception has allowed me to critically explore and evaluate the effectiveness of such alliances. It has also allowed me to compare the two organizations and the differing structures, resources, and strategies that each brings to the campaign, and assess their particular effectiveness in organizing immigrant meatpacking workers. Finally, in this case study, I explore meatpacking workers' perceptions of the two organizations, their collaborative campaign and their differing leadership, strategies and tactics, as well as workers' receptivity to unionization in general.

Sample

My internship with the AFL-CIO and UFCW, participation in Nebraska's Lt. Governor's task force, and research with Dr. Lourdes Gouveia involving meatpacking communities allowed me to identify key contacts that have been essential as both interviewees and for identifying and enrolling additional participants in this study. These key contacts include both UFCW and OTOC representatives and organizers. It was through them that I initially gained access to meatpacking workers in South Omaha.

I interviewed a total of 31 individuals for this study. This sample size (N=31) allowed for both in-depth interviews and still a variety of experiences, as found in the following: 1) a cross-section of 23 workers from several different South Omaha

meatpacking plants; 2) four community-based organizers; and 3) five union officials.³ These individuals were chosen using non-probability sampling techniques, including both purposive and referral sampling. They were carefully selected to represent relevant dimensions and important sources of variation in the population (Singleton, Jr. and Straits 1999:158). Once I gained access to key contacts, I continued with referral sampling, in which the key contacts were asked to supply the names and contact information of members of the target population (Singleton, Jr. and Straits 1999:162). Another referral sampling technique utilized was snowball sampling, wherein at the conclusion of each interview I asked the interviewees if they could provide the names and contact information for other individuals whom might be interested in participating in the study. Inclusion criteria in the sample included any one of the following: 1) current or former union organizer and/or representative at the local, regional and/or national level; 2) current or former community-based organizer and/or representative; and 3) current or former meatpacking worker in South Omaha. Interviews took anywhere from ninety minutes to six hours, with an average of three hours and on some occasions required several settings. The length of the interviews was based on the extent to which interviewees chose to expand on their answers.

³ During the course of this study, one of the meatpacking workers I interviewed became an organizer and was therefore interviewed in both capacities. For this reason, the aforementioned number of individuals does not correspond to the sample size of N=31.

Instruments and Data Collection

Meatpacking Worker Interviews

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis with meatpacking workers unless there was a need for a translator, in which case, I utilized an individual trusted by both the interviewee and myself. Rather than contacting workers directly, I chose to use key contacts, who have earned the trust of the workers and whose trust I also earned (i.e., UFCW and OTOC organizers), as a means to prospective participants. Key contacts distributed letters of invitation to workers and once these workers indicated that they were interested in participating in the study, the key contact arranged a date, time and place for the interview, that is, unless the worker preferred to contact me directly, in which case the key contact was not needed to schedule the interview. The interviews took place at locations preferred by the workers. Most interviews were conducted in the workers' homes. Some interviews, however, took place at the following: 1) Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church located in South Omaha; 2) the UFCW/OTOC sub-office also located in South Omaha; and 3) public establishments, such as restaurants, where the workers felt comfortable.

I interviewed 23 workers from six different South Omaha meatpacking plants, including ConAgra's Northern States, Armour Swift-Eckrich (ASE), Nebraska Beef, Greater Omaha, Quality Pork International (QPI), and Millard Processing Services (MPS). Prior to the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, MPS was the only one of these six plants unionized. The majority of the meatpacking workers I interviewed (8 out of 23) were working for Northern States at the time of their interview. However, an

additional 5 of the 23 workers had previously worked for Northern States, but at the time of their interview were working at different South Omaha meatpacking plants. In other words, 13 of the 23 workers interviewed had experience working at the Northern States plant. In addition to the 8 individuals working at this plant at the time of their interviews, 6 individuals were working at ASE; 6 individuals were working at Nebraska Beef; and the final 3 individuals were working at Greater Omaha, QPI and MPS. The majority (N=21) of the meatpacking workers I interviewed were Latino immigrants, the bulk of whom (N=15) were Mexican. Interviewees also included two meatpacking workers from El Salvador, one from Guatemala and one from Honduras. Only one of the Latinos I interviewed was native-born. This individual is a second-generation Mexican-American. My sample also includes one Caucasian worker. Nearly 75 percent of the workers interviewed (N=17) have been residing in the U. S. for over a decade. The age of the interviewees ranges from 24 to 64, with a mean age of 40. In regard to gender, the interviewees are relatively evenly split, with 13 males and 9 females in the sample.

The purpose of these interviews was to explore the extent to which the background and demographic characteristics of meatpacking workers, specifically Latino immigrant workers, affects their propensity to support unionization. An additional objective of these interviews was to examine, from the workers' perspectives, the process of unionization and the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign.

Community Organizer Interviews

“Community organizers” are defined here as OTOC organizers. These individuals were, for the most part, identified through pre-established personal contacts

and subsequently asked to participate in the study. In addition, individuals identified in the media were invited to participate. Four OTOC organizers, all of whom are actively involved in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, were interviewed. These interviews took place at the following locations: 1) the UFCW/OTOC sub-office in South Omaha; 2) Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church; 3) organizers' homes; and 4) public establishments of the organizer's choosing. These interviews were semi-structured. The structured component included questions regarding the individual's role in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. The structured component also included questions concerning the individual's relationship to the Latino community in South Omaha. The unstructured component or "guided" questions were tailored to each interviewee according to his or her particular expertise and/or position in the organizing campaign.

Union Official Interviews

Union officials include current and/or former organizers and/or representatives of the UFCW Local, Regional and/or International Union and the AFL-CIO, including the federation's Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA). The majority of these interviewees were identified through pre-established personal contacts. These interviews were also semi-structured. The locations in which they were conducted were chosen by the interviewees and included both local union offices and public establishments. Interviews with union officials in Washington, D.C. were conducted via telephone. In total, five union officials were interviewed. Of the five, three were UFCW organizers and two were AFL-CIO representatives, including a representative from LCLAA.

Examination of Public Records

Precise figures on union membership and activities are difficult to obtain. It has been my experience that unions are resistant to release information regarding their membership and organizing campaigns. Given that the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which is an AFL-CIO affiliated union, also represents meatpacking workers, I made several attempts to invite representatives of their organization to participate in this study and to gather information regarding their meatpacking membership. Although I was able to establish that the Teamsters Warehouse Division represents meatpacking workers, when I finally was able to contact a union representative from this division they said that they could not be of assistance and referred me to the Teamsters Resource Division. To no avail, I left several messages with representatives of the Resource Division at the Teamsters Press Office in Washington, D.C. Also unsuccessfully, I made several attempts to contact representatives of the UFCW Minority Coalition in order to invite them to participate in this study, including sending letters of invitation and emails and making phone calls. In addition, the United Latinos of the UFCW declined my invitation to participate. Due to the aforementioned organizations' failure to respond to, and in some cases outright refusal of, my requests for information and/or invitation to participate in this study, I depended on second-hand information and statistics obtained from: 1) the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; 2) the U.S. Department of Labor; and 3) the National Labor Relations Board.

According to the *Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959*, union reports must be filed with the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards

Administration (ESA) and Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS). These reports include the following information: 1) Union Constitutions and Bylaws; 2) Form LM-1 Reports, which disclose union membership fees and dues per fiscal year; 3) Union Annual Financial Reports that disclose financial activities such as assets, liabilities, receipts, disbursements, loans, investments, and payments to officers and employees; and 4) Union Trusteeship Reports, which disclose information regarding trusteeship. I used these reports to obtain information regarding union membership and to serve as a cross-reference for information provided by interviewees and in the press and media.

In addition, I utilized information provided by Research, Education, Advocacy, and People (REAP), which is an independent, nonprofit reform group that emerged from the UFCW. REAP was founded in 1990 by former UFCW Packinghouse Director Lewie Anderson and has since grown to represent over two thousand members in an estimated twenty UFCW locals (Craypo 1994:76). Essentially, REAP serves as a UFCW watchdog by providing research, analysis and assistance to rank-and-file union members and officers. As explained by sociologist Carol Andreas (1994:78), “The organization denounces the high salaries of union officials, the infrequency of meetings among officials and delegates, and the oligarchic nature of the union’s leadership structures. It also serves as a watchdog on union giveaways to corporations.”

Finally, both the UFCW and OTOC were assessed in regards to their membership and leadership, as well as their hierarchical structure. For instance, UFCW and OTOC leadership were categorized according to ethnicity, in order to assess the ethnic diversity and integration, or lack there of, within each of the organizations. Specifically, I examine

the ethnic composition of each of these organizations in order to evaluate the extent to which immigrant and native-born Latinos have or have not been incorporated and in what capacity.

Participant Observation

Interview data were complemented with participant observation in public and private meetings, which I was invited to attend. For the most part, these meetings took place at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church and the UFCW/OTOC sub-office, both located in South Omaha. I also attended press conferences held by the UFCW, OTOC and the INS that were open to the public. In addition, I observed UFCW and OTOC “actions” in which I was invited to participate. By participating in these activities, I was able to observe the level and type of participation among meatpacking workers, union officials and community organizers, as well as among members of the Latino and religious communities. My participation in these activities also allowed me to observe the level and type of interaction between and among workers and organizers; for example, the level of communication, accessibility and receptivity between and among these individuals.

Data Analysis

The aforementioned methods of data collection were directed toward the development of theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967, 1965) refer to theory that is generated from the data as “grounded theory.” Moreover, Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that grounded theory advocates a loosely structured research design that allows theoretical ideas to emerge from the field in the course of the study. In this study, data

analysis consisted of systematically looking for patterns documented in field observations and interviews.

There are two primary levels of analysis: 1) the level of meatpacking workers as individuals and/or groups subject to, and participating in, organizing campaigns; and 2) the level of the organizing campaign itself. First, the data is analyzed at the level of individual meatpacking workers and their propensity to support unionization based on a number of background and demographic characteristics that have been identified in the literature as affecting contemporary immigrant unionization, which include: 1) their legal status; 2) the length of time they have been residing in the United States and whether they view their stay in the country as temporary or permanent; 3) their prior union and/or other political experience; 4) their social networks, which include kinship, friendship, cultural and/or community ties; and 5) their nationality.

Second, the data is analyzed at an organizational level, which includes a juxtaposition of union and community-based organizing, as well as an analysis of the collaboration between a union (the UFCW) and a community-based organization (OTOC) in an organizing campaign. The UFCW and OTOC are analyzed independently and in alliance in order to assess their respective effectiveness in terms of organizing contemporary meatpacking workers, the majority of which are Latino immigrants. I analyze each organization's history, structure, culture, strategies and tactics. I also consider their organizational resources and commitments (financial, physical and emotional), as well as objectives. Furthermore, I assess whether or not these two organizations have: 1) bilingual and/or Spanish-speaking staff, organizers and

representatives; 2) integrated immigrant and native-born Latinos into organizing and leadership positions and incorporated their specific needs and concerns into the organization's agenda; and 3) roots in and links to the Latino community and its institutions. Organizational strategies and tactics which I explore include: 1) workplace versus community organizing; 2) plant-by-plant versus industry-wide organizing; 3) leafleting or what is commonly referred to as handbilling; 4) visiting workers in their homes, which is also referred to as housecalling and/or one-on-ones; 5) contact with and recruitment of workers; 6) meetings; 7) actions; and 8) training and education. Additional factors that will be analyzed include employer resistance to unionization (i.e., anti-union tactics utilized by employers during organizing campaigns) and the role of the state, particularly labor and immigration legislation and enforcement efforts.

Limitations and Implications

Given that this research is a case study, it bears the "weaknesses" typically associated with case study research, which includes a lack of generalizability. By focusing on a single organizing campaign, I am unable to determine how much of what occurred was specific to the conditions prevailing in this particular campaign. However, case study research allows for the capturing of a rich reality of the organizing process, particularly the complex interaction among workers, their employers, their community and organized labor. Moreover, this micro-level research looks intensively at the organizing process itself, particularly the role played by immigrant workers, their communities and labor-community alliances to capture vivid analysis of the factors affecting unionization. Case studies play an important role in clarifying and expanding

our knowledge and understanding of organizing strategies and campaigns. Although this is a case study of a single organizing campaign, the campaign consists of organizing efforts at several different meatpacking plants and the implications are much broader than the meatpacking industry to include other industries employing a significant number of Latino immigrants.

The implications and contributions of this study are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it allows us to rethink and challenge certain assumptions commonly held about the “unorganizability” of immigrant workers. It informs our understanding of the micro-process of labor organization, particularly among Latino immigrants. Additionally, it adds to the more recent efforts to document and analyze the relationship between contemporary immigrants and unionization.

Practically, this research may be helpful in describing factors that influence unionization among contemporary immigrant workers, specifically Latino immigrant meatpacking workers, and therefore help determine which strategies and approaches are most likely to facilitate labor organization. It is my hope that this research sheds light on current efforts to organize workers in the meatpacking industry and other industries with a predominantly Latino immigrant workforce. By exploring the complexity of factors that affect organizing an immigrant workforce, this study may help chart a new course for unionism within the meatpacking industry and the U.S. labor movement in general. Further research regarding immigrant unionization is needed in additional settings such as other industries and sectors of the economy with a predominantly immigrant workforce as well as a diversity of geographic locations.

Finally, this research contributes to immigration and labor policy by illustrating the contradictions in these two bodies of legislation. For example, the National Labor Relations Act defines all workers, including the undocumented, as “workers” and therefore entitles them to protection under U.S. labor law, while immigration legislation, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 in particular, makes the employment of undocumented workers illegal and therefore subjects these workers to labor exploitation and ultimately deportation.

Chapter IV

Latino Immigrant Meatpacking Workers and Unionization

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the complex ways in which the individual and group characteristics of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers affect unionization. Through an in-depth case study of the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign among an estimated 4000 meatpacking workers in South Omaha, this chapter explores the factors that have been identified in the literature as affecting immigrant unionization. Thus, I examine how the following factors affect immigrant workers' propensity to unionize: 1) their legal status; 2) the length of time they have resided in the United States and their intended length of stay in the country; 3) their social networks, which included their kinship, friendship and cultural ties; 4) their prior union experience; and 5) demographic characteristics such as their nationality, gender and age.

South Omaha's Meatpacking Industry

South Omaha's meatpacking industry dates back to the 1870s (Pratt 1981:13). In 1876 John A. Smiley organized the Union Stock Yards Company (Larsen and Cottrell 1997:72). Shortly after which, Omaha capitalist William A. Paxton, along with several Omaha businessmen and Alexander Swan, a powerful Wyoming "Cattle King," established the South Omaha Land Company, which built packing houses in South Omaha and persuaded Geo. H. Hammond & Co. to open a slaughterhouse in the area (Larsen and Cottrell 1997:74). The cornerstones of the meatpacking industry, such as Swift & Company and Cudahy Packing Company, soon followed. According to Larsen and Cottrell (1997):

They all had their killing areas, fertilizer departments, bone yards, “arctic” rooms, and gut departments. Worth millions of dollars, they employed men who yearly slaughtered and dressed millions of animals. The only other larger packing centers in the United States were Kansas City and Chicago. (P. 77)

By the mid-1950s South Omaha surpassed these cities to become the largest livestock center in the world, a position it maintained until the early 1970s (Burbach 1999:19). At this time there were nearly twenty meatpacking companies in South Omaha, including the industry leaders, Cudahy, Armour, Wilson, and Swift (Burbach 1999:19). These firms were accompanied by a number of smaller companies, including Higgins Packing Company, Hoffman Brothers, Mayerowich & Vail, Roth & Sons and South Omaha Dressed Beef Company (Larsen and Cottrell 1997:142).

There are currently over a dozen meatpacking and processing plants in the South Omaha area, including Armour-Swift-Eckrich, Inc., ConAgra Beef Company (Northern States), Greater Omaha Packing Company, J.F. O’Neill Packing, John Roth & Sons, Mann’s International Meat Specialties, Inc., Millard Processing Services, Inc., Nebraska Beef, Omaha Steaks International, Quality Pork International, Rabe’s Quality Meats, Inc. and Skylark Meats, Inc. Altogether, these companies employ an estimated 4000 workers, 80 to 90 percent of whom are Latino immigrants.

Latino Immigrant Workers’ Background and Demographic Characteristics

Legal Status: Unionization and the “Undocumented”

The term “undocumented” refers to immigrants who are present in the United States without the permission of the U.S. government. Undocumented immigrants enter the United States either illegally, without being inspected by the immigration authorities,

or by using false documents, or legally, with a temporary visa and then remain in the country beyond its expiration date. It is estimated that there are between 9 and 11 million undocumented immigrants currently residing in the United States (Bacon 2001b:1).

According to a February 1998 U.S. GAO report, the INS estimates that as many as 25 percent of the workers in Nebraska's meatpacking industry are undocumented (U.S. General Accounting Office 1998:15). However, both labor and community organizers estimate that an even greater percentage of the industry's workforce in South Omaha is undocumented. Their estimates range up to 40 percent, with this percentage varying based on plant characteristics, such as size, management and ownership. As explained by a community organizer [“At some plants in South Omaha, like Nebraska Beef, top-level managers are from Mexico and are therefore able to use their ethnic connections to recruit workers, most of which are undocumented, directly from Mexico. At these plants almost half of the workers are undocumented” (Interview February 3, 2000).] Lending support to this organizer's claim is the fact that in December 2000 three managers at Nebraska Beef were arrested and charged with smuggling undocumented workers from Mexico to work at the South Omaha meatpacking plant. According to a *Lincoln Journal Star* article, Nebraska Beef officials including the company's vice president of human resources, a personnel manager and a recruiter, were arrested and accused of participating in a conspiracy to transport undocumented workers from Mexico to the South Omaha meatpacking plant for employment (Beck 2000).⁴

⁴ In 2002, federal prosecutors dropped their case against Nebraska Beef officials who were accused of conspiring to hire undocumented workers after a federal judge dropped the charges when the INS deported the immigrant witnesses (Australia Visa 2003).

All of the immigrant meatpacking workers interviewed for this study indicated that were residing and working in the United States legally. However, 90 percent of them stated that at one point in time they were working in the country illegally, as undocumented immigrants. These workers revealed that they initially had migrated to the United States and gained employment in the country illegally. Most of them made the transition from undocumented to documented status by gaining amnesty under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). Basically, IRCA provided amnesty to undocumented immigrants who could demonstrate that they had lived in the United States continuously since 1982 or that they had resided in the United States and performed seasonal agricultural services in the country for at least 90 days during a twelve-month period ending May 1, 1986. The second of the two amnesty measures is referred to as the “special agricultural worker” (SAW) provision. It is estimated that nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants were granted amnesty under IRCA (Baker 1997:6).

The following workers’ comments illustrate how they utilized the SAW provision to make the transition from undocumented to documented status:

- In 1983, I migrated, illegally, from Tijuana to California, where I found a job as a farmworker. My wife stayed behind because she was pregnant with our son. After she had him, they [his wife and son] migrated, illegally, to California to meet me. We [he and his wife] both worked as farmworkers for about three years. And because we worked as farmworkers, we got our “papers” through “amnesty.” Our boss just had to write a letter telling the INS that we had been working for him for a few years (Interview July 2, 2001).
- In 1988 I crossed the border into El Paso illegally. Then, I took a bus from El Paso to Kansas City, where my in-laws picked me up and brought me to Nebraska. My brother-in-law owns a farm here in Nebraska and he was

able to get me amnesty by saying that I worked on his farm since before 1986 (Interview June 26, 2001).

Other meatpacking workers revealed that they became legal U.S. residents by alternative means, particularly through marriage to U.S. citizens:

- In 1983, when I was seventeen years old, I moved to Bakersfield, California with some friends from my hometown in Mexico. In Bakersfield, I worked as a farmworker picking oranges, grapes, tomatoes and other fruit. Then, when some friends of mine said that they were moving to Omaha, I decided to go with them. When we got to Omaha, we found work at a hide plant in South Omaha. I worked there for about 6 months. I quit because the chemicals I worked with burnt my arms. Because I was undocumented I tried to gain amnesty, but didn't qualify. After I married a U.S. citizen, I became documented and then I was able to get a job at a meatpacking plant, Cornhusker Packing Plant [which was located in South Omaha] (Interview June 8, 2001).
- I came to the United States in 1992, when I was 16 years old. I paid a coyote to smuggle me across the U.S.-Mexico border, where my brother was waiting for me. He brought me to Omaha, where he was working at a meatpacking plant. Because I was undocumented, I couldn't get a job at the plant so I found a job as a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant. I worked in different Chinese restaurants for about three years, until I got my papers. They [Chinese restaurants] don't ask for papers. I got my papers after I married a Mexican-American. Then I went to work at MPS [Millard Processing Services, a meatpacking plant in South Omaha] (Interview April 6, 2001).⁵

Under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) undocumented workers are recognized as “employees,” and therefore protected under U.S. labor law. In short, the NLRA serves as the primary legislation governing relations among employers, employees, and unions in the private sector of the U.S economy. The act guarantees employees the right to organize and bargain collectively with their employers. To administer the legislation, Congress established an independent federal agency, the

⁵ Coyotes, also known as *polleros*, help undocumented migrants enter the United States illegally in exchange for a fee (Zahniser 2000:273).

National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Under the NLRA undocumented workers are provided the right to join unions, and furthermore, protected against employer interference with that right. Delgado (1992) explains that in 1984 the U.S. Supreme Court determined that undocumented workers were “employees” under the NLRA:

In 1984 the Supreme Court handed down an important decision on undocumented workers and the NLRA. In *Sure-Tan, Inc. v. NLRB*, the Supreme Court ruled that undocumented workers were protected by the NLRA, noting that there was no federal law prohibiting employers from employing undocumented immigrants. (P. 137)

However, just two years later, such a federal law was passed. This legislation provides for “employer sanctions.” Employer sanctions are a cornerstone of the aforementioned Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). The assumption behind these sanctions is that they would close a loophole in immigration law by forbidding employers, for the first time in U.S. history, from hiring undocumented immigrants and allow the INS to penalize employers who knowingly do so. Michael Fix (1991) explains:

These sanctions were intended to right an asymmetry in American law: while it had been a violation of federal law for undocumented aliens to enter and work in the United States, their employers committed no illegal act by hiring them. Following IRCA’s enactment, employers became liable for knowingly hiring undocumented aliens and for failing to conduct mandated verification and record-keeping procedures. (P. 2)

In enacting employer sanctions, IRCA replaced the law often referred to as “the Texas Proviso,” which for many years had exempted employers from legal culpability for employing undocumented immigrants. IRCA required employers to hire only workers who can establish their right to work in the United States and keep records regarding the immigration status of these workers or risk substantial civil and criminal penalties.

Basically, the employer sanctions provision of IRCA prohibits three types of activity: (1)

knowingly hiring undocumented immigrants; (2) the continued employment of known undocumented immigrants; and (3) hiring any worker without verifying his or her identity and authorization to work in the United States (Fix and Hill 1990:33). The law requires that all employers verify the authorization to work of employees hired after November 6, 1986, and maintain records (I-9 Forms) indicating that the employee's eligibility was verified. In addition, the law requires that applicants for employment attest to the fact that they are authorized to work by signing these forms. It also requires that employers sign them, pledging under penalty of perjury that they have examined specified documents to determine the applicants' identity and work eligibility. Moreover, IRCA sets out a graduated set of penalties for knowingly hiring undocumented workers of \$250 to \$2000 per worker for the first violation; \$2000 to \$5000 per worker for the second violation; and \$3000 to \$10,000 for the third and subsequent violations (Fix and Hill 1990:34).

In effect, IRCA's employer sanctions provision makes it illegal for immigrants without the appropriate legal documentation to work in the United States, creating a fundamental contradiction between immigration legislation and labor legislation. Labor and immigrant scholars and advocates contend that this contradiction provides employers with a means to keep workers unorganized. For instance, the National Immigration Forum (2002) explains:

When undocumented workers begin to stand up for improved working conditions, their employer calls the INS to remove the undocumented workers. When this happens, the employer is rid of workers who insist on better pay and/or working conditions, and is free to hire replacement workers. The employer escapes penalty, and the INS has unwittingly assisted the employer in evading the law.

Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that employers routinely use the threat of calling in the INS to verify the I-9 Forms in workers' files when they start organizing and/or protesting their wages and working conditions, as a way of intimidating them and undermining unionization. When asked about the obstacles they face in organizing undocumented workers, labor and community organizers interviewed for this study universally claimed that employers routinely intimidate their employees by threatening to call the INS. Several organizers claimed that during their campaign in South Omaha, meatpacking employers held captive-audience meetings with their employees in which they discussed the INS coming to the plant. For instance, a labor organizer stated, "Because the second shift is usually comprised of a larger number of undocumented workers, managers from this shift held captive-audience meetings with their workers and told them that if enough of them supported the union the company would call in the INS" (Interview January 18, 2001). Labor and community organizers also explained that undocumented workers were singled out and intimidated by their managers and supervisors. For example, a former meatpacking worker who is currently working as an organizer explained:

At some meatpacking plants, the managers and supervisors know which workers are documented and which ones are not and threaten them accordingly. While Anglo managers and supervisors are usually aware of the fact that some of their workers are undocumented, they usually do not know who is documented and who is not. But at plants like Nebraska Beef and Greater Omaha where the managers are Latino and recruit their workers directly from Mexico, they are aware of which workers are undocumented and they put more pressure on these workers (Interview, February 2, 2002).

Similarly, a meatpacking worker stated:

Managers at my plant have been pulling workers aside one-by-one and asking them whether they support the union. One of the workers on my line said that when she told them that she supported the union they warned her that the INS would review her papers if there was a union election (Interview May 10, 2001).

Organizers also mentioned less direct ways in which employers used the legal status of their employees and the INS to thwart unionization. For example, a community organizer pointed out how a leaflet stapled to Nebraska Beef employees' paychecks indirectly implied that the INS would be involved in the union election. A section of the leaflet reads as follows:

Q: What is an "election" that the Union and the Company are talking about?

A: Federal law provides that if thirty percent (30%) employees at a work location who have similar interests, sign enough cards to represent thirty percent (30%) of the work force, then The National Labor Relations Board (a government agency like the International Revenue Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service) will conduct a secret ballot election to determine whether or not a majority of those employees wish to have the Union be their bargaining agent and representation.

In anticipation of these employer tactics and to help mitigate the effects of workers' legal status, labor and community organizers explained that they informed workers that regardless of their legal status they are considered "employees" under the NLRA and therefore protected under U.S. labor law and against unfair labor practices by their employers. For instance a community organizer explained:

When we [OTOC] started organizing a 'Temporary Workers' Committee' among South Omaha meatpacking workers, we held meetings with workers in which Department of Labor representatives and labor lawyers were invited to provide workers with information about their rights as employees and to explain to them that they are protected under U.S. labor law regardless of their legal status (Interview June 25, 2001).

The legal vulnerability of undocumented workers is often cited as a significant barrier to unionization in industries such as meatpacking where they make up a substantial number of the workforce. It is generally assumed, in fact, some labor scholars and organizers argue, that because of their vulnerability to deportation, undocumented workers have a negative impact on unionization. Delgado (1992:131) explains, “They [undocumented workers] are said to act as deterrents to unionization, since their fear of apprehension and deportation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) purportedly forces them to tolerate very low wages, abusive treatment by supervisors, and poor working conditions.” Likewise, Milkman (2002: 115) explains that conventional wisdom assumes that undocumented immigrants are “vulnerable, docile individuals who are intensely fearful of any confrontation with authority, who accept substandard wages and poor working conditions because their standard of comparison is drawn from their sending countries, and who therefore are extremely unlikely to actively seek unionization.” Challenging this view Milkman (2002:116) argues, “Despite the large numbers of undocumented immigrants among foreign-born workers, there is survey evidence, albeit fragmentary, suggesting that foreign-born workers’ – especially Latinos’ – attitudes are actually more favorable toward unions than are those of native-born workers.”

Delgado also challenges the conventional wisdom on the presumed negative impact of undocumented workers on unionization. Based on his research among Mexican and Central American undocumented workers in Los Angeles, he explains,

“The data indicate that undocumented workers are indeed ‘organizable’ and the degree to which they can or cannot organize seems to depend little on their citizenship status, and more on labor market factors, organizing strategies, state control, and the settlement process of immigrants” (Delgado 1992:131-2). Moreover, based on his research, Delgado (1993:134) suggests that undocumented workers fear of deportation did not make them more difficult to organize than their documented counterparts employed in the same industry. He explains that the fear of apprehension and deportation by the INS among undocumented workers was mitigated by the rather inconspicuous presence of the INS in Los Angeles and the relative ease of returning to the United States in the event of apprehension and deportation (Delgado 1992:133).

However, among Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in Nebraska, and in South Omaha in particular, the INS’s presence is by no means inconspicuous. INS attention to Nebraska’s meatpacking industry creates a situation markedly different from that described by Delgado. Since the establishment of employer sanctions, this agency has targeted the state’s meatpacking industry and its undocumented workforce with repeated efforts to enforce the law. The most blatant example of this is “Operation Vanguard.”

Operation Vanguard. In 1998, in an effort to enforce employer sanctions, the INS implemented “Operation Vanguard.” This was a state and industry-wide operation, which focused on undocumented immigrants working in Nebraska’s meatpacking industry. According to the INS, Nebraska was chosen for this operation because of its high concentration of meatpacking plants, which it claimed had “traditionally attracted

large numbers of unauthorized workers” (U.S Department of Justice 1999). Basically, under its general powers to enforce employer sanctions, in December 1998, the agency mailed “Notices of Inspection and Administrative Subpoenas” to approximately 115 meatpacking plants throughout Nebraska and western Iowa requesting copies of employment eligibility paperwork and employment history records for all employees, including I-9 Forms, Social Security numbers, and Alien Registration numbers. By late December, it had gathered documents pertaining to approximately 24,000 meatpacking employees. The following month a “clearinghouse” was established in Omaha at the INS District Office, consisting of nearly a dozen INS personnel. These personnel typed employee information into a database, which was then checked against INS and Social Security Administration databases, looking for discrepancies. In all, the agency identified “40 plants that had workers with discrepancies between their work papers and the databases” (Immigrants’ Rights Update 1999:2). In these plants, it reported that more than 4,500 workers had such discrepancies (Immigrants’ Rights Update 1999:2). Subsequently, in April 1999 the INS held a “seminar” with representatives from these 40 plants to provide them with their respective “discrepancies list.” These lists consisted of those employees for whom the INS was unable to verify employment eligibility and with whom it intended to interview. At this seminar the agency also distributed notices for each one of the employees on the “discrepancy lists” to be delivered by the employer. These notices explained that the INS would come to the meatpacking plant to interview the employee. The notices also stated that if an employee failed to complete an interview

or provide additional information to the employer and the INS, “the employer may terminate their employment” (Maurstad 2000b:3). Gouveia and Juska (2002) explain:

‘Big Three’ (IBP, now Tyson, Cargill and ConAgra) executives, and small plant owners alike, were herded into a hotel room filled with media and community representatives. They were handed boxes containing the letters summoning employees identified for ‘discrepancies’ among various forms of identification. A total of 4,500, out of 24,000 Nebraska and Iowa meatpacking workers were identified as having such ‘discrepancies’ (i.e., were suspected of working illegally). Some companies had up to 68 percent of their employees called in for INS interviews. (P. 337)

Nearly 70 percent, or an estimated 3500 workers, called in for interviews with the INS quit their jobs rather than face the agency. In the end, the INS arrested only 34 workers for being undocumented (Bacon 1999c:4).

The INS promoted this strategy as an effective means of enforcing employer sanctions and reducing undocumented immigration. The assumption behind this strategy as a deterrent to undocumented immigration is as follows: once undocumented workers receive notification from their employers regarding the INS inquiry, they will either quit their jobs and leave the area or submit to an interview and be deported, thus engendering a “ripple” effect which will persuade other undocumented workers to avoid employment in certain sectors, such as meatpacking, where undocumented workers are concentrated (Mumgaard 2000). The INS intended to keep undocumented workers from returning to the meatpacking plants by maintaining a presence in the industry through follow-up inspections every 90 days. The agency also planned to implement Operation Vanguard in Iowa and other Midwestern states and in other industries. However, the operation was suspended during the summer of 1999, when the Social Security Administration (SSA) stopped permitting the INS to check employee records against its database, citing privacy

concerns. The SSA stated that its purpose was to track workers' earnings to determine their eligibility for Social Security benefits, not to aid the INS in the enforcement of immigration laws (Gonzalez 2000:2).

When asked about the effects of Operation Vanguard on unionization, a few of the union representatives interviewed for this study were unfamiliar with the operation, which, to some extent, suggests that they were not aware of some of the basic concerns of the Latino immigrant meatpacking workers they sought to represent. However, those union representatives familiar with the operation claimed that it has had a detrimental effect on unionization. For instance, they explained that among the unionized meatpacking plants in Nebraska, the operation depleted their membership as union members simply quit their jobs rather than deal with the INS. For example, one of them asserted:

There are lots of families with three or four and sometimes more members working in the industry, sometimes at the same packing plant. Even if only one of the family members was undocumented and decided to quit before the INS came to interview them, the entire family quit with them. Lots of workers and their families just quit work and picked-up and left, rather than facing the INS (Interview August 8, 2000).

Similarly, another claimed, "Even the documented workers decided to quit their jobs instead of being questioned by the INS. Even though their documents were probably fine, they were afraid of being deported by the INS" (Interview June 20, 2000). A third stated, "Anytime you have workers who have signed union authorization cards and want to form a union and the INS comes around, the union campaign is going to fall apart. Workers don't want to chance being deported" (Interview January 18, 2001). A fourth

union representative explained another way in which the operation affected unionization.

He explained:

Some of the plant supervisors called the workers at home and told them not to come into work because the INS would be there. Meanwhile, we [the local UFCW] didn't know what was going on, so we weren't able to warn or help the workers like their supervisors did. Not only were they pissed at us, but this also helped the supervisors gain their trust. The whole operation undermined the union (Interview February 28, 2000).

Although it was not a formal, NLRB sanctioned, organizing campaign, OTOC began organizing workers among the meatpacking plants in South Omaha before the implementation of Operation Vanguard. During my interviews with OTOC organizers, they explained how the operation undermined their efforts to organize the non-union meatpacking plants in South Omaha. According to one OTOC organizer, prior to the operation OTOC had been organizing and building a base of leaders and workers throughout the meatpacking plants located in South Omaha. Once the operation began, however, most of these leaders and workers quit their jobs, which effectively eliminated the organizational base OTOC had helped established. This organizer explained:

Through our work within the Latino community, with the church and the soccer league, we had established a "temporary workers' committee." This committee was made up of twenty or more leaders from various meatpacking plants in South Omaha. After Vanguard we were left with only a couple of leaders and without a workers' committee. We basically had to start all over again (Interview January 9, 2001).

This account corresponds to that offered by labor scholar and journalist, David Bacon, who explains, "In Omaha, where a community organization, Omaha Together One Community had made beginning steps towards organizing non-union plants, Operation

Vanguard wiped out its rank-and-file organizing community” (Bacon 1999a:19).

Moreover, he notes:

Since last fall Sergio Sosa, a Guatemalan organizer with Omaha Together One Community, has been meeting with packinghouse workers, investigating plant conditions while looking for cultural threads to unify an anxious work force....Sosa’s work led to the formation of a committee of twenty-two in-plant leaders who met regularly and were building a base. After Operation Vanguard’s debut, only two of those leaders were left. As Sosa puts it, “The companies already buy people off when they begin to organize, threaten workers with immigration raids, fire people and even bring in workers from the border in a crisis. Operation Vanguard gave the companies a big gift on top of all this – almost all our leaders had to find jobs elsewhere” (Bacon 1999a:19).

Plant Raids. Operation Vanguard was not an isolated incident of the INS targeting Nebraska’s meatpacking industry. Since the creation of employer sanctions, the industry has also been the focus of a series of plant raids. For example, in 1995, as part of an 18-state INS operation dubbed “Operation Jobs,” the agency raided meatpacking plants throughout Nebraska apprehending hundreds of workers. Beef America, a unionized meatpacking plant, which then was located in South Omaha, was one of the plants raided as part of this operation, which resulted in the apprehension of approximately 84 workers who were suspected of working in the United States illegally (“INS Gets Tough” 1995:8). Additionally, as explained in the aforementioned 1998

GAO report:

In operations to identify illegal aliens at seven Nebraska and Iowa meatpacking plants in 1996 and 1997, the INS found 909, or about 23 percent, of the workers in these plants had questionable identification documents, which indicated that they might be illegal aliens. During these operations, the INS apprehended 513 illegal aliens, or about 13 percent of the workforces. The INS District Director for Nebraska and Iowa said that more illegal aliens would have been apprehended if they had reported for

work when the INS was at the plant and was ready to interview them (U.S. General Accounting Office 1998:15).

In South Omaha meatpacking plants, specifically in 1997, the INS raided Quality Pork International, Greater Omaha Packing and VMI. These raids resulted in the apprehension and deportation of an estimated 350 meatpacking workers, 45 of whom were working at VMI, a liver-processing plant (Ruggles 1997:13). Another 150 workers were apprehended at Greater Omaha Packing, while the rest were working at Quality Pork International (Taylor 2000a:4). Although none of these raids occurred during unionizing campaigns, labor and community organizers alike argue that the repeated plant raids and presence of the INS in Nebraska's meatpacking industry creates a chilling effect among the mostly Latino immigrant workforce, which in turn makes their job of organizing more difficult.

{ The most recent South Omaha raid, which took place during the organizing campaign, occurred December 5, 2000 at the Nebraska Beef plant. Two hundred and twelve workers were apprehended and deported after an estimated 100 federal agents raided the plant. Most of these workers were from Mexico; however, there were also a few from El Salvador and Guatemala. According to government officials, the raid was the result of a fourteen-month investigation dubbed "Operation Putman." As a result of this investigation, the U.S. government charged Nebraska Beef and three company officials with conspiring to ship busloads of undocumented Mexican workers to Nebraska every few weeks to work in the meatpacking plant. However, approximately sixteen months later, in April 2002, a federal judge dropped the charges when the INS deported the immigrant witnesses (Australia Visa 2003). }

Rather than sanctioning the employer, according to organizers and workers alike, this raid succeeded in undermining a yearlong effort to unionize the plant. As previously mentioned, it took place during the UFCW/OTOC campaign despite the fact that the INS has an internal policy against initiating immigration enforcement actions during labor organizing campaigns. Under the INS operations instructions (287.3a), agents are prohibited from engaging in any enforcement activities when aware of union organizing efforts. According to union officials, when the UFCW announced its organizing drive in June 2000, International Union officials in Washington, D.C. informed the INS that labor disputes existed at a number of South Omaha meatpacking plants, which included Nebraska Beef. However, the INS defended the raid arguing that its investigation began prior to the union organizing campaign (Taylor 2000b). Regardless, community and union organizers, as well as workers, argue that by deporting a significant number of Nebraska Beef workers who supported unionization, the raid sabotaged the UFCW/OTOC campaign.

Just two days after the raid, while immigrant advocates gathered at a press conference in South Omaha to condemn the INS operation, workers at the Nebraska Beef plant stopped production protesting their working conditions. As a result of this work stoppage, seven meatpacking workers were fired. One of them explained:

After the raid we were doing the same amount of work with a couple hundred fewer workers. The managers didn't slow down the line speed and the meat was piling up. We were working as fast and as hard as we could, but we couldn't keep up. So, about half of us [an estimated 400 workers] just stopped working. We walked off the line and to the cafeteria. Our supervisors and managers followed us into the cafeteria, where we asked them to slow down the line speed and give us a raise. After they agreed to give us a 50-cent an hour raise, most of the workers returned to

the line. A few of us, however, stayed behind in the cafeteria, and were fired for doing so. The managers said we were fired for “inciting a riot.” After getting fired, we went over to Our Lady of Guadalupe Church to talk to OTOC and the union about what happened (Interview April 3, 2001).

UFCW and OTOC organizers responded to the situation at Nebraska Beef by not only meeting with the fired workers and providing legal representation for them, but also by intensifying their organizing campaign at the plant. Immediately following the firings, UFCW and OTOC organizers held a meeting with an estimated 50 Nebraska Beef workers at the union hall located just a few blocks from the plant. At the meeting they vowed to step up their organizing efforts at the plant and as a result the workers in attendance signed authorization cards and agreed to actively participate in these efforts (Interview January 18, 2001). UFCW representative Carl Ariston stated, “The 50 people that we met with said they would meet us at the plant after they got off work [Friday], and that they were going to help to sign up all the rest of their co-workers” (Taylor 2000d:1). Similarly, an OTOC organizer explained:

Following the raid and the firings, Nebraska Beef workers were very agitated. They began organizing themselves. Then they came to OTOC and the UFCW looking for support and signifying that they wanted to unionize their plant. So, we [OTOC and the UFCW] decided to focus our immediate attention and efforts on Nebraska Beef. It became our highest priority. Organizers and workers gathered outside of the plant gates daily in between shifts to handbill and talk to workers. The discontent among workers at the plant allowed us to intensify our effort and gain the required authorization cards to petition for a union election (Interview February 23, 2001).

Moreover, in defense of the fired workers, the UFCW filed unfair labor practice charges against Nebraska Beef, alleging that the workers were fired for engaging in a protected activity and sought to get them reinstated with back pay. Approximately four

months later, in April 2001, the NLRB ruled in favor of the seven fired workers and sent Nebraska Beef a settlement offer that called for them to be reinstated and given back pay (Walton 2000:4A). When the company failed to respond, the Board issued a complaint against them and scheduled a hearing on October 10, 2001. According to a UFCW representative, a few days before the scheduled hearing, Nebraska Beef reached a settlement with the workers and the union (Interview May 11, 2002).

Interviews with meatpacking workers as well as UFCW and OTOC organizers revealed the complex and contradictory ways in which workers' legal status and immigration enforcement operations affect unionization. The most direct way in which INS operations hinder organizing is when they result in the deportation of undocumented workers who support and/or are involved in unionization. The INS raid at Nebraska Beef represents such a case. Organizers claim that the raid resulted in the deportation of a large number of workers who not only supported unionization, but also were actively involved in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. As stated by a UFCW organizer, "The INS sabotaged our organizing campaign when it raided Nebraska Beef and deported a significant number of workers who supported the UFCW" (Interview January 18, 2001). Moreover, an OTOC organizer explained, "Over the last six months we have developed a sizeable committee of workers and leaders at Nebraska Beef. As a result of the raid at the plant over half of these committee members and all but two of our leaders were deported" (Interview January 9, 2001).

UFCW and OTOC organizers claimed that their organizing campaign was also adversely affected when managers blamed the INS raid on the union. For instance, a

UFCW organizer stated, “When workers went to management seeking an explanation for the raid, they were told that the UFCW was to blame” (Interview January 18, 2001).

Moreover, an OTOC organizer explained:

The Nebraska Beef raid happened less than two weeks before a scheduled union election at the Cudahy plant in South Omaha. In order to undermine the union, Cudahy managers told workers at their plant that the union was responsible for the raid at Nebraska Beef and that Cudahy would be next if the union won the election” (Interview March 11, 2001).

Similarly, a Latina immigrant worker at the Armour Swift-Eckrich (formerly Cudahy) plant in South Omaha claimed:

After the raid at Nebraska Beef everyone at Cudahy was worried that the INS was going to raid us too. My supervisor told me that the reason the INS raided Nebraska Beef was because of the union. Well, at Cudahy we were trying to get the union too, so we figured our plant would be next (Interview March 31, 2001).

The INS raid at Nebraska Beef also affected the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign in that it created a sense of camaraderie between workers and managers at the plant when managers helped workers escape apprehension by the INS. A Nebraska Beef worker explained:

During the raid managers helped workers escape. For example, when workers found out the INS was coming they ran to the shipping department where they got on a truck which drove them out-of-town where they were later picked up and driven back to Omaha by their managers. Managers also called workers at home and told them not to come to work because the INS was at the plant (Interview June 8, 2001).

While the previous discussion reveals how the INS raid at Nebraska Beef hindered unionization, according to a few organizers it also had the contradictory effect of facilitating their unionization efforts. The organizers mentioned two ways they utilized the situation at Nebraska Beef to build support for unionization: 1) to channel the

discontent among workers at the plant into organizing and building support for the UFCW/OTOC campaign; and 2) to demonstrate their commitment to the meatpacking workers. A UFCW organizer explained, “There was increased discontent among workers at Nebraska Beef, which created a basis upon which we were able to build support for our campaign at that plant” (Interview January 23, 2001). Another union organizer stated:

Workers at Nebraska Beef were frustrated with the insufficient number of workers on the line and their increased workloads following the raid and responded to these conditions by organizing and protesting. Several workers were fired in the process. After they were fired they came to us [the UFCW] for help and we filed charges on their behalf. This demonstrated our commitment to them. It demonstrated that even though they are not union members we are committed to fighting for them (Interview January 18, 2001).

Likewise, a third union organizer claimed, “Because of the UFCW’s presence and support after the raid, workers at the plant realized that we were committed to them” (Interview February 26, 2001).

Meatpacking workers also commented on how the raid at Nebraska Beef changed their affinity to the UFCW and their participation in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. For instance, a Nebraska Beef meatpacking worker stated:

I supported the organizing campaign by signing an authorization card back in October when the UFCW was handing them out to workers outside the plant. But I wasn’t involved in the campaign until after the raid. A couple of days after the raid I was fired for complaining about the speed of the line and not having enough workers on the line. The union filed charges against the company to help me get my job back. Since then I have been going to union meetings and helping build support for the campaign by getting other workers to come to the meetings and sign cards (Interview April 3, 2001).

Because of their vulnerability to deportation, one might expect undocumented workers to be more apprehensive about the risks involved in unionizing, particularly

when confrontations with the INS are likely. Yet, this study suggests this may be less of an obstacle to unionization than one might expect. Although a few UFCW organizers listed the legal status of the workforce as an obstacle they face when trying to unionize the meatpacking industry, the community organizers interviewed for this study universally claimed that undocumented workers are just as likely to support unionization as their documented counterparts. For instance, a community organizer stated:

During my one-on-ones with meatpacking workers, they usually revealed their legal status. And during these one-on-ones, undocumented workers were just as likely as documented workers to complain about their working conditions and assert their support for organizing. In fact, a number of them [undocumented workers] were involved in OTOC's Temporary Workers' Committee, and when OTOC and the UFCW joined forces they continued to be involved. I would say they [undocumented workers] are just as likely as documented workers to support unionization (Interview June 25, 2001).

In this case study, there is reason to believe that community organizers offer a more adequate assessment of the propensity of undocumented meatpacking workers to unionize, given that these organizers, some of whom migrated to the United States themselves and worked in the country illegally, have been better able to establish relationships with these workers based on their shared experiences.

When asked whether the undocumented workers at their plants support the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, the meatpacking workers interviewed for this study also claimed that their undocumented co-workers were just as likely to support unionization as their documented counterparts. For instance, a worker who had worked as an undocumented immigrant explained:

Undocumented workers support the union and are not intimidated by the INS. Look, we have one foot here and one foot there, what difference does

the INS make? We're already at risk by being in this country. We aren't risking much more by supporting the union. Why not at least try to improve our working conditions? (Interview December 19, 2000).

Similar to Delgado's (1993) findings, in this study, immigrant workers indicated that the undocumented workers at their plants are more concerned with being fired for supporting the union than being apprehended by the INS. For example, a Latina immigrant meatpacking worker stated:

Workers are mostly afraid of not being able to secure another job if they lose the one they have. See, they have a job now and are secure in that job. But because they don't have papers they are afraid that if they are fired they won't be able to secure another job. Who is going to hire them without papers? They are afraid that other companies won't hire them without papers (Interview May 10, 2001).

Several organizers agreed that the fear of job loss is more of an obstacle when organizing undocumented workers than fear of apprehension and deportation by the INS. However, in regard to the notion that undocumented workers fear involvement in unionization more than their documented counterparts, one immigrant stated:

I think some undocumented workers avoid involvement in the organizing campaign but still support the union. For example, a few undocumented workers that I know didn't talk about the union or sign authorization cards or attend union meetings. They remained silent until it was time to vote in the union election and then they voted 'yes' for the union (Interview March 30, 2001).

According to the meatpacking workers and organizers I interviewed, regardless of their legal status, the majority of workers in South Omaha's plants support unionization and the current UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. Overall, this study challenges the common assumption that undocumented workers are "unorganizable."

Given the previous accounts of INS efforts to enforce the employer sanctions provision of IRCA, it is apparent that the situation among meatpacking workers in South Omaha differs markedly from the one described in Delgado's study of a waterbed factory in Los Angeles where there is a "rather inconspicuous presence of the INS" (1993:133). The situation among meatpacking workers in South Omaha reveals a more complex relationship between worker's legal status and unionization. Although this study supports Delgado's (1993) claim that undocumented workers are by no means impossible to organize, it also suggests the variety of ways in which immigrant worker's legal status and immigration policies and procedures affect unionization. The legal status of meatpacking workers in South Omaha has not generally deterred them from supporting unionization and/or participating in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign by signing authorization cards, attending union meetings and voting in support of union representation, but it has posed an obstacle to unionization given the INS's focus on Nebraska's meatpacking industry for the enforcement of immigration legislation.

Length of Time Residing in the U.S. and Intended Length of Stay in the Country

A number of scholars (Milkman 2002, 2000; Delgado 2000, 1992; Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000) maintain that time residing in the United States and length of stay in the country are important factors affecting unionization among contemporary immigrant workers. Specifically, they contend that unionization is strongest among those immigrant workers who have been in the United States longer and who plan on remaining in the country. Basically, these scholars argue that the longer immigrants live in the United States and intend to remain in the country, the more likely their frame of

reference is to shift from the conditions prevailing in their native country to those of the United States, which in turn is assumed to increase their willingness to unionize. In fact, Waldinger and Der-Martirosian (2000:60) maintain that time is likely to be the most decisive factor influencing the unionization of immigrants as interest in the possible benefits obtained through unionization increase with the time spent in the United States. (2000:60). However, these authors also clarify that time may not work in quite the same way for all immigrants, particularly labor migrants who are part of a circular or temporary migration pattern. They argue, “Workers emanating from groups with a history of circular or temporary migration will be more likely to retain a dual frame of reference, which in turn reduces the impetus to organize” (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000:59). Therefore, these authors theorize that Mexican immigrants, as a quintessential labor migration group and with a history of temporary and/or circular migration patterns, will be less receptive to unionization than other immigrants (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2000:70).

In this study only two of the 21 Latino immigrant meatpacking workers interviewed have been residing in the United States for less than a decade. These two workers indicated that they have been in the country for two years and eight years, respectively. In other words, approximately 90 percent of the immigrant workers interviewed indicated that they have been residing in the United States for over a decade, with the majority of them (52 percent) having lived in the country for fifteen or more years. The fact that the overwhelming majority of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers interviewed had been residing in the United States for over a decade

demonstrates their tendency towards “permanent settlement” in the country. In fact, nearly all of these workers claimed that they do not see themselves as “temporary migrants,” but rather as “permanent settlers.” When asked about their plans for remaining in the United States, the overwhelming majority expressed a desire to remain in the country and in the Omaha area in particular. Furthermore, 81 percent, or 17 of the 21 Latino immigrant workers interviewed, are Mexican; and rather than being “temporary migrants,” 15 of these 17 indicated that they have already settled, or are planning to settle, permanently in the United States. Most of them have their families residing with them in South Omaha and many have children who were born U.S. citizens.

The results of this study suggest that Latino immigrant meatpacking workers’ tenure in the United States may be longer than presumed. Moreover, they suggest these workers’ inclination towards permanent settlement in the country, even those workers of Mexican descent. The two workers in this study who did in fact express their desire to return to Mexico in the near future also indicated that they not only support unionization, but also were actively involved in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. By “actively involved” I am referring to the fact that they participated in an array of organizing activities, such as getting their co-workers to sign union authorization cards, handbilling their c-workers outside meatpacking plants, assisting organizers on housecalls and attending union and/or community meetings. In short, the two workers who claimed that they are in fact “target earners,” also indicated their desire for unionization and proclaimed their support for the current UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. Therefore, these two workers counter Waldinger and Der-Martirosian’s (2000) contention that

Mexican immigrants have a negative effect on unionization. For example, an individual who was working at a South Omaha meatpacking plant explained how he quit the plant over a year ago and returned to Mexico to start his own business with the seed money he had earned working at the plant. When that business endeavor failed, he returned to his former meatpacking employer in South Omaha. He is currently working at the plant to earn money to start another business in Mexico. When asked why he is participating in this organizing campaign given his temporary status at the plant and in the United States, he responded:

There are basically two reasons why I want to help the union. One is that I might end up back at the plant someday. For example, if the new business I am planning fails or if I need to earn money for my family, I might have to return to the plant. And when I do, I want things to be different. Second is that I have friends who are working at the plant and I want things to be different for them and for the person who comes in behind me, to fill my position. I support the union because I want things to be better for them (Interview May 24, 2001).

Among the four other Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in this study who are not of Mexican descent, but rather from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, only one revealed that his stay in the United States is temporary. And although he has traveled back and forth between the United States and Honduras for the past decade and plans on returning to his native country permanently in approximately two years, (after he has earned enough money to help finance the college education of his four children), he too supports unionization and the current UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. He explained his support as follows:

We need a union because we don't need to be treated the way we are currently being treated at the plant. We aren't treated like human beings. Our managers and supervisors don't respect us. Something needs to be

done about the way they treat us. Something needs to be done about our working conditions, especially the speed of the line. If we get a union maybe our managers and supervisors will start respecting us and maybe our working conditions will improve (Interview February 26, 2001).

When pressed about the risks involved in unionization and his temporary status in the meatpacking industry and the United States, this worker continued:

What do I have to lose? If I get fired, I'll be able to find another meatpacking job, probably within a couple of days. And if I have trouble finding a job, I'll just go back to Honduras for a while. I'm really not risking much. I'm in a better position than most of the Anglos at the plant, who have been working there for years. They are the ones that have the most to lose (Interview February 26, 2001).

Interviews with these workers reveal the extent to which they view their stay in the United States as "temporary" and that it has had little effect on their willingness to support unionization or become involved in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign.

Although a few of the UFCW organizers I interviewed support Waldinger and Der-Martirosian's (2000) argument that circular or back-and-forth migration between the United States and the workers' sending country makes unionizing more difficult, both the OTOC organizers and workers I interviewed disagree. Moreover, an OTOC organizer suggested that the issue of back-and-forth migration could be alleviated to some extent by negotiating policies that address the issue in union contracts. For example, this organizer suggested:

In order to confront the issue of back-and-forth migration among meatpacking workers who have extended families and responsibilities in their home countries, policies regarding the issue should be incorporated into union contracts. Such policies would be useful so that immigrant workers don't lose their pay, benefits, and seniority when they take leave, or in some cases quit, to return home for an extended period of time. Such policies would also benefit unions in at least two ways. First, unions wouldn't lose their members when they are fired for taking extended leave.

And second, by having such policies in their contracts, unions would be more appealing to immigrant workers (Interview June 25, 2001).

Some unions, in fact, have incorporated such immigrant-specific language into their contracts. For example, Local 2 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE), in Los Angeles, has negotiated an “extended leave policy” into their union contract. Wells (2000:125) explains, “This policy, which was first incorporated into the contract language in 1980, came directly out of a large group of grievances filed by workers who were denied leave or who had been terminated when they failed to return ‘on time’ after visits to their native country to tend to relatives.”

The results of this study do not support Waldinger and Der-Martirosian’s claim that recent arrivals are “altogether too uncertain of their status, standing and orientation to seriously consider unionization” (2000:50). Based on the responses of workers who are relatively recent arrivals, this study suggests that they too support unionization and are willing to participate in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. For example, one of the recent arrivals stated:

It doesn’t take us workers long to figure out that we need a union. When I worked as a housekeeper in Vegas I learned the difference a union makes. Not only were union housekeepers paid more money, but the union also helped its members find jobs. When I moved to Omaha and started working at Nebraska Beef, one of the first things I told the other workers at the plant is that we needed a union (Interview February 26, 2001).

Although the majority of immigrant workers interviewed for this study have been residing in the United States for over a decade, nearly all of the them mentioned having family and/or friends who are recent arrivals working in South Omaha’s meatpacking

plants.⁶ These workers responses also suggest that recent arrivals often support unionization and the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. For example, when asked if the recent arrivals at his plant support unionization, a worker stated:

My brother, who moved here from Mexico just a couple of months ago, supports the union and has been helping to organize workers at the plant. Right after he moved here, he started coming with me to union meetings. At first he just came with me for something to do, but now he is really serious about the union and getting workers at the plant to support it. He has only worked there for a short while, but already he knows that we need a union (Interview April 3, 2001).

Furthermore, when asked if the recent arrivals at their meatpacking plants support the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, workers' responses suggest that they enter into established social networks in both their workplaces and communities. Consequently, these individuals are likely to support what those in their social networks support. Therefore, if those in their social network support unionization, they are likely to follow their lead. For instance, the most recent arrival interviewed, a Latina, who arrived in South Omaha nearly two years ago to join her husband as a meatpacking worker, explained her support for the organizing campaign as follows:

My husband has been helping the union organize workers at the plant [Nebraska Beef]. I don't know too much about unions, but I support my husband and what he is doing. I also support the union because my friends and church support it (Interview March 16, 2001).

In sum, this research suggests that even those meatpacking workers who are relatively recent arrivals to the United States and/or view their migration to the country as

⁶ "Recent arrivals" are defined here as individuals who have migrated to the United States within the last couple of years (after 1999).

temporary, support unionization and are often willing to participate in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign.

Social Networks: Latino Immigrants' Strong Kinship, Friendship and Cultural Ties

As mentioned previously, a factor that is commonly associated with the settlement patterns of immigrant workers and is suggested as influencing their receptivity to unionization is the strength of their social networks. Based on their case studies of immigrant unionization, Milkman (2002, 2000), Delgado (2000, 1993) and Zabin (2000), among others, argue that the social networks characteristic of Latino immigrant workers facilitates unionization. For instance, Milkman (2002) explains:

The fact that immigrant workers rely so heavily on ethnic social networks for such basic survival needs as housing, jobs, and various other forms of social and financial assistance may also make them easier to recruit into the labor movement than native-born workers. Southern California is famous for its highly atomized social arrangements and weak sense of community, but that reputation is based entirely on the "Anglo" experience. In contrast, L.A.'s working-class immigrants have vibrant ethnic networks and communities rooted in extended kinship ties, as well as the shared experience of migration from particular communities in their countries of origin. The intricate web of social connections among immigrants can be a key resource in building labor solidarity, particularly if unions can identify and recruit key actors in kin and community networks. (P. 117)

Similarly, Delgado (2000) explains that in his own research, immigrant social networks played a key role in labor organizing. He explains, for example, that these networks were used to recruit workers into the organizing process (Delgado 2000:229). Moreover, Zabin (2000:150) found that the strong social networks among immigrant workers contributed to creating the solidarity necessary to initiate and sustain organizing campaigns.

In addition, a number of scholars have documented how meatpacking employers utilize immigrant social networks to recruit new employees, a process which is commonly referred to as “network recruiting” (Grey 1999; Stull, Broadway and Griffith 1995; Stanley 1992). They have shown how this process benefits meatpacking employers. For example, Grey (1999:21) argues that employers benefit from this form of recruiting as it facilitates further labor migration, which provides a steady supply of new workers into their meatpacking plants and reduces their cost of recruitment. Moreover, Stanley (1992: 112) explains, “Workers at some plants receive bonuses for recruiting family members and friends. A typical bonus is \$150 if the new recruit makes it past the probationary period of usually 90 to 120 days.”

The results of this study support these findings and reveal that network recruiting has provided a stream of immigrant workers into the meatpacking plants in South Omaha. This study also provides additional evidence for previous research which suggests that it is common for new and potential immigrant workers to seek information regarding employment opportunities from friends and/or family members in their social networks (Milkman 2000; Grey 1999; Stull, Broadway and Griffith 1995; Stanley 1994). Nearly every immigrant meatpacking worker interviewed found work in South Omaha’s meatpacking plants through their social networks. In fact, 20 out of the 21 of them had friends and/or family already working in the meatpacking industry when they arrived in South Omaha. Thirteen of the 21 workers explained that they chose this type of employment because they had family members working in meatpacking plants (six indicated brothers; four mentioned cousins; the additional three mentioned a sister, a

father-in-law; and a brother-in-law respectively). Of the seven workers who indicated that they chose meatpacking employment because they had friends working in the industry, five mentioned friends from their hometowns in Mexico, one mentioned a friend from Texas and the other mentioned a friend in Omaha. The only immigrant worker interviewed who did not rely on his friendship or family ties to gain meatpacking employment explained, “When I moved here from Mexico I didn’t know anyone. I came here because I saw an advertisement in *The Herald* for meatpacking jobs in Nebraska that paid \$8 an hour and offered a 15-day hotel stay” (Interview May 24, 2001).

When asked why they chose meatpacking employment, by far the most common response was because they had family working in the industry. The following responses were typical:

- My brother told me that he could get me a job at the plant where he was working [Nebraska Beef]. So, I moved to Omaha and he did (Interview February 1, 2001).
- My brother was working for Northern States and making good money while I was back in Mexico. When he said that there were plenty of meatpacking plants and jobs in Omaha, I decided to come check it out. By the time I got here, he had a job waiting for me at the plant [ConAgra’s Northern States] (Interview April 3, 2001).
- I chose ConAgra because of my sister. She works at the plant and told me that if I moved here, she would help me get a job there (Interview May 30, 2001).
- My wife and I were living in Texas and working for a furniture manufacturing company when we received a call from our relatives telling us that there were meatpacking jobs available in Omaha and that we could make more money here than in Texas (Interview July 2, 2001).

UFCW and OTOC organizers alike explained that it is not uncommon for immigrant meatpacking workers to have between three and six immediate family

members and seven to ten extended family members working at meatpacking plants in South Omaha. Interviews with the meatpacking workers themselves verified these estimates. It was common during interviews with meatpacking workers for them to convey that several members of their family are also meatpacking workers.⁷ For instance, one worker explained that he and his wife have been working together at Nebraska Beef for three years and that their oldest son, who recently turned eighteen, also works at the plant (Interview June 26, 2001). Another worker stated, “Between my family and my wife’s family, there are at least ten of us working in meatpacking” (Interview May 28, 2001). Additional comments included:

- My wife and her father are both working at Nebraska Beef. One of my brothers works at the Skylark packing plant and the other works at Omaha Steaks. I also have a sister here in Omaha who is working at the QPI packing plant (Interview February 2, 2001).
- My husband and I are both working on the kill-floor at ConAgra’s Northern States plant. I have a brother who is also working at the plant, but he is in fabrication. I have another brother working at QPI and a sister at Cudahy. Her husband also works at the plant [Cudahy] (Interview March 30, 2001).

According to UFCW and OTOC organizers, these family as well as friendship ties were essential in their organizing campaign among South Omaha meatpacking workers. They explained how these ties were used to get information, leaflets, handbills and union

⁷ I concluded each of my interviews with meatpacking workers by asking them if they could provide the names and contact information for any other workers who might be interested in participating in this study. Almost half of the workers interviewed provided the names of two or more family members who were employed in South Omaha plants. One of them stated, “Well, if you want to come back, I can arrange for you to talk with my brother and his wife, they are both working at Greater Omaha” (Interview July 2, 2001). Another said, “My husband and both of his brothers are meatpacking workers if you are interested in interviewing them” (Interview June 2, 2001).

authorization cards circulated and signed throughout the meatpacking plants and the Latino community in South Omaha. In fact, these social networks were fundamental in reaching meatpacking workers and recruiting them into their organizing campaign.

Organizers described how they utilized them to establish in-plant workers' committees and to build commitment among workers at different meatpacking plants in South Omaha. For instance, a UFCW organizer stated, "At every level of this campaign, from handbilling to housecalling workers, to getting authorization cards signed and meetings organized, the workers' family and friendship ties have been essential" (Interview February 8, 2001). Another UFCW organizer explained, "Meatpacking workers approached their friends and families and persuaded them sign authorization cards and to participate in union meetings and activities" (Interview January 18, 2001). Similarly, an OTOC organizer explained:

We have used workers' social networks both inside and outside of the meatpacking plants to mobilize workers and gain support for our unionization. Family ties have been particularly important in organizing house meetings. For example, after my one-on-one with a Latina worker, she agreed to organize a house meeting with several of her relatives. She has relatives working at three different meatpacking plants in South Omaha. Therefore, with just this one-on-one, I was able to enlist seven or eight additional meatpacking workers into our organizing campaign (Interview February 11, 2001).

Moreover, according to another OTOC organizer:

Meatpacking workers in South Omaha are already highly organized based on their immigrant social networks. We just need to find leadership within these social networks and explain to these leaders the benefits of being union and they will go back and talk to the rest of their friends and families. They will organize themselves (Interview March 17, 2001).

OTOC organizers also explained that meatpacking workers belong to social networks which are based on their common places of origin, such as the workers' hometowns, and that they were able to utilize these networks to organize the workers. For instance, one organizer explained:

Within each meatpacking plant there are clusters of workers that come from the same rural areas, towns, cities, and states. Many times they know one another because they are from the same hometowns in Mexico. Once you find leaders within these clusters, the leaders are usually able and willing to organize the rest of the cluster. These clusters of workers will basically organize themselves. For example, after I met with a meatpacking worker who was recruited along with fourteen other men from Chihuahua, Mexico, to work at Nebraska Beef, he went back and persuaded the fourteen men to get involved in the union campaign. All fifteen men signed authorization cards and pledged their support for the union. They also arranged for me to meet with their friends from Chihuahua who are working at meatpacking plants other than Nebraska Beef in South Omaha (Interview February 17, 2001).

In addition, interviews with OTOC organizers and workers revealed that the Omaha Latino Soccer League functions as part of the immigrant meatpacking workers' social network and therefore played an important role in the process of unionization. According to an OTOC organizer, nearly 50 percent of the league's players are meatpacking workers. Thus, he explained, "The league offers us a vehicle for organizing workers and building support for the organizing campaign" (Interview November 8, 2000). Moreover, he explained, "The fact that many of the meatpacking workers in South Omaha are involved with the Latino Soccer League has provided us the opportunity to connect and build relationships with a large number of workers at several South Omaha meatpacking plants" (Interview November 8, 2000). Another OTOC organizer stated:

While doing 'one-on-ones' and 'house-meetings' with the Latino community in South Omaha, I realized that a lot of the meatpacking workers are organized into soccer teams based on their regions of origin. For example, they are organized into teams based on which states in Mexico they are from. Some team names include Durango, Zacatecas and Jalisco. Once organizers are able to identify team leaders and gain their support, it is much easier to gain the support of the rest of their team members. These leaders and their team members have helped us recruit other meatpacking workers throughout the league and the community into our campaign in South Omaha (Interview February 1, 2001).

Furthermore, because the Latino Soccer League held its weekly meetings at the UFCW/OTOC sub-office in South Omaha, members of the league, many of which are meatpacking workers, became more familiar with the UFCW and OTOC and their joint organizing campaign. The league's use of the sub-office also provided the opportunity for organizers and workers to connect with one another. Also establishing familiarity with, and perhaps legitimacy for, the UFCW/OTOC's organizing campaign was the fact that these two organizations sponsored a team in the Latino Soccer League.

The results of this study also suggest that the geographic concentration of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in South Omaha facilitates labor organization. First of all, it helps maintain and solidify their social networks, which in turn makes it easier to organize the workers. Moreover, it makes it easier to organize Latino workers than their Anglo counterparts who tend to be dispersed throughout Omaha. Nineteen of the 23 workers interviewed for this study live in South Omaha, and no more than four of the 23 claimed to be the only meatpacking worker living at their residence. In other words, 83 percent of the workers in this study indicated that they are sharing their residence with at least one other meatpacking worker. Given that the unionization process requires visiting workers in their homes, the fact that they are geographically concentrated has made the

task of these visits, or what the UFCW refers to as “housecalling,” much easier and less time consuming. More importantly, according to organizers, the geographic concentration of meatpacking workers in South Omaha has facilitated their efforts to locate and recruit additional workers. As explained by a UFCW organizer:

During a typical organizing campaign, we will map out the plant and then identify workers on each line, in each department, etc. Once we’ve identified these workers, we try and find out where they are living in order to do housecalls. This process can be very difficult. However, that has not been the case with meatpacking workers in South Omaha. It has been rather easy obtaining the names and addresses of workers for this campaign. Because most of the meatpacking workers live in the same neighborhoods, if you ask them to list other workers on their lines, in their departments, or working at their plants, not only can they tell you the names of additional workers, but they can also tell you where they are living. For the most part, they are concentrated in South Omaha neighborhoods (Interview January 18, 2001).

Another UFCW organizer stated:

The union does housecalls based on workers’ zip codes. Basically, we map out where workers are living and then divide up the task of housecalling based on their zip codes. The fact that most meatpacking workers are concentrated in South Omaha makes our job a lot easier (Interview February 26, 2001).

A third explained:

The fact that many of these workers live in the same neighborhoods and even the same houses has made housecalling less difficult. For example, I had the address of a guy working at Nebraska Beef. When I arrived at his apartment I found four other meatpacking workers living there and several additional workers living in the same apartment complex. By the time I concluded my housecall, I had authorization cards signed by seven workers from three different plants. These workers also gave me the addresses of a handful more of meatpacking workers living in the neighborhood (Interview January 25, 2001).

An OTOC organizer, likewise, explained that when he went to do a “one-on-one” with a worker at an apartment complex that one of the meatpacking employers in South Omaha

uses to house newly recruited immigrant workers, this visit resulted in eleven signed authorization cards (Interview January 21, 2001). In short, both union and community organizers maintain that because of the geographic concentration of meatpacking workers in South Omaha, they were able to reach a majority of them relatively easily.

The fact that most of the Latino immigrant meatpacking workers are concentrated in South Omaha also means that many of them attend the same Catholic Church. In this study, 70 percent, or 16 of the 23 workers interviewed, are members of and/or attend religious services on a regular basis at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. The results of this study reveal the vital role this church played in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. First, the church functions as a mechanism through which Latino immigrant social networks are built and maintained, which in turn facilitates the process of unionization. And second, by actively participating in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, priests, nuns and other clergy members of the Catholic Church provided support and legitimacy for the campaign. Not only were these individuals outspoken regarding their support for unionization and the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, but also they participated in the campaign by: 1) writing letters and making phone calls to workers, employers and public officials; 2) visiting workers in their homes and/or assisting organizers with their housecalls and one-on-ones; 3) holding meetings with workers and their families, as well as other community members; and 4) dedicating masses, homilies and other religious services to the workers and their effort to unionize South Omaha's meatpacking plants. For instance, in a letter addressed to meatpacking

workers at ASE, Father Damian Zuerlein and Sister Janet Horstman of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish state:

A few days from now, on Friday December 15th, you will have an opportunity to vote and be represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union...OTOC and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish support you and your co-workers in this election...We have been helping workers to organize in some Omaha packing plants because you deserve better wages, better working conditions and a voice in the workplace; the only way this can happen is through union contracts.

A similar letter addressed to Nebraska Beef workers from Father John Buckson and Sister Janet Horstman of Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, dated June 12, 2001, reads in part:

As you probably know, workers at Nebraska Beef have been organizing for many months to form a union and be represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). We want you to know that OTOC and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish support you and your co-workers. We stand with you and are ready to act to protect your right to organize....No doubt officials at your plant will offer you much advice and information about unions, perhaps make promises or even threats that the plant may close if workers vote for the union. These same tactics were used at ConAgra Beef and Cudahy a few months ago. We urge you to get accurate information; think through what you are hearing and do what is in your best interest and the interest of your family. Again, OTOC and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish support you and your co-workers as you organize.

Workers from Nebraska Beef, Armour-Swift-Eckrich (ASE), and other South Omaha plants expressed how letters such as these, as well as the phone calls they received from clergy members, gave them the confidence and courage they needed to support and participate in the organizing campaign. For instance, an ASE worker explained:

As it came closer and closer to the day of the union election, our managers started putting more and more pressure on us. They were trying to intimidate us and make us uneasy about the election and the union. Workers at the plant were mostly afraid of losing their jobs if they voted for the union. But once we received letters and phone calls from the

Church and knew that the Church and community were supporting us, we had the support and courage we needed to stand up to our managers and to vote for the union (Interview April 3, 2001).

Another worker at this plant stated:

The day before the election I received a phone call from someone from the Church [Our Lady of Guadalupe]. They called to tell me that the Church was supporting me and my co-workers in the election and that they were praying for us. That is the first time in my 25 years as a meatpacking worker that I had ever heard of anything like that happening...the Church getting involved in a union election. Knowing the Church was behind us and supported our efforts really made a difference. It boosted my morale and gave me confidence that we were going to win the election. I believe it made quite a difference for a lot of workers (Interview February 25, 2001).

In addition, a Nebraska Beef worker claimed, “As soon as I found out there was going to be a union election at the plant I decided I was going to vote “yes” for the union. But my decision to vote for the union was reinforced when I received a letter from the Church assuring me that I had their support” (Interview March 31st, 2001). Additionally, a worker at the Northern States plant stated, “The Church built my confidence in the union. Knowing that priests and nuns were involved helped me trust the union and influenced my decision to get involved too” (Interview May 4, 2001).

The Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish has also provided a sanctuary for workers and organizers to meet and discuss their organizing campaign. As explained by an OTOC organizer:

We used to hold our meetings with meatpacking workers on Sundays following mass, but once we leased an office in South Omaha, we started having our meetings there. Once we changed locations, attendance at these meetings began to drop for basically two reasons: 1) because it was more convenient for workers to meet right after mass on Sundays than to come to meetings at the UFCW/OTOC office during the evenings of the work-week; and 2) because workers didn’t feel comfortable meeting at the UFCW/OTOC office. They believed they were under surveillance entering

- and leaving the office by their employers, managers, and other company supporters. For example, workers at one of the plants suspected their employer of having the owner of the building across the street from the office take down their names and license plates when they came to meetings. Several workers suggested that we move our meetings back to the Church (Interview May 4, 2001).

Workers also suggested that holding UFCW/OTOC meetings at the church provided them a sense of security. Furthermore, an OTOC organizer explained that by having their meetings at Our Lady of Guadalupe, organizers were given the opportunity to make contact and interact with workers that attend the church but are not necessarily acquainted with the UFCW or the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. In short, the church has provided the UFCW and OTOC access to numerous South Omaha meatpacking workers and served as a channel of communication between the organizers and workers.

The findings of this study are in line with those of Milkman (2002, 2000), Delgado (2000, 1993) and Zabin (2000), which suggest that Latino immigrant social networks facilitate unionization. They show that most of the meatpacking workers in South Omaha belong to social networks that are based on their family, friendship and cultural ties. Many of these workers not only have a number of family members and friends working in South Omaha meatpacking plants, but they also live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same church and play in the same soccer league. According to organizers and workers alike, all of these factors played a critical role in building support for the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. Moreover, the findings of this study demonstrate that the same social networks meatpacking employers use to recruit new workers can be utilized for organizing purposes as well.

Union Experience

Immigrant workers' experience with unions in their sending countries is indicated in the literature as a factor conditioning their preference for unionization once working in the United States. Scholars such as Milkman (2000, 2002) and Wells (2000) suggest that immigrant workers are especially receptive to unionization because of their likelihood of having had previous experience with unionization and oppositional politics in their sending countries. Milkman (2002), for example, explains:

Although there is no systematic evidence on this point, it is striking that many of the new rank-and-file immigrant union leaders have a history of union activism and/or left-wing political ties in their native lands. And although many immigrant workers are from rural backgrounds, a substantial number arrive in the United States far better acquainted with the idioms of unionism and class politics than their native-born counterparts. Among the workers involved in the L.A. Justice for Janitors (JfJ) campaign in 1990, for example, organizers reported "a high level of class consciousness," as well as a willingness to take the risks involved in organizing, that was shaped by experiences back home. (P. 117)

Likewise, based on her research among immigrant hotel workers in San Francisco, Wells (2000) asserts:

Latino immigrants are especially receptive and militant union members. Not only do they often come from countries with strong and legitimate labor movements, but many were union members of leaders there. Moreover, many Mexicans and especially Central Americans engaged in dangerous authority-challenging struggles in the chain of events that led to their emigration. (P. 119)

Bonacich (2000), however, argues that the union and/or political experience of immigrant workers in their sending countries not only varies significantly, but also may have a negative effect on their unionization in the United States. She states:

Some of the Central Americans have had a great deal of experience with political struggles in their homelands as have some of the Mexicans,

especially those from Mexico City. On the other hand, many have been exposed to corrupt unions or to regimes that assassinate union leaders. These experiences, or lack of any experience of political struggle, may handicap union organizing. (P. 139)

Moreover, Zabin's (2000) analysis of an organizing campaign among mostly Latino immigrant workers at a wheel factory in California found that few of the workers had experience with unions in their sending countries.

Interviews among Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in South Omaha revealed results similar to Zabin's (2000). Although the immigrant meatpacking workers in this study vary in their previous union experience, the overwhelming majority of them indicated having had no prior union experience either in their sending countries or the United States. In fact, 17 of the 21 immigrant meatpacking workers I interviewed claimed that this campaign was their first union experience. Only three of the 21 immigrant workers mentioned having had prior union experience in their sending countries and these three were all of Mexican descent. Moreover, they universally claimed to have had positive union experiences in Mexico, which contradicts some of the claims made by labor organizers regarding the prior union experience of immigrant workers and how it affected the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. For example, during my interviews with UFCW organizers, a few of them asserted that because immigrant workers from Mexico associate U.S. labor unions with corrupt Mexican unions or "sindicatos," they are less likely to support unionization. However, when asked about labor unions in their sending country, not a single Mexican immigrant worker mentioned corruption. In fact, one of the three Mexican immigrant workers with prior

union experience referred to the relative strength of the Mexican labor movement in comparison to U.S. labor unions and labor laws. He stated:

There is something I do not understand about unions in this country [the U.S.], when a union is on strike, not all the workers honor the strike. In this country workers cross the picket line and go back to work. They wouldn't get away with that in Mexico. Also, in this country, when workers go on strike the company can hire new workers to take their place. If workers are striking a plant in Mexico, no one is working and their jobs can't be given away. That is the law (Interview May 5, 2001).

Moreover, all three of the Mexican immigrant workers with prior union experience accredited their support for the current organizing campaign in South Omaha to their positive experience with unions in Mexico. For example, one of them stated:

In Mexico, if I had a problem with my supervisor I would just go see someone in the union and they would take care of the problem. We need something like that here, in the meatpacking plants. The supervisors treat us workers terrible. We need a union to deal with them. That is what I am expecting from the union, what I got in Mexico. If I didn't have that experience with unions in Mexico, I don't know if I would support the meatpacking union (Interview May 4, 2001).

Another worker with five years union experience at a refrigerator factory in Mexico explained:

My experience with the union I belonged to in Mexico was a good one. It was a good union. I was working at MABE Refrigerators and we went on strike for better wages. All of the workers stayed on strike and out of the factory until we won a wage increase. During the strike, we had workers blocking each entrance to the plant and we rotated our picket lines so that no one could get in the plant. No one even thought of crossing the line. The strike lasted about two months. It was hard not getting paid for those two months, but we won. Not only did we get the wages we were asking for, but we also got paid back wages for the two months we were out on strike. It was a good union experience and I expect the same from this one (Interview Wednesday, May 30, 2001).

Of the four workers with prior union experience, as previously mentioned, three of them gained union experience in Mexico and the other individual was a member of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) while she worked as a housekeeper at a hospital and hotel in Las Vegas. She also claimed to have had a positive union experience.

Although they were not union members, five of the 21 immigrant meatpacking workers in this study have previously worked in unionized meatpacking plants, three of whom worked for Millard Processing Services (MPS), which is located in South Omaha and represented by UFCW Local 271. The other two individuals worked for Farmland in Denison, Iowa, which is represented by UFCW Local 440 and H&H Packing, which is located in Fort Worth, Texas. When asked why they did not belong to the unions at these meatpacking plants, the workers responded as follows:

- I wanted to become a union member, but when I asked the union steward at the plant how to, I was told that I missed the time frame to become a member (Interview May 30, 2001).
- I only worked at the plant for a month. And in that time, no one told me anything about the union or asked me if I wanted to join (Interview June 26, 2001).
- Shortly after I started working at the plant I became a “lead man” and if I want to be promoted to supervisor, I can’t be a union member (Interview June 8, 2001).
- Because there are a lot of problems with the union at MPS. For example, the union steward at the plant doesn’t speak Spanish and I don’t speak English, so I can’t communicate with her. I can’t communicate with anyone at the local office either because no one there speaks Spanish. The UFCW has three different union representatives who visit the plant on Wednesdays from 3:00-4:00 pm. So, if a Spanish-speaking worker needs to speak with someone from the union their only opportunity is one hour on Wednesdays. These three UFCW representatives are not from the local office; they’re out of the international office. And, there is no union steward at the plant

during the second shift. There is only someone during the first shift. So, for nearly 500 workers and \$19 per month in union dues, there is one union steward and she doesn't speak Spanish (Interview February 25, 2001).

The last of these five workers did not even realize that the plant she works at, which is MPS, was a unionized plant until it was revealed to her during the process of being interviewed. When I explained to her that MPS is in fact unionized, her response was:

There is no union at MPS. I work there. I know there is no union there. I've never seen nor heard anything about the union and I've worked there for eight months. Besides, I don't know any workers at MPS who belong to the union (Interview May 10, 2001).

Additional Demographic Characteristics

Ethnicity/Nationality. As mentioned previously, Latino immigrants comprise an estimated 80 to 90 percent of the meatpacking workforce in South Omaha. According to organizers and workers alike, the majority of these workers are first generation (foreign-born) Mexican immigrants. Of the 23 meatpacking workers interviewed for this study, 21 are first generation, Latino immigrants. Seventeen of them, or just over 80 percent, are in fact Mexican, which suggests that the meatpacking workforce in South Omaha is rather homogeneous with regard to ethnicity and nationality. However, there are several other nationalities represented among South Omaha's meatpacking workforce, including individuals from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Columbia and other Latin American countries, as well as from Vietnam, the Philippines, and a growing number from Sudan.

Several of the union organizers interviewed suggested that intra-ethnic tensions exist within the meatpacking plants and that these tensions hinder worker solidarity and, consequently, unionization. However, interviews with meatpacking workers did not

reveal in-plant tension based on ethnicity and/or nationality. Instead they reveal the ways in which ethnic relations and networks based on nationality encourage unionization. For instance, an OTOC organizer explained:

From their South Omaha neighborhoods to their soccer teams, these workers are already highly organized based on their regions and countries of origin. Once we are able to find leaders in their neighborhoods or on their soccer teams, these leaders do the rest. If we find leaders who support unionization, we pretty much have the support of the rest of their friends, neighbors, and teammates. For example, while I was doing a one-on-one with a meatpacking worker from Guatemala, he told me that nearly everyone in his neighborhood is Guatemalan and working in meatpacking. After I expressed my desire to meet with these workers, he arranged a meeting with twenty or so men who were working in several different meatpacking plants in South Omaha. Just like that, he organized a meeting with twenty meatpacking workers (Interview June 3, 2001).

Overall, my interviews with meatpacking workers from several different countries of origin including Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala did not reveal differences in the appeal of unionization based on ethnicity and/or nationality.

Gender. Latina immigrants make up a considerable proportion of South Omaha's meatpacking workforce. Their percentage of the workforce varies from plant to plant and by department within plants. According to both union and community organizers they typically comprise between 25 to 40 percent of the workforce at any given plant and dominate departments such as "packing" and "fabrication," which are considered less physically-demanding departments. Organizers also estimate that Latina immigrants make up at least 75 percent of the workforce at some secondary meat processing plants in South Omaha.

Eight of the nine female meatpacking workers interviewed for this study are Latina immigrants, all of whom claimed to support the UFCW/OTOC organizing

campaign in South Omaha. Although these women support the campaign, their responses suggest that their participation is adversely affected by their patriarchal family structure and its resulting gendered roles and responsibilities. When asked to describe their involvement in the campaign, several Latina meatpacking workers indicated their willingness to participate, but were unable to do so because of their domestic roles and responsibilities. For example, one of them explained, “I do not attend the union meetings because they are mostly in the evenings and that is when I am taking care of my children and housework. I am away from my children all day, while I am at work, so I need to be with them in the evenings” (Interview March 32, 2001). Likewise, another claimed:

I tried to make it to as many of the OTOC’s Temporary Workers’ Committee meetings as I could, but I missed a few because I had to take care of my kids. For example, the evening that Governor Johanns came to South Omaha to meet with workers in the basement of Our Lady of Guadalupe, I couldn’t find a babysitter. I really wanted to be at that meeting, so I decided to just take my kids with me. When I got to the church and went downstairs to the basement, I realized that practically all the workers at the meeting were men and that there weren’t any kids there. I couldn’t take my kids down there, so I left the church and tried to get a hold of someone to take care of them. I couldn’t find anyone, so I missed the meeting (Interview June 11, 2001).

A third Latina, whose husband is also a South Omaha meatpacking worker, explained, “I would like to go to the meetings with my husband, but someone needs to take care of our children” (Interview May 30, 2001).

Organizers also agreed that female meatpacking workers’ participation in the organizing campaign, particularly union meetings and activities, was limited due to their domestic roles and responsibilities. For instance, an OTOC organizer stated:

It is hard to get women involved in the campaign, mostly because of their culture. Many of their husbands do not want them involved and even if

they let them get involved, the women have so many family responsibilities that it is hard for them to find time to participate (Interview June 18, 2001).

UFCW organizers, likewise, stated:

- Female meatpacking workers don't get involved in the campaign because of their family and household obligations (Interview June 11, 2001).
- It is difficult to get female workers involved in the campaign. They are less likely to show up for our meetings than male workers, which is probably because they are the ones taking care of their households (Interview May 18, 2001).
- It's "a familia," or more accurately, "a machismo issue." Machismo within their families affects Latinas' participation in unionization. Latinos do not want their wives to participate in the union or this campaign because they think their place is at home, as a wife and a mother (Interview February 13, 2001).

In addition, a few of the Latina meatpacking workers indicated that their husbands do not support unionization and therefore discourage them from getting involved with the union and the current organizing campaign. Interestingly, these women revealed that they do not necessarily follow their husbands' advice regarding unionization. Here, one Latina worker said:

My husband tells me not to get involved with the union or the organizing campaign, but he doesn't work at a packing plant. He doesn't know what it is like to work where I work or whether or not I need a union. Because of him, I don't go to union meetings or talk about the union, but when it comes time to vote, I'm voting "union yes" (Interview July 2, 2001).

Another stated, "My husband doesn't like the union, so he tells me I shouldn't take part in what they are doing. So, I didn't tell him that I signed a union [authorization] card. I don't talk to him about what the union or workers at my plant are doing" (Interview April 3, 2001).

On the other hand, husbands of several of these Latina workers support unionization and the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. Six of the eight Latina workers in this study have husbands who are also working at meatpacking plants in South Omaha. All but one of these women claimed that their husbands support unionization, which has in turn influenced their decision to support the campaign. For instance, when asked what influenced their decision to support the campaign, a frequent response was, "I support the union because my husband supports the union." In fact, their husbands' influence over their decision to support the UFCW/OTOC campaign was apparent in their responses. For example, one of them stated:

I support the union because my husband tells me I should. The meatpacking plant that he is working at now doesn't have a union, but the one he used to work at, American Beef, had a union. He was a member, so he knows about unions. He has experience working with them and at a unionized plant. So, when he told me I should support the union, I did! (Interview April 16, 2001).

Likewise, another Latina worker explained:

I don't really know much about unions. I've never been a union member, but my husband has. And he told me that if the union is organizing my plant, I should support them. So, I guess there are two main reasons I support the union. The first is because of my husband and the second is because of my injury (Interview March 31, 2001).

A final theme revealed during interviews with Latina meatpacking workers is the role the church has played in influencing their decision to support the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. Seventy-five percent of the Latina meatpacking workers interviewed claimed to be active members of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish. Several of these women explained that their support for the campaign is directly related to the church. For instance, one of them stated, "I was not sure what to think about the union,

but when I received a letter from Father Damien and Sister Janet pledging their support for the union, I was 100 percent convinced that it was something I needed to support too” (Interview March 30, 2001). Similarly, another claimed:

At first I was uncertain about the union and whether or not to get involved. But one day, after mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe, there was a bus outside the church and it was taking people downtown for a union rally at ConAgra. I decided to get on the bus and go to the rally. After the rally, I decided to support the union. Since the church was backing the union, I knew it was the right thing to do (Interview, May 10, 2001).

A third Latina worker explained, “Some members of my church [Our Lady of Guadalupe] started having union meetings after mass on Sundays. I went to a couple of meetings and decided that I needed to support the union” (Interview March 28, 2001). Overall, interviews with female meatpacking workers, specifically Latina immigrant workers, suggest that although their patriarchal family structure may hinder their participation in the unionization process, they still overwhelmingly support unionization.

Age. The age of South Omaha’s meatpacking workforce ranges from at least the legal working age of 18 to the retirement age of 65. Workers and organizers alike indicated that there are some individuals working in the plants that are actually younger than the legal working age of 18. The meatpacking workers interviewed for this study, ranging in age from 24 to 64, are illustrative of this range. In fact, several of the workers in this study indicated that their families have three generations presently working in South Omaha plants. However, union organizers estimate that most local meatpacking workers are between the ages of 30 and 45. The mean age of workers in this study, which is 40, confirms this estimate.

Three out of the five UFCW organizers interviewed suggested that younger meatpacking workers are less likely than their older counterparts to support unionization. In line with this suggestion, when asked the question: “Who are the least likely workers at your meatpacking plant to support unionization,” several workers claimed that the younger workers at their plants are not interested in unionization. When further questioned as to why this might be the case, the typical response was that the younger workers are not interested in the benefits unions have to offer. For example, an individual with 23 years experience as a meatpacking worker claimed, “When you are young, you don’t care about things like health insurance and pension and retirement plans, all you care about is getting a pay check every Friday” (Interview February 22, 2001). However, interviews with younger meatpacking workers (those workers under the age of 35) sometimes contradicted these responses. For example, a twenty-four year-old Latina immigrant stated:

The older workers, who have been working at the plant for several years, are the ones that don’t support the union. They don’t support it because they have the most to lose. They have the most invested in the company, and therefore the most to lose. They don’t want to risk their jobs on the union. We younger workers don’t have as much to lose. We can easily get a job at another plant, with another company (Interview February 26, 2001).

Likewise, a twenty-four year-old who has been working in meatpacking plants in South Omaha for over four years stated:

We younger workers are more likely to support the union for several reasons, most importantly, because we have the least to lose if we get fired for our support or lose our jobs because the company decides to close the plant because of the union. The older the worker, the more likely they are to have a family that they have to support, so the less likely they are to support the union or participate in this campaign because they cannot

afford to lose their jobs. The older workers need their jobs more than we do because they have families to support. Plus, they have less free time than we do to go to meetings and other union activities (Interview April 6, 2001).

Whereas several of the younger workers indicated that one reason they support unionization is because they have little to lose, the older workers in this study (those workers over the age of 50) indicated that one of the primary reasons they support the campaign is their desire for the security and retirement benefits a union contract presumably offers them. A few of the older workers also mentioned that they were working in the industry when it was unionized and that they remember the difference it made regarding their wages and working conditions. For example, a native-born Mexican American, who has worked over 46 years in the meatpacking industry, explained:

I remember when we were union. I remember how much better the pay and working conditions were. When I walked off the job during a union strike in the eighties I was making \$11.45 per hour. Now, after working an additional nineteen years in the industry, I am making \$11.35 per hour. That's ten cents less an hour than I was making in 1982! The pay, benefits, and working conditions went out the door right along with the union. I remember the benefits we had when we were union and I want to see them brought back to the industry (Interview February 22, 2001).

On the whole, this research did not reveal a difference in the immigrant meatpacking workers' inclination to support unionization based on age. From ages 24 to 64, all of the workers interviewed for this study indicated that they supported and had participated, or were willing to participate, in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign.

Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was to critically examine and ultimately challenge the widely held assumption that contemporary meatpacking workers are “unorganizable.” By exploring immigrant workers’ propensity to support unionization based on a number of their background and demographic characteristics, this study suggests that regardless of: 1) legal status; 2) length of time residing in the United States and intended length of stay in the country; 3) prior union experience; 4) ethnicity and/or nationality; 5) gender; and 6) age, Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in South Omaha often support unionization.

First of all, the results of this study refute the notion that undocumented workers are “unorganizable.” Regardless of their legal status, the majority of workers in South Omaha’s meatpacking plants support unionization and the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. However, because Nebraska’s meatpacking industry has been the focus of numerous INS efforts to enforce immigration legislation, particularly employer sanctions, the legal status of the industry’s workforce has posed challenges to union organizing. Second, the results of this study suggest that even those meatpacking workers who are relatively recent arrivals to the United States and/or view their migration to the country as temporary support unionization and the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. Third, the overwhelming majority of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in this study have not had prior union experience. However, this lack of experience has not affected their willingness to support unionization and participate in the campaign. Fourth, the results of this study did not reveal differences in Latino immigrant meatpacking workers’

receptiveness to unionization based on their nationality, gender, or age. Interviews with female meatpacking workers, specifically Latina immigrants, suggest that although their patriarchal family structure may hinder their participation in the organizing campaign, they still overwhelmingly support unionization. Additionally, this research did not reveal a difference in meatpacking workers' tendency to unionize based on age. Although the younger generation of workers implied that their older counterparts were less likely to support unionization and the older workers implied just the opposite, suggesting that it was their younger counterparts that were less incline to support the union, the findings of this study suggests that from ages twenty-four to sixty-four, contemporary meatpacking workers support unionization.

Finally, the results of this study suggest that Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in South Omaha belong to extensive social networks, which are based on kinship, friendship and cultural ties. Meatpacking employers utilize these ties to recruit new workers into their plants. The findings of this study reveal that organizers can also tap into these social networks to facilitate unionization. Nearly every meatpacking worker interviewed for this study found work in South Omaha's plants based on his or her social networks. In fact, this study suggests that the success of the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign has, to some extent, depended on the ability of labor and community organizers to tap into meatpacking workers' social networks to mobilize workers and build support for their campaign.

Whereas this chapter has focused on how the background and demographic characteristics of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers affects unionization, the next

chapter describes and evaluates the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign among South Omaha's predominantly Latino immigrant meatpacking workforce.

Chapter V

The UFCW/OTOC Organizing Campaign Among South Omaha's Meatpacking Workers

In the summer of 2000 two organizations, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) and Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), converged in an effort to organize South Omaha's predominantly Latino immigrant meatpacking workforce. These two organizations have different organizational histories, structures, cultures and strategies. This chapter evaluates the effectiveness of these two organizations, alone and in alliance, in terms of organizing contemporary meatpacking workers. I begin by briefly describing each organization and then turn to a description of OTOC's efforts throughout the 1990s to organize South Omaha's meatpacking workers. Next, I present data from the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, which began in the summer of 2000. This data examines workers' receptivity to the two organizations and their alliance in order to draw conclusions later about the extent to which organizational approaches emerge as the most critical factors in determining unionization among contemporary meatpacking workers. As in the previous chapter, I allow the voices of workers and organizers to describe and evaluate the effectiveness of each organization and their collaborative organizing campaign in South Omaha.

The United Food and Commercial Workers

The UFCW is one of sixty-eight unions affiliated with American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). It was formed in 1979 with the merger of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union and the Retail Clerks International

Union. Today, it is one of the largest private sector unions in the United States, representing approximately 1.4 million workers in many different industries, including an estimated 250,000 meatpacking workers (United Food and Commercial Workers 2003). The union consists of approximately five hundred local unions, which are organized into eight regions across the United States (United Food and Commercial Workers 2003). Each of these regions is headed by a “regional director” who oversees a staff that provides assistance to the local unions within its geographic territory. In Omaha, the UFCW is represented by Local 271, which is under the direction of the UFCW Northcentral Region 6, based in Illinois. UFCW Local 271 is the second largest union in Omaha, according to the Omaha Federation of Labor (Deering 2000:13). As of January 2000, the local had 2,078 members (not all of whom are meatpacking workers) and represented only three of more than a dozen meatpacking plants located in South Omaha (U.S. Department of Labor 2000b). The three meatpacking plants were Millard Processing Services (MPS), Omaha Steaks International, and Aksarben Foods, Inc.

In the years preceding the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign in South Omaha, UFCW Local 271 experienced a decline in membership and therefore was placed into trusteeship by the International, according to a UFCW representative (Interview January 18, 2001). A U.S. Department of Labor LM-15 Form confirms that the local was placed into trusteeship on July 29, 1997 (U.S. Department of Labor 1999). It states the reasons for establishing the trusteeship as (1) “to assure the performance of collective bargaining agreements or other duties of a bargaining representative” and (2) “to ensure that the

local union achieves and maintains financial stability” (U.S. Department of Labor 1999).

It also provides the following, more detailed, explanation:

The Trustee continues to work on ensuring that the percentage of members in the local union’s bargaining units is maintained at an acceptable level, and achieving that objective has been made more difficult by unanticipated problems. The Trustee’s progress in reducing the local union’s past-due per capita tax obligations to the International Union and in ensuring the local union’s financial stability continues to be challenged by the loss last summer of one of the local union’s largest bargaining units when the plant was permanently closed and by the loss earlier this year of three bargaining units in Iowa to recently chartered UFCW Local No. 440. As a consequence, work continues to ensure that the local union may meet its financial obligations and to ensure future financial stability and the ability and necessity of the local union servicing its membership and keeping its bargaining units strong (U.S. Department of Labor 1999).

In January 2000 the trusteeship was terminated by the International Union and the following officers were elected: Richard Saalfeld (President), Donna McDonald (Secretary-Treasurer), William Smith (Vice President), Linda Lee (Vice President), Rick Skillett (Vice President), Frank Rodriguez (Vice President), Dennis Knapp (Vice President), Marshall Martin (Vice President) and Shirley Spencer (Vice President) (U.S. Department of Labor 2000a). However, just prior to the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign in South Omaha, Local 271’s President, Richard Saalfeld, retired and was replaced by Secretary-Treasurer, Donna McDonald.

Omaha Together One Community (OTOC)

Omaha Together, One Community (OTOC) is a community-based organization founded in 1992 and currently representing over 40 member organizations, most of which are religious congregations. OTOC is affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a national network of community-based organizations, which represents the largest

and oldest institution for community-based organizing in the United States (Dahle 1999:294). The IAF was founded in Chicago in 1940 by community organizer Saul Alinsky. The Foundation's mission is to train people to organize themselves to take responsibility for solving the problems in their local communities. Mary Beth Rogers, organizer of the Foundation for Democracy Dialogues, explains, "IAF organizations concentrate on the development of skill and insight that allows people to act for themselves, to transform themselves from passive participants who are content to have things done for them into actors who initiate change in their inner as well as outer lives" (1990:50). This approach was formulated by Saul Alinsky and continues to be carried on by the national IAF and its affiliated organizations. Central to this approach is what IAF affiliates and members commonly refer to as "The Iron Rule," which is "never do for people what they can do for themselves" (Rogers 1990:50).

IAF affiliates are locally constituted and while they are linked into regional and national networks, their emphasis remains on local organizing. They mobilize around concerns that arise again and again in community dialogues. William Greider, a prominent political journalist and author of *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy*, explains that the IAF "does not start out with 'policy issues' or a political purpose. It starts with conversations in peoples' homes. It does not spring itself on to a city or town, but begins by establishing relations with enduring institutions that people rely on – churches and synagogues and civic associations, from Catholic bishops to black Baptist ministers"(1992:225).

In 1969 the IAF established a training center, the Saul Alinsky Training Institute, which provides leadership training for community organizers. And, over the years the IAF has trained ordinary people to organize amongst themselves to become a powerful political voice and to solve problems in their communities. Sociologists Joe Feagin and Hernán Vera (2001) explain:

Over the decades, the IAF has trained many organizers, and it currently serves many groups and families in numerous states and overseas as well. Today, the IAF is the center of a national network of broad based, multiethnic, interfaith organizations in primarily poor and moderate income communities. Typically, these organizations are broad coalitions, which include an array of local churches, synagogues, mosques, unions, schools, and environmental, health, and civic organizations. These coalitions get local organizations to listen to, and learn from, each other – and then work to develop coordinated strategies to get local decision makers to sit down with them to make meaningful changes in community conditions and services. IAF groups work to establish and renew local democracy by empowering citizens through participation and political action. (P. 142)

As of 2000, the IAF was staffed by a team of 110 professionally trained organizers, who contract with community organizations to recruit and train community members on how to effectively address pressing issues facing their communities (Ramsey 2000). It comprised 62 affiliated organizations across the United States with an estimated combined membership exceeding one million individuals (Industrial Areas Foundation 2001).

Religious Congregations Bring the IAF to Omaha

The IAF came to Omaha in the early 1990s in the form of a “Temporary Organizing Committee.” This Committee grew out of discussions among Omaha clergymen, dating to the mid-1980s, about how to involve and empower people in their

local communities. In October of 1991, a group of pastors from 21 Omaha congregations formed a sponsoring committee and the following year it entered into a contract with the IAF and hired a professional organizer, Tom Holler, from San Antonio, Texas with 13 years experience with the IAF (Flannery 1993:15). As described in the following *Omaha World Herald* article signed by the co-chairmen of the Omaha Temporary Organizing Committee:

The Omaha Temporary Organizing Committee had its roots in discussions started in 1986. Pastors from various parts of the city recognized that the present system could not resolve the serious problems that confronted our communities: violence, underemployment, unemployment, youth problems, discrimination, deterioration of inner-city neighborhoods, and the rising cost of health care, among others. We discovered that these problems were related to the increased isolation and disconnectedness that exists in our communities. This fragmentation leaves people increasingly less capable of forming a common purpose and carrying it out. We quickly realized that we could not expect others to solve problems for us. In our search for answers, we learned of the success of congregations in other areas of the country that were engaged in community organizing. We contacted organizing training centers. In October of 1991, we formed a sponsoring committee. The following year we entered into a contract with the Industrial Areas Foundation and hired an organizer (“Omaha Temporary Organizing Committee: ‘The Goal is Just To Solve People’s Problems’ 1993:15B).

It changed its name to “Omaha Together One Community” (OTOC) in 1995. Since then, OTOC has continued to grow, and now consists of over 40 member organizations.

The organizational structure of OTOC has an “executive team” which includes the following: 1) a secretary; 2) a treasurer; 3) a member of the clergy caucus; and 4) several elected co-chairs. It also has a “steering committee” and “delegate congress,” which are comprised of members from each of its member organizations. In addition,

there is an “education arm,” the “Institute for Public Life,” which trains leaders in research and organizing.

The organizing strategies utilized by OTOC and its organizing staff are those espoused by the national IAF. In the broadest sense, these strategies include: 1) “one-on-ones,” 2) “house meetings,” 3) “research actions,” and 4) “actions.” At the core of OTOC’s approach to community-based organizing are “one-on-ones” and “house meetings” in which organizers meet with individuals and groups of individuals in the community to identify their common interests and concerns, as well as search for leaders. As explained by Rogers (1990:51), “one-on-ones” are a “technique used to recruit new leaders and to get church people involved in the organization. The major purpose of the recruitment meeting is to establish a personal relationship with a potential leader, to find out what the individual really cares about, and to show him or her that there might be an effective way to get it through the political process.” These one-on-one’s lead to “house meetings,” which are “held in private homes, where organizers get to know people and the ideas of the community and, in passing, scout for those who will become the community’s leaders” (Greider 1992:225). Through these two strategies (one-on-ones and house meetings) OTOC organizers identify what will become the organization’s priorities. Next, organizers conduct “research actions” to determine specific, concrete, and winnable issues around the community’s concerns; these research actions are then followed by community “actions.” An OTOC organizer explained, “Once we discover an issue in the community through one-on-ones and house meetings, we research the issues, which we refer to as a ‘research action’ and if we gain enough support for the issue, we

plan an ‘action’” (Interview January 10, 2001). To clarify, he spelled out these four strategies as follows:

We begin by canvassing the community, conducting one-on-ones with individuals. These one-on-ones develop into house meetings and then into research actions and actions. For example, one-on-ones with individuals in the South Omaha community revealed concerns regarding working conditions in the community’s meatpacking plants. Based on these one-on-ones, we organized house meetings in which a number of individuals came together to discuss their working conditions. We then carried out research on conditions in the plants, which involved a “one-day clinic” in which health care professionals screened and documented meatpacking workers’ injuries. The clinic was followed by a community rally and prayer service – an “action” (Interview January 10, 2001).

Throughout their entire organizing processes, OTOC espouses IAF’s “Iron Rule,” which is “never, ever, do for people what they can do for themselves” (Rogers 1990:15).

Community-Based Efforts to Organize South Omaha’s Meatpacking Workers

Canvassing the Community and Identifying Issues. Soon after OTOC was established, working conditions in South Omaha’s meatpacking plants became one of its central priorities. As OTOC organizers canvassed the South Omaha community conducting one-on-ones and house meetings, they heard numerous stories about poor working conditions in the area’s meatpacking plants. According to Tom Holler, a leading OTOC organizer, when OTOC began holding meetings in South Omaha in 1993, “it was clear from day one that the major issue in the community was conditions in these plants” (Olsson 2002:16).

Spearheading OTOC’s efforts to address working conditions in the South Omaha plants has been one of the organization’s member congregations, Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, and its parish priest, Father Damian Zuerlein. The congregation is

located in the heart of the Latino community and amidst a number of meatpacking plants. Ninety-eight percent of the congregation's estimated 6,000 members are Latinos, 25 to 30 percent of which have some connection to meatpacking (Walton 1999a). Father Zuerlein was instrumental in bringing OTOC to Omaha and since the organization's founding he was involved with organizing meatpacking workers at his parish. A common concern he identified among these workers was the conditions at their place of employment. In an effort to address these concerns, Father Zuerlein and OTOC organized meetings with meatpacking plant employers and managers to discuss working conditions. However, these efforts failed when the managers reacted defensively. For example, Father Zuerlein explained that when he asked if workers could be trained to do other jobs to reduce the number of repetitive motion injuries, the typical response by plant managers was, "You just don't understand the industry. This can't be done" (Hendee 2000:24). Bacon (2002) has documented Father Zuerlein's efforts as follows:

Zuerlein began organizing workers at the Greater Omaha Packing Co. meatpacking plant in 1996. "We were able to get them together very quickly, because the conditions in the plant were so bad....People weren't getting bathroom breaks, and even urinated in their clothes on the line. The line speed was tremendous, and lots of workers showed symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome. But management sent spies into our group, and after a meeting with the plant manager everyone involved in the effort was fired. We concluded that we needed to root our organizing deeper in the plant, and identify and train leaders willing to make a commitment.

When efforts meeting with meatpacking employers failed, Father Zuerlein and OTOC tried to find other ways to help workers improve the conditions at their plants.

Workers continued meeting at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. As a result of these meetings, a list of specific concerns took shape which included: 1) the speed of the

production line could be brutal and lead to severe repetitive motion injuries; 2) unjust terminations subsequent to injuries were frequent and aimed at minimizing worker's compensation claims; 3) some plants lacked time clocks, leading to discrepancies in pay; 4) patterns of arbitrary wage increases and job advancement created an atmosphere which contributed to the sexual abuse and harassment of female employees by their supervisors; 5) lack of an adequate number of bathroom breaks; and 6) the INS being called in to intimidate workers (Kuhlmann 2002:1). Subsequently, in April 1997, OTOC organizers sponsored a "city council campaign" in which they, together with meatpacking workers, raised these concerns with a number of Omaha City Council candidates. As a result of the campaign, OTOC secured promises from a number of candidates to address problems in the meatpacking plants. For instance, each candidate pledged to organize a public hearing on conditions and wages in the plants (Gertzen 1997:11).

Hiring a Community Organizer and Addressing Key Concerns. In the summer of 1998, OTOC hired organizer Sergio Sosa. Sosa, a Guatemalan immigrant, had experience organizing in his native country as a seminarian as well as a member of a radical movement, which organized Mayan peasants during Guatemala's civil war of the 1970s and 1980s. Once he was hired by OTOC and completed his IAF training, he was appointed to serve the Latino community in South Omaha. Almost immediately, he began conducting one-on-ones throughout the community. Over the next several months he canvassed the community holding over seven hundred one-on-ones. He explained that these encounters revealed how the South Omaha community was organized and three primary concerns within the community including: 1) working conditions in the

meatpacking plants; 2) problems with the INS; and 3) issues regarding Latino soccer teams and their access to Omaha soccer fields (Interview October 5, 2000).

Subsequently, OTOC began campaigns focusing on each of these three areas. Sosa explained:

Latino soccer teams were banned from the City's soccer league because of problems with drinking, littering, etc. So, OTOC helped organize the players, their teams, and money to form the Omaha Latino Soccer League. We organized over 500 players into 32 teams and raised over thirty thousand dollars. As a result, the City and the Nebraska Soccer Association provided us eight new soccer fields at Dodge Park. This campaign was not just about soccer fields; however, it was also a strategy to build trust within the Latino community and among the community's meatpacking workforce (Interview June 8, 2001).

Sosa explained that he, and OTOC in general, began to gain workers' trust as a result of organizing the Omaha Latino Soccer League; trust that he then utilized to build an organizational base among South Omaha's meatpacking workers. Sosa explained, "The Soccer League and the trust I gained working on this campaign allowed me to connect with workers, their families, friends, compadres, comadres and their workplaces. These connections were essential in building a base among meatpacking workers in South Omaha and eventually forming a worker's committee" (Interview August 3, 2001).

Interviews with meatpacking workers revealed that a few of them, in fact, became involved in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign because of their participation in the league. For instance, a Nebraska Beef worker with over 15 years of experience working in South Omaha's meatpacking plants recounted:

I have been involved in this organizing campaign for a few years now, ever since OTOC helped us form our own soccer league. Before that, we didn't really know what OTOC was all about. But after the soccer league was

formed, we started attending OTOC meetings and building a “workers’ committee” (Interview June 8, 2001).

Throughout the fall of 1998, Sosa estimated that he conducted thirty house meetings with members of the soccer league. He explained:

In conducting these house meetings, I was searching for leadership among the players. As a matter of fact, a couple of the players turned out to be key leaders who helped organize a number of meatpacking workers throughout the league. These leaders were crucial during OTOC’s initial efforts to organize South Omaha’s meatpacking workers (Interview June 8, 2001).

OTOC also took up the Latino community’s concerns regarding the INS, which included: 1) the location and size of the local INS office; 2) INS office doors being locked during the day because the waiting room was full; 3) INS staff scheduling more appointments at one time than the four-person staff could handle; and 4) INS use of lawyers and other third parties to arrest undocumented immigrants (Rosman 1998). In early to mid-1999, OTOC held press conferences and rallies to publicly criticize the service provided by the INS District Office in Omaha. And in June 1999, it initiated a postcard campaign aimed at pressuring federal immigration officials to improve services at the office. Over 10,000 postcards outlining INS service problems were sent to Sen. Bob Kerry (D-Neb), Rep. Lee Terry (R-Neb) and Michael Pearson, an INS executive associate commissioner of field operations in Washington, D.C. (Sherry 1999:3). This campaign ultimately led to an increase in the INS staff and the expansion of the waiting room area at the Omaha office. According to OTOC organizers, the success of this campaign also served to establish OTOC’s legitimacy within the Latino community in general, and among the community’s meatpacking workers in particular (Interview May

18, 2000). Moreover, an OTOC organizer claimed, “As a result of this campaign, not only did South Omaha’s meatpacking workers become familiar with OTOC, but OTOC also became more familiar with workers’ concerns and needs” (Interview January 8, 2001).

Organizing a “Workers’ Committee” and the “Meatpacking Workers’ Bill of Rights.” Concurrent with these campaigns, Sosa built a committee of workers representing several meatpacking plants in South Omaha. He explained, “Through the Soccer League and INS campaigns, as well as the one-on-one and house meeting campaigns in South Omaha, I was able to identify several leaders within the meatpacking plants. Together we [Sosa and these leaders] built a multi-plant committee of workers as well as several in-plant committees” (Interview May 25, 2000). He clarified:

The multi-plant committee consists of leaders and workers across several different meatpacking plants, while the in-plant committees consist of leaders and workers within each of the different plants. Whereas the in-plant committees identify issues specific to their respective plants, the purpose of the multi-plant committee is to identify and address common issues and problems across a number of South Omaha packing plants and to build a broader base among South Omaha’s meatpacking workers. It is important to have a multi-plant committee so that workers remain involved as they move from one plant to another (Interview May 25, 2001).

In July 1999, a number of workers from these committees met with OTOC representatives and decided to form a “Temporary Workers Committee” (TWC) and explore the possibility of building a workers’ association. This association would work to resolve workplace disputes as well as inform members of their rights, and provide them services, such as language and citizenship classes and a credit union. Over the next several months, OTOC developed a number of strategies to facilitate the TWC’s

organizing efforts. For example, OTOC, with the help of the Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest (a non-profit, non-partisan law project committed to social and economic justice), brought working conditions in South Omaha's meatpacking plants to the attention of the local media and public officials.

During the months of July and August, OTOC organizers and workers from several South Omaha meatpacking plants met with a journalist from *The Lincoln Journal Star* (Nebraska's capital city newspaper), to share stories about working conditions in the plants. Subsequently, *The Lincoln Journal Star* published a series of articles highlighting workers' experiences in the South Omaha meatpacking plants. On Sunday, September 5, 1999, for example, journalist Don Walton published an article entitled, "Critics: Hispanics Exploited in Omaha Meatpacking Jobs" featuring workers' experiences regarding their poor wages and working conditions. These articles, the September 5th article in particular, caught the attention of Nebraska Governor Mike Johanns. "Johanns said that he was 'very disturbed' by what he read in a Sunday *Journal Star* story detailing conditions Hispanic workers say they encounter during long hours at hazardous and swift-moving production lines" (Walton 1999c). Consequently, Johanns assigned Nebraska Lt. Governor Dave Maurstad to investigate working conditions in the state's meatpacking plants. Maurstad explained, "My goal was to determine whether there was legitimacy behind the concerns of workers as outlined in the September 5, 1999 edition of the *Lincoln Journal Star* and subsequent articles in that and other newspapers" (Maurstad 2000a).

In the months that followed, Maurstad met with OTOC, the TWC, and hundreds of workers during a series of meetings at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. In his effort to investigate working conditions in Nebraska's meatpacking plants, Maurstad met with workers from a number of South Omaha plants, including Greater Omaha Packing Co., Nebraska Beef, ConAgra's Northern States and Quality Pork International. He also visited these four plants and held meetings with their executives and managers.

In January 2000, after his four-month investigation, Maurstad issued a report to Governor Johanns, stating that workers' concerns fell into four general areas: 1) abusive and discriminatory language and behavior by supervisors; 2) inadequate communication of company policy and inadequate training; 3) unsanitary working conditions; and 4) unsafe working conditions (Maurstad, 2000b). Maurstad also issued the following six recommendations to Governor Johanns: 1) the Nebraska Department of Labor should develop a "Meatpacking Industry Workers Bill of Rights" for employers to adopt and post prominently in the workplace; 2) state and federal regulatory agencies should encourage workers to report violations as few workers now take those complaints to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA); 3) the Nebraska Department of Labor should support an OSHA experimental program to help reduce injuries; 4) employers should be encouraged to establish "Community Liaison" programs to help workers find services for personal issues in the community; 5) the Nebraska Department of Labor should develop a partnership with the Safety and Health Council of Greater Omaha on a "Safety-Awareness Training Program"; and 6) OSHA should be

encouraged to undertake a legitimate study of the speed of the production line in meatpacking plants, with industry cooperation (Nebraska Department of Labor 2000).

On February 1, 2000, in a meeting arranged by OTOC, Governor Johanns met with about 40 South Omaha meatpacking workers and their supporters in the basement of Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church. During the meeting workers described to the Governor their arduous and dangerous working conditions. One of the workers actually stood up and demonstrated for the Governor the various cuts and motions he makes every 30 seconds as the meat passes by him on the disassembly line. “During the meeting Johanns told workers that they could be instruments for change...That they needed to continue to cooperate with one another like they are doing through Omaha Together One Community Organizing Committee” (Sherry 2000). Moreover, he told workers, “You must find a way to organize amongst yourselves. You can’t let this drop” (Sherry 2000).

On June 28, 2000, following the first of the six recommendations proposed by Lt. Gov. Maurstad, Johanns released the “Nebraska Meatpacking Industry Workers Bill of Rights.” It lists the following rights: 1) the right to organize; 2) the right to a safe workplace; 3) the right to adequate facilities and the opportunity to utilize them; 4) the right to adequate equipment; 5) the right to complete information; 6) the right to understand information provided; 7) the right to existing state and federal benefits and rights; 8) the right to be free from discrimination; 9) the right to continuing training including supervisor training; 10) the right to compensation for work performed; and 11) the right to seek state help. Governor Johanns also appointed Jose Santos, a seven-year employee of the Nebraska Department of Labor, to serve as “Meatpacking Industry

Workers Rights Coordinator.” As Coordinator, Santos is responsible for inspecting and reviewing the practices and procedures of Nebraska’s meatpacking operations to ensure that the rights outlined in the Governor’s “Meatpacking Industry Workers Bill of Rights” are enforced. In addition, Governor Johanns sent posters listing the “Bill of Rights” along with letters to all of Nebraska’s meatpacking plant employers asking that they voluntarily post them at their plants in an effort to better inform workers of their rights as employees.

The labor representatives and organizers that I interviewed were generally unimpressed with the “Meatpacking Industry Workers’ Bill of Rights.” In fact, they believed it lacked enforcement and therefore was essentially useless. For instance, an AFL-CIO representative stated:

That Worker’s Bill of Rights is all bullshit. Everything spelled out in that bill is already state and federal law, but the Department of Labor doesn’t enforce the law. They won’t enforce the bill of rights...there will be absolutely no enforcement of any of those so-called rights. The only way workers are going to improve their working conditions is through unionization. There is no other way. And if they are going to unionize, it will take the courage of workers themselves not a Republican Governor. The Bill of Rights is a damn joke (Interview June 8, 2000).

Likewise, a UFCW organizer claimed:

The “Bill of Rights” is a joke. The “Rights” outlined in the “Bill” are already laws. They just aren’t enforced. Santos is not going to enforce them. He’s a ghost. He hasn’t been to any plant that I know of to make sure that the companies are upholding these rights and the laws are enforced (Interview January 18, 2001).

Despite these limitations, some community organizers and workers believed the bill had some redeeming value. An OTOC organizer, for example, claimed, “Even if only for

symbolic reasons, the ‘Bill of Rights’ has facilitated organizing efforts among South Omaha’s meatpacking workers” (Interview March 4, 2001). He explained:

The “Bill of Rights” informs workers about their access to existing state and federal laws, like their right to a safe work environment and their right to workers compensation if they are injured while working and, perhaps most importantly, their right to organize. Some immigrant meatpacking workers did not even know they had the right to organize before they heard about the “Bill of Rights.” It has encouraged these workers to get involved in our organizing efforts (Interview March 4, 2001).

Another OTOC organizer asserted:

Workers were encouraged by their meetings with Governor Johanns and his new “Bill of Rights.” The fact that he established a “Bill of Rights” for the meatpacking industry alone has validated workers’ concerns and their need to organize. It has helped them work through their fears and given them the confidence they need to move forward with their organizing efforts (Interview June 11, 2001).

In addition, a Northern States worker with over a decade experience working in South Omaha’s meatpacking plants expressed a similar view:

Thanks to this Bill of Rights, meatpacking workers finally really understand their rights as workers. And they will be reminded of these rights every time they pass by where they are posted in their meatpacking plants. The “Bill of Rights” has encouraged them to organize and fight for the enforcement of these rights (Interview June 18, 2001).

Addressing Workers’ Injuries: A “One-Day Clinic” for Workers as an

Organizing Tool. An additional strategy OTOC used to help build support for the TWC was to sponsor a “One-Day Clinic” for meatpacking workers. On Sunday, April 30, 2000, a clinic was held at the Indian-Chicano Health Center in South Omaha. Its purpose was to document repetitive motion injuries and other work-related injuries affecting meatpacking workers, and also to provide them with information on how to prevent such injuries. In addition to documenting injuries, OTOC organizers explained that the

purpose of the clinic was also to build solidarity among the workers by showing them they share similar problems and build support for their organizing efforts (Interview May 11, 2000).

According to OTOC organizers, approximately 145 workers from 13 different meatpacking plants came to the free clinic to be screened by volunteer health professionals, including physical and occupational therapists from Creighton University (Interview May 9, 2000). The clinic was followed by an hour-long interdenominational prayer service and rally at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, which was attended by over 300 workers and their supporters. An OTOC organizer explained that the clinic not only succeeded in publicly exposing the injuries meatpacking workers suffer, but also in facilitating organizing efforts among the meatpacking workers (Interview August 17, 2000). A number of the workers, in fact, indicated that they initially became involved in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign as a result. For example, a ConAgra Northern States worker with 20 years experience working in South Omaha meatpacking plants stated:

OTOC held a clinic for meatpacking workers who were injured on the job. The clinic demonstrated the need for workers to organize and change their working conditions. It also demonstrated to our employers that we were organized and committed to improving our working conditions. After the clinic, I was committed to organizing (Interview April 16, 2001).

Another Northern States worker claimed:

They announced at church [Our Lady of Guadalupe] that OTOC was sponsoring a clinic for meatpacking workers. Since I had been experiencing problems with my wrist, I decided to go to the clinic. At the clinic they performed a bunch of tests on my wrist and the results weren't good. It was that day when I first heard that OTOC was organizing a

workers' committee. And it was then that I decided I wanted to be involved in the committee (Interview February 26, 2000).

Similarly, an Armour-Swift-Eckrich worker explained, "At the clinic, Sergio [Sosa] was sitting with a group of workers around a table talking about organizing a workers' committee and I happened to be sitting at the table. After listening to Sergio and the other workers talk, I decided that I needed to get involved" (Interview June 11, 2001).

Initial Conversations with the UFCW: The Beginning of a Collaborative Organizing Campaign. While the "Temporary Workers' Committee" was gaining members and momentum, IAF, OTOC, AFL-CIO and UFCW representatives were meeting to discuss their "potential collaboration." Unfortunately, I was not privy to the meetings and/or discussions that took place amongst these representatives and therefore cannot speak authoritatively about the terms of their collaboration. In fact, I experienced some resistance from both organizations (OTOC and the UFCW) when questioning them about the details of their collaboration. Interviews with organizers and representatives from both organizations produced contradictory claims. For instance, UFCW representatives claimed that they were approached by OTOC and vice versa. I was only able to ascertain that at least a year prior to going public with their alliance OTOC and UFCW representatives had begun meeting to discuss the possibility and details of their alliance to organize South Omaha's meatpacking workers. In addition, UFCW representatives revealed that as part of their contract with OTOC, their union financed the leasing of an office as well as the hiring of an OTOC organizer assigned full-time to the South Omaha campaign (Interview January 19, 2001). An OTOC representative confirmed that the UFCW financed the establishment of a sub-office of Local 271 in

South Omaha. However, this representative claimed that the UFCW also paid OTOC to find, hire and supervise two local organizers to assist in the campaign. They were to be trained by the IAF. Nonetheless, prior to their formal collaboration, OTOC organizers and the TWC organized a number of meetings in order to decide whether or not such collaboration was in their best interest. Ultimately, they decided that it was. Sosa, explained:

The idea of collaborating with the UFCW in our efforts to organize was proposed to the TWC. The committee held several meetings to decide whether or not they wanted to work with the UFCW. It was their decision; it was their committee. They decided that in order to make the right decision they needed to meet with UFCW representatives and have some questions answered. The UFCW agreed to meet with them. In preparing for the meeting, the TWC came up with a list of over 100 questions they wanted to ask the UFCW. I met with them [the TWC] and helped them reduce the number of questions to about 25, a more manageable number. Then, on June 7, 2000, approximately 25 workers met with UFCW representatives, including the President of Local 271, the Regional Director and a few others from the International. After the workers finished questioning the UFCW representatives, they met amongst themselves and democratically decided that it was in their best interest to collaborate with the UFCW. The workers, however, were divided on the issue. A handful of them opposed the collaboration and threatened to withdraw their support if the TWC decided to work with the UFCW. They voted against the collaboration. However, they were outnumbered in their vote by at least 2 to 1. After the vote, these workers left the meeting and never returned (Interview August 5, 2001).

Labor-Community Alliance: The UFCW Joins OTOC in a Campaign to Organize Meatpacking Workers

After OTOC and the UFCW decided to collaborate, UFCW International and regional representatives quickly established themselves and their “campaign headquarters” at a local hotel. When asked why the campaign was not being conducted from Local 271’s office in downtown Omaha and by the Local’s representatives, an

International representative explained, “The Local does not have an ‘organizing division’ or the manpower to run an organizing campaign. Plus, Donna McDonald is a relatively new Union President and she is working without a Secretary-Treasurer” (Interview January 18, 2001). He continued, “A number of organizers are needed to run the campaign, especially bilingual organizers. The International is helping the Local out by bringing in bilingual ‘spurs’ from around the region to work on the campaign and sponsoring a number of Union Summer Interns” (Interview January 18, 2001). When asked to clarify what he meant by “spurs,” the UFCW representative explained, “Spurs are essentially workers who are paid to take a leave of absence from their work in order to help us organize. They move from campaign to campaign as needed.” The UFCW International Union has a “Special Project Union Representation” (SPUR) program.

According to the Union:

This program makes organizing more effective and less costly for local unions. Members are on leave from their jobs for up to a year while working on behalf of the union. The local union pays their expenses and their wages are paid by the International Union. Members undergo training and then work with experienced organizers before working on their own. The SPUR program allows local unions to take on organizing drives that may otherwise be out of their reach (United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1000a 2004).

During the course of the UFCW/OTOC South Omaha campaign a number of “spurs” moved in and out of the area. In fact, during the first year of the campaign, at least 17 different organizers from the International and Regional Union as well as the SPUR program participated in the campaign. These organizers were in addition to the ten AFL-CIO Union Summer Interns the UFCW sponsored to help with the campaign.

As part of the national AFL-CIO Union Summer program, ten interns spent the month of June participating in the UFCW/OTOC campaign, mostly assisting the UFCW by “handbilling” and “housecalling” meatpacking workers. A UFCW organizer explained, “At least half of these interns were bilingual which made our job of communicating with the Spanish-speaking meatpacking workers and translating union material, such as handbills, from English to Spanish easier” (Interview February 13, 2001). After their four-week internships with the national AFL-CIO were completed, a few of these interns stayed in South Omaha for an additional two to three weeks assisting in the campaign (Interview February 13, 2001). The International UFCW also hired one of the interns as a full-time organizer with the International and subsequently assigned him to the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign.

Building on OTOC’s Organizing Efforts: The Role of the Church

On June 20, 2000 the UFCW and OTOC publicly announced their collaborative campaign to organize South Omaha’s predominantly Latino immigrant meatpacking workforce. Although the campaign officially began in June 2000, it is evident from the previous discussion that OTOC had in fact laid the groundwork for this campaign much earlier. OTOC organizers and members, such as Sergio Sosa and Father Zuerlein, spent several years prior to the UFCW/OTOC campaign building an organizational base among South Omaha’s meatpacking workers and helping these workers form their own “Temporary Workers Committee.” The TWC played a crucial role in mobilizing workers for the UFCW/OTOC campaign. A UFCW organizer explained, “This campaign would never have happened if it wasn’t for the hard work and determination of OTOC. They,

along with the workers' committee they helped form, are the ones who are really responsible for this campaign" (Interview February 26, 2001). Moreover, Mark Lauritsen, a UFCW organizer based in Washington, D.C. and dispatched to South Omaha by the International for the campaign, explained, "This is not a union-instigated drive. The workers are doing this. We are just lucky enough to be the union they chose" (Walton 2000).

The majority of the workers that I interviewed (17 out of 23) indicated that they were involved in OTOC's organizing efforts among South Omaha meatpacking workers prior to the campaign that began in the summer of 2000. These workers indicated that they had participated in a number of OTOC's organizing efforts including: 1) one-on-ones and house meetings; 2) the Omaha Latino Soccer League; 3) the One-Day Clinic for workers; 4) the Temporary Workers Committee; and 5) meetings at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church with government officials from the Nebraska Department of Labor and OSHA, as well as meetings with Nebraska Governor Mike Johanns and Lt. Governor Dave Maurstad.

In addition to the workers mentioned previously, who explained that they became involved in OTOC's organizing efforts as a result of their involvement with the Latino Soccer League and the One-Day Clinic, others explained they became involved with OTOC's efforts to organize meatpacking workers as follows:

- I became involved with OTOC when Sergio [Sosa] came to my home to talk to me about the conditions in my meatpacking plant. He got my name from Sister Janet at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. After talking to Sergio, I started going to the meetings he was having with workers at the Church (Interview May 10, 2001).

- At church workers were talking about meetings they were having with the Governor to discuss working conditions in the packing plants. Once I found out about these meetings, I became involved (Interview April 6, 2001).
- One of my co-workers is very active in OTOC. She invited me to go with her to a meeting they had at the Church [Our Lady of Guadalupe]. I went. After that, I started attending most of the meetings they had at the Church (Interview March 31, 2001).

Moreover, nearly half of the workers interviewed (11 out of 23) indicated that they were members of the TWC. For example, a Nebraska Beef worker explained:

I had friends working at Greater Omaha Packing and OTOC was organizing them. I started going to their meetings even though I wasn't working at Greater Omaha. I was at ConAgra. I decided that we needed to do something about the working conditions at ConAgra too. So, I started getting more involved with OTOC and organizing ConAgra workers. Later on, OTOC formed a committee of workers from several plants. I was involved with the committee before they joined up with the union (Interview May 24, 2001).

Other examples included:

- At Our Lady of Guadalupe one Sunday they announced the worker's committee. That's how I first learned about the committee and became involved (Interview with a Nebraska Beef Worker March 31, 2001).
- A good friend of mine that I worked with at ConAgra was one of the chairs of the committee. He kept bugging me about getting involved. And I finally did (Interview with a ConAgra Northern States Worker May 4, 2001).

Just six of the 23 meatpacking workers interviewed indicated that they had begun participating in the campaign after June 2000 when OTOC and the UFCW started collaborating. Two of these workers explained that they had been recruited to the campaign as a result of organizers handbilling their plants, and another claimed that he became involved after organizers visited his home. The following explanation provided

by a Nebraska Beef worker with 13 years of experience in South Omaha meatpacking plants exemplifies how these three workers were drawn to the UFCW/OTOC campaign:

Several months ago there were organizers handing out flyers outside the plant. I took one of them and just threw it away. The next day they were outside the plant again. This time, when the organizer handed me a flyer, he started asking me a bunch of questions. I was tired from working, so I just gave him my phone number and address. A few days later, he showed up at my house. After our conversation, I decided to get involved in the campaign (Interview July 2, 2001).

Two other workers explained that they joined the organizing effort after a rally for ConAgra's Northern States workers at the company's headquarters in downtown Omaha. One of them, a Latina with over a decade of experience working in South Omaha plants, described how she became involved after attending the rally:

I became involved in the campaign after going to the rally for workers downtown. See, I am an active member in the Church [Our Lady of Guadalupe]. One day last fall after church there was a bus taking people from the church to the rally downtown. So, I got on the bus and went to the rally. At the rally I met a woman who was also a meatpacking worker. She told me about the benefits to having a union and about her experience with unions in California. That's when I started becoming involved in the campaign (Interview April 3, 2001).

The other worker explained that after hearing about this event, she contacted the President of UFCW Local 271 asking for union authorization cards to distribute to workers at her plant (Armour Swift-Eckrich [formerly Cudahy]). She stated:

I called Donna McDonald at Local 271 and told her that workers at Cudahy were interested in organizing our plant. Donna said that she would get us some authorizations cards. So, a maintenance worker at our plant went downtown to the Local's office and picked up the cards. He brought them back to the plant and we divided them up and started passing them around to the workers (Interview February 25, 2001).

And a Nebraska Beef worker revealed that he became involved in the UFCW/OTOC campaign after he was fired from his job. He explained:

I supported the organizing campaign by signing an authorization card back in October when the UFCW was handing them out to workers outside the plant. But I wasn't involved in the campaign until after the raid [the INS raid at Nebraska Beef on December 5, 2000]. A couple of days after the raid I was fired for complaining about the speed of the line and not having enough workers on the line. The union filed charges against the company to help me get my job back. Since then, I have been going to union meetings and helping build support for the campaign by getting other workers to come to the meetings and sign cards (Interview April 3, 2001).

Overall, interviews with workers revealed that the UFCW had been conspicuously absent from South Omaha's meatpacking plants for a number of years prior to the UFCW/OTOC campaign. A few of the workers explained that the last organizing effort they remembered in South Omaha was in the early 1980s when workers at the Cudahy (now Armour Swift-Eckrich) plant went on strike. They indicated that they were working at the plant at the time of the strike. One of them explained:

The last time I remember the union involved in the meatpacking plants in South Omaha was around 1982, when we went on strike at Cudahy. The union and the company were facing a deadline for contract negotiations, and when the contract expired and the negotiations weren't getting us anywhere, we decided to strike. We were making over \$11.00 an hour. The company put an ad in the newspaper advertising our jobs at \$7.25 an hour. At \$7.25/hour, there were a lot of local residents who were willing to take our jobs. That was really the last of the union in South Omaha (Interview February 22, 2001).

Aside from workers at the Millard Processing Services (MPS) plant, one of whom did not even realize the plant was unionized, only one other person I interviewed recalled union organizing activities in South Omaha plants. He claimed, "One day a few years ago, probably 1997, there were union organizers outside the plant handing out fliers, but

after that day I never saw them again” (Interview June 26, 2001).⁸ Furthermore, when asked about previous union organizing activities at their plants, the most common response workers gave was that this campaign is the first they have known about and/or participated in. Responses similar to the following provided by a Northern States worker were typical, “In the nine years and three different South Omaha meatpacking plants I’ve worked, I’ve never once witnessed an attempt to organize workers until OTOC came along” (Interview February 1, 2001). These were workers with years of experience working in several different South Omaha plants. For instance, the majority of the 23 workers interviewed have worked an average of seven years and in three South Omaha meatpacking plants.

Workers’ perceptions of limited past union organizing efforts were supported by statements made by UFCW representatives familiar with efforts in the area. When asked about the previous attempts to organize South Omaha’s meatpacking workers, for example, a UFCW representative explained:

We have been in and out of the area trying to organize over the years, but not on the scale we are now. This campaign represents the single largest union effort to organize Omaha’s packing plants since probably the 1980s....We have really never before put together the effort we have here now. Never before have we had the “person power” we have here now. Never before have we put together the resources needed to organize Omaha’s packing plants until this June (Interview January 18, 2001).

⁸ Perhaps due to the relative absence of the UFCW at MPS, one of the MPS workers I interviewed was not aware that the plant was unionized until it was revealed to her during the process of being interviewed. When it was explained to her that MPS is a unionized plant, her response was: “There is no union at MPS. I work there. I know there is no union there. I’ve never seen nor heard anything about the union and I’ve worked there for eight months. Besides, I don’t know any workers at MPS who belong to the union” (Interview May 10, 2001).

A common theme emerged among workers' explanations of why they were participating in the UFCW/OTOC campaign; they were not familiar with the UFCW, but supported the organizing effort because of OTOC and/or the Church. Moreover, most of the workers explained that their first contact with the UFCW was through OTOC.

Workers explanations included the following:

- We [the TWC] didn't know much about unions until OTOC started having meetings with us to discuss the UFCW. Then we [the TWC] decided to have a meeting with the UFCW and learn more about what they were about and how they could add to our campaign. It is through OTOC, and the workers' committee, that I learned how unions could help us, and what having a union in our packing plants would mean (Interview March 31, 2001).
- I didn't really know anything about unions, just what I was hearing from my co-workers. Many of them were saying they did not trust unions. I tried to explain to them that this union [the UFCW] is different because OTOC is involved and that they could trust OTOC (Interview May 4, 2001).
- I joined the campaign because of OTOC and the church. During mass one Sunday, the priest made an announcement about the organizing campaign at Northern States and after mass, OTOC organizers were handing out cards to sign. I wasn't working at Northern States, but I signed a card anyway and just wrote "Cudahy" on it...I don't really know any of the UFCW organizers and haven't really spoken to any of them. If I have questions, I ask the OTOC organizers (Interview May 10, 2001).
- I was motivated to support the union because OTOC and the priest and nuns at my church [Our Lady of Guadalupe] support the union (Interview June 8, 2001).
- Most of my co-workers at Northern States signed authorization cards because they recognized OTOC. They were not familiar with the UFCW. If it would have been just the UFCW, only about 10 to 15 percent of the workers would have signed authorization cards (Interview February 1, 2001).

- The only reason workers know about the union is because of OTOC. Without OTOC, the union won't be successful (Interview April 6, 2001).

The Trajectory of the UFCW/OTOC Organizing Campaign

When asked to describe the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign in South Omaha, a UFCW organizer outlined the following:

The first step is to handbill the plant. Organizers gather outside the plant gates and distribute handbills to workers between the workers' shifts. The handbills basically explain what the union is all about and usually has an authorization card attached to it. After that, we evaluate the results of the handbilling. For example, we determine how many cards have been signed and returned. If there are a good number of cards returned the union will continue handbilling the plant and schedule a meeting with the workers. Usually we decide on a date and time for the meeting and then distribute a handbill announcing the meeting. Once a meeting is organized, the union will begin a "full organizing program," which includes housecalling and organizing workers into a committee. This committee will distribute authorization cards to their co-workers and get them "signed up." The next step is for the union to file for an election with the National Labor Relations Board. Generally, we will file for an election once 70 percent of workers have signed authorization cards. We wait until we have at least 70 percent of the workers signed up because we will lose about 18 to 20 percent of them once the election is announced, due to the company's anti-union tactics. The last step is to educate and prepare the workers for what to expect from the company as its anti-union campaign and tactics begin (Interview January 18, 2001).

The organizing campaign described by this UFCW organizer, as well as the way in which the UFCW/OTOC campaign in South Omaha actually proceeded, for the most part reflects a prototypical union organizing campaign. The strategies utilized in the campaign are those traditionally used by AFL-CIO affiliated unions during the course of an organizing campaign and are reflective of those regularly taught at the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute. The typical union organizing campaign proceeds as follows. First, the union makes contact with the workers. Throughout the campaign this is "an ongoing

process of identifying and meeting workers who might be interested in trying to form a union” (Diamond 1992:10). Making contact with workers usually begins with leafleting, or what is commonly referred to as “handbilling,” workers right outside their workplace. Second, the union begins “list building,” which is a process of assembling names and addresses of the workforce so that the union organizers can communicate with them regarding unionization and enroll them in the campaign (Diamond 1992:10). During the list building phase, union organizers ask their initial contacts, who are usually workers who have signed and returned authorization cards, for the names and addresses of their co-workers. Third, the union conducts “housecalls” and begins building “a committee” (Diamond 1992:10). Diamond explains, “By meeting with individuals in the workforce, often through house visits, the organizer answers questions about the union, gets information about the workforce, and identifies individuals who might be willing to join an organizing committee” (1992:10). Fourth, the union organizes committee meetings in which it, along with workers, strategizes how to get a majority of the workforce to sign union authorization cards (Diamond 1992:10). Once the union has succeeded in signing up a majority of the workforce, it asks the employer to voluntarily submit to “card check recognition” in which a neutral third party examines the signed authorization cards to determine their legitimacy and the number of cards signed. If the employer agrees to this procedure and a majority of the workforce has signed cards, then the employer is required by law to bargain with the union (Diamond 1995:18).⁹ If card check recognition fails,

⁹ As explained in a “Labor Law Handbook” produced by the AFL-CIO:

Voluntary recognition can occur where the employer agrees to recognize the union based upon cards signed by a majority of employees. If the union persuades the

then the union petitions the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for an election. Once the union wins recognition, either through the “card check” process or a NLRB election, a committee is selected to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement or “union contract” (Diamond 1992:10-12).

By and large, once OTOC began collaborating with the UFCW the organizing campaign in South Omaha began to take the form of a traditional union organizing campaign, structured around the goals of winning NLRB representation elections and successfully negotiating union contracts. OTOC organizers as well as workers explained that the campaign went from being a multi-plant organizing effort to one that focused primarily on one plant at a time, moving from plant to plant with NLRB representation elections. For instance, a worker who was involved in the TWC explained:

The union prefers to go about the campaign plant by plant rather than using the multi-plant strategy we began with. I think the multi-plant strategy is more effective because meatpacking workers move from plant to plant. For example, when workers go back to Mexico for the holidays, they get fired for taking more days off than they are allowed. Also, in the summer, workers leave their meatpacking jobs for construction jobs. Construction jobs are better jobs, but they are only temporary. If workers can't get their old jobs back at the end of summer, they just look for jobs at another meatpacking plant. Or, if we hear working conditions are better at another plant, like the line is running slower, we check it out (Interview January 30, 2001).

employer to agree to a “card check,” a third party, such as a member of the clergy, arbitrator, or any other individual, can examine the cards to verify majority support. Once an employer agrees to a card check – and review of the cards indicates that there is a majority support – the employer is required by law to bargain with the union (Diamond 1995:18).

An OTOC organizer described the disappointment some workers felt when the organizing efforts at their plant were largely put on hold so that the UFCW and OTOC could focus the campaign on the Northern States plant. He stated:

After we began focusing our campaign on Northern States, workers from Greater Omaha approached me complaining that we had abandoned them and our organizing campaign at their plant. They were complaining because a bunch of workers at their plant had signed cards and organized a committee, and then we just abandoned their plant for Northern States (Interview April 6, 2001).

After June 2000, OTOC began following the UFCW's lead in the campaign, adopting the union's organizing strategies and tactics such as handbilling, housecalling, and collecting signed authorization cards. However, OTOC organizers modified these strategies to make them more in line with their own organizing culture. In addition, OTOC complemented the campaign with its own organizing strategies, including postcard and letter-writing efforts, prayer services and community rallies. As one of the organizers explained:

We have adopted the UFCW's organizing strategies, but we have also modified them to reflect our own organizing culture and strategies. For example, when housecalling workers, our "housecalls" reflected "one-on-ones" rather than the union's "housecalls." Also, in housecalling and committee meetings, we continue to practice the 'Iron Rule' of never doing for others what they can do for themselves (Interview March 6, 2001).

Likewise, another organizer described the different approaches the two organizations use when visiting workers' homes:

They [UFCW organizers] do "housecalls" and we [OTOC organizers] do "one-on-ones." When they visit workers' homes, they talk about the union and only the union. They do not get to know the workers like we do. They just talk about the benefits of having a union and try to get workers to sign authorization cards. We talk to workers about their lives and experiences, and also search for leadership among the workers. We take time with each

of the workers we visit and really get to know them and understand their concerns and needs. Workers open up more when you show them that you are not just trying to sell them something, but are actually interested in them as people. I believe one-on-ones are more effective at gaining the workers' trust and support (Interview June 11, 2001).

Workers' comments confirmed a difference in the way they were approached by UFCW and OTOC organizers. For instance, an ASE (Cudahy) worker, who was a member of the TWC and had accompanied both UFCW and OTOC organizers on their visits to workers' homes, claimed, "The way the UFCW approaches workers is all about unionizing. They are not interested in building leadership in the plants and community. OTOC spends time with workers and tries to find and build leaders, both in the plants and community" (Interview February 25, 2001). Similarly, a Northern States worker explained:

Workers from the committee [the workers' committee at Northern States] paired up with people from the UFCW and OTOC to housecall Northern States workers. Once, I was paired with a UFCW organizer and a student [Union Summer Intern] and another time with a Deacon from the church [Our Lady of Guadalupe]. During the housecalls, UFCW organizers didn't really seem interested in the workers the same way the Deacon was....UFCW organizers did all the talking during their housecalls. They were not interested in hearing what the workers had to say (Interview July 2, 2001).

In addition, a Nebraska Beef worker who helped UFCW organizers map out the different departments and workers at his plant explained:

The goal of housecalling is to determine whether or not workers support the union and to get them to sign union cards. After finishing a housecall, the UFCW records whether or not the worker signed a union card and assigns them a color based on how strongly they do or don't support the union (Interview April 6, 2001).

A visit to the UFCW's campaign headquarters verified this worker's comments. Here, a UFCW organizer revealed the union's diagram of Nebraska Beef in which workers were

mapped out according to their respective departments in the plant and color-coded rating their degree of support for the union (Interview January 18, 2001).

When asked their opinion regarding OTOC's collaboration with the UFCW, workers' responses were mixed. While several were indifferent, a few were pleased, and a few others expressed their frustration with the collaboration. A Northern States worker, for example, stated:

I was thrilled when the UFCW joined OTOC in organizing meatpacking workers. We [workers] need all the support we can get. With the two organizations working together, we have more support and more power. Plus, the union has taught us new ways to organize like having an election and getting a contract (Interview March 31, 2001).

Conversely, a Nebraska Beef worker who was a member of the former TWC stated, "Once we started working with the union all we talked about was getting cards signed and elections. OTOC was not about cards and elections; they were about teaching workers how to be organized and how to improve their working conditions" (Interview April 6, 2001). Another worker and former TWC member stated:

It made a huge difference once OTOC started working with the UFCW. It was like we [the TWC] did a one hundred and eighty degree turn. The whole campaign changed at that point. We were not organized anymore. The UFCW started having meetings with us, but they didn't bring professional people to talk to us and to represent us like OTOC did. They brought these young people, who didn't know what they were talking about. All they talked about was "the union." They didn't know anything about us [meatpacking workers] and our work. All they cared about is whether we supported the union and that we signed a union card. I just signed one so that they would leave me alone....Once the UFCW came along, we [the TWC] stopped talking about OTOC and our committee and all we talked about was "the union" (Interview April 16, 2001).

Plant-by-Plant Organizing: The UFCW/OTOC Campaign Zeros In On ConAgra's Northern States

Within approximately a week of going public with their campaign, UFCW and OTOC organizers began focusing their organizing efforts on ConAgra's Northern States plant. According to organizers of both groups, they zeroed in on this plant because it had the most established workers' committee, which had been formed at least a year earlier with the help of OTOC organizers and the relentless efforts of one individual who co-chaired the workers' committee. A UFCW organizer explained, "OTOC had established workers' committees in a number of the South Omaha meatpacking plants. The Northern States committee was the strongest of these committees and they felt it was time to advance the campaign at their plant" (Interview January 18, 2001). Likewise, an OTOC organizer expressed:

The decision to focus the campaign on the Northern States plant came from workers. The plant's workers' committee indicated that they were ready to move forward with their campaign. They believed that a majority of their co-workers supported unionization and would vote for the union in an election (Interview February 6, 2001).

A member of the workers' committee at Northern States confirmed, "We had been organizing workers at the plant for months and decided that it was time to move forward, towards an election" (Interview March 19, 2001).

Prior to the UFCW/OTOC campaign at Northern States, OTOC had laid the foundation for the effort at the plant. The UFCW came along at the point in which OTOC had already: 1) made contact with a sizeable number of the plant's workers through one-on-ones and house meetings; 2) put together a list of the plant's workforce; and 3) built a workers' committee which attempted to enlist a majority of the plant's

workforce in the organizing campaign. In other words, going by the union's campaign timeline, the UFCW joined the campaign at a point in which workers were nearly ready to either ask for card check recognition from the company or petition the NLRB for an election. A member of the TWC explained, "When we started working with the UFCW, we handed everything over to them, including our lists of workers and leaders in a number of meatpacking plants, including Northern States. As soon as we got them [the UFCW] up to date, we started handing out authorization cards and preparing for an election at Northern States" (Interview March 19, 2001).

Within a week of going public with their campaign, the UFCW and OTOC, together with members of the former TWC and workers, began handbilling Northern States. Attached to the handbills were union authorization cards. An OTOC organizer explained, "Several OTOC organizers and members, five UFCW organizers, ten Union Summer interns and a number of workers began handbilling the Northern States plant as workers started and ended their shifts. In the meantime, members of the plant's workers' committee took a bunch of authorization cards with them into the plant and started distributing the cards to their co-workers" (Interview February 12, 2001). According to OTOC and UFCW organizers, this initial handbilling effort resulted in at least 30 percent of the plant's workforce signing authorization cards, which is the amount required to petition the NLRB for an election.

Addressing Employer Resistance. Organizers and workers explained that as soon as the effort focused on Northern States, specifically handbilling at the plant, the company responded with an anti-union campaign. For instance, in response to union

handbills, the company stapled letters to workers' paychecks. For example, on Friday June 23, 2000, the company attached a letter to workers' paychecks addressed "Dear Fellow Employees," signed by the company's Vice President and General Manager and entitled "Look Before You Leap!" It stated:

Recently a labor union has been passing out some information to employees at several Omaha meat processing facilities, including our facility. These handbills tell you to sign an authorization card and promise good things if you do sign. You should know the company's position on this union. Simply stated, we do not believe a union is needed in our facility. When I started here as the General Manager six months ago, it was clear that we had opportunities to make our plant a better place to work for everybody. I believe we have made progress. Do we do things exactly right? No, of course not. However, we sincerely believe that any problems or issues that we may have can best be addressed without the involvement of an outside third party who has different interests (i.e., union dues, etc.) than you....If you are asked to sign a union card, we encourage you to ask some questions first....We also want to answer any questions that you may have about the organizing process. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask your supervisor, Human Resources, my staff or me. We want you to have all the facts before you make this important decision.

Organizers and workers countered the company's tactics with some of their own.

For instance, an organizer explained that in response to the letters the company stapled to workers' paychecks, organizers and workers met after their committee meetings and produced a bilingual newsletter, *La Neta/The Truth*. One of the newsletters they produced, for example, entitled "ConAgra Beef Begins Its Anti-Union Campaign" read:

This past Friday, we were given a small yellow sheet with our checks telling us why we shouldn't sign any more cards or ask for union representation.

We the workers say: Let's tell *THE TRUTH*.

Fellow co-workers, let us be clear about something, we are the union!

THE TRUTH: it's true, they increased the size of the cafeteria and the kill floor, but they also increased the chain speed, which increases their profits.

THE TRUTH: it's true, they increased our wages 80 cents, but let's look at this a bit closer.

80 cents = faster line speed

80 cents = more cows slaughtered per hour

80 cents = more accidents and...

THE TRUTH: the raise is turning out to be costly.

Organizers and workers alike claimed that as soon as the campaign at Northern States was underway, the company began intimidating and threatening workers who openly supported unionization. They claimed that among the company's threats were firing union supporters, calling in the INS to check workers' legal status, and closing the plant.

A worker with several years experience at the plant stated:

Our managers and supervisors started asking us whether or not we supported the union and to name our co-workers at the plant who did. They also started searching our lockers for union handbills and authorization cards. They told us that if we signed authorization cards, the INS would check the cards to make sure we were documented. They also told us the plant would close if it became union (Interview April 4, 2001).

As a result of these tactics, on June 20, 2000 the UFCW filed charges with the NLRB against the company for "unlawfully interfering with the union campaign" by: 1) conducting surveillance on its employees; 2) creating the impression of surveillance on its employees; 3) searching employees' lockers for union literature and authorization cards; 4) confiscating union literature and authorization cards from employees; and 5) interrogating employees about their union sympathies (Interview January 18, 2001). The same day the UFCW filed these charges with the NLRB, the union also sent a letter to the INS informing it that "labor disputes" (organizing campaigns) existed at a number of

South Omaha meatpacking plants, including the Northern States plant. As previously explained, under INS policy, the agency's officials are prohibited from engaging in any enforcement activities when aware of union organizing efforts.

Building Momentum. In the weeks that followed, organizers and workers continued handbilling and housecalling, holding organizing meetings, and gathering signed authorization cards. An OTOC organizer summarized how the campaign proceeded as follows:

We [OTOC organizers] helped the UFCW chart out the plant's workforce by departments. For each department we made a list of workers' names, their position in the department, whether they had signed an authorization card, whether they supported the union, and whether they were a member of the plant's worker's committee. We did this in order to determine how many and which workers supported the union. Then, we took workers addresses from their authorization cards and separated them according to zip codes. We divided up the task of housecalling according to the different zip codes (Interview June 6, 2001).

When these efforts produced signed authorization cards for a majority of the plant's estimated 550 workers, the campaign turned to gaining "card check recognition." On September 20, 2000, nearly two months after the UFCW/OTOC went public with the campaign, UFCW Local 271 President, Donna McDonald, sent a letter to Stan Wells, the general manager of ConAgra Inc., formally asking the company to recognize the union as the bargaining agent for workers at the Northern States plant (Taylor 2000c). Meanwhile, OTOC distributed postcards addressed to ConAgra's CEO, Bruce Rohde, calling on the company to recognize the UFCW as bargaining agent for the workers at its Northern States plant without an NLRB election. As explained in a UFCW press release:

Mark Darby, co-chair of OTOC, set forth a charge to Omaha clergy and community members, "We are spreading the word with postcards

addressed to ConAgra calling on the company to turn over a new leaf and respect workers' rights. Postcards and fliers will be distributed in congregations across the city. We are committed to take action until we have justice for these workers" (United Food and Commercial Workers Union 2000).

These postcards stated:

Dear Mr. Rohde:

The faith traditions of Omaha Together One Community congregations support the rights of workers to organize unions for the purpose of collective bargaining. The laws of our nation protect and promote that right as well.

I support OTOC's call for ConAgra to recognize the Omaha ConAgra Beef Workers through voluntary recognition commonly called "card check." They are entitled to a safe work place and just compensation. These men and women are members of our congregations. We stand with them in their efforts to gain recognition from ConAgra.

Signed _____ Congregation _____

The same day the union sent a letter to ConAgra, UFCW and OTOC organizers and nearly fifty workers, accompanied by their supporters, rallied in front of the Northern States plant to formally request card check recognition. Julio Gonzales, chairman of the OTOC/UFCW organizing committee at the plant, addressed the rally with the following statement:

For weeks we have talked with workers about forming a union so we can have a voice on the job. We've met in workers' homes, during our lunch breaks, after work and in the evenings. We are here to announce we have a majority, over 50 percent, of our fellow workers that have signed authorization cards. We want to be clear. We are the union. We represent a majority of workers in this plant and we authorize the United Food and Commercial Workers as the collective bargaining agent. We are calling on ConAgra management to give us recognition through a voluntary process referred to as "card check." That is, once it is verified by a neutral third party that a majority of workers have signed cards, negotiations between our UFCW committee and ConAgra management can begin. This would be the best way for labor and management to work together. We know we have strong community support for our effort. Next Wednesday,

September 27, we will hold a rally of union, church and community leaders at ConAgra's headquarters in downtown Omaha. We call on all of Omaha to support us. We hope ConAgra agrees to this process. We are confident this will be a more productive and profitable plant if the management recognizes our union and deals squarely with our collective interests. There are many issues related to the organization of our work, the compensation paid and the health and safety conditions in the plant that need addressed (Interview September 20, 2000).

Both UFCW and OTOC organizers confirmed that approximately 385, or 70 percent, of the plant's estimated 550 workers had signed authorizations cards.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the company refused the UFCW's request for card check recognition. A UFCW organizer explained that ConAgra's Vice President of Labor Relations, Doug Schult, sent a letter back to the UFCW declining the union's request for voluntary recognition and suggested that it file for an election with the NLRB (Interview January 18, 2001). As a result, on September 27, nearly 300 people marched through downtown Omaha converging on ConAgra's headquarters to protest the company's refusal to voluntarily recognize UFCW Local 271. And, the UFCW filed a petition with the NLRB for an election and was subsequently granted separate union representation elections for the maintenance workers and production workers at the plant.

The Company Steps Up Its Anti-Union Efforts. In the days leading up to the elections, organizers and workers claimed that the company intensified its anti-union campaign. For instance, they claimed that in an effort to undercut unionization, the company made a number of improvements at the plant. Workers explained that the company raised their wages, improved their benefits, specifically their health insurance

¹⁰ When petitioning the NLRB for an election, the union must submit authorization cards signed by at least 30 percent of the bargaining unit.

benefits, slowed down the speed of the production line and promised them a new cafeteria. A Latina with eight years experience working at the plant explained, “Before the union campaign, the speed of the line was really fast and then all the sudden, once the campaign started, the company slowed it down. The only reason they slowed it down was so workers would be content and wouldn’t see the need for a union” (Interview March 31, 2001). Another worker claimed, “After the union announced they were having an election at the plant, the company made us all kinds of promises. They promised to improve our working conditions, but they were just trying to pacify us so we would vote against the union in the election” (Interview February 8, 2001).

On November 15, 2000, just two days before the scheduled elections and just before the “24-Hour Rule” went into effect, company executives including the Vice President of ConAgra’s Red Meats Division visited the plant delivering captive audience speeches. Basically, what is commonly referred to as the “24-Hour Rule” is a provision under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which maintains that within twenty-four hours prior to an NLRB election, management is prohibited from holding meetings with their employees (Diamond 1995:16). Organizers and workers explained that just before this “24-Hour Rule” went into effect, workers at Northern States were assembled into the plant’s lunchroom, where managers had set up a microphone and speakers for a thirty-minute meeting. According to UFCW organizers, corporate executives intimidated workers with last minute scare tactics. A UFCW organizer explained, “During this captive audience meeting corporate executives threatened workers with wage cuts and loss of benefits if they voted for the union. They also threatened workers with the plant’s

closing if the union won the election” (Interview January 18, 2001). Similarly, a member of the plant’s workers’ committee claimed:

In his speech, the Company’s Vice-President made both promises and threats. He promised to improve our working conditions. He asked us for our forgiveness and to have patience with the company as they made changes that would eventually lead to better working conditions at the plant. He also threatened there would be consequences if we voted in favor of the union. For example, he threatened to cut our wages and benefits and even close the plant if we voted for the union (Interview January 23, 2001).

Dealing with Defeat. On November 17, 2000, the NLRB elections took place at the plant. In the elections, production workers voted 238 to 150 against unionization, while a smaller contingent of the maintenance workers, comprising a separate bargaining unit, voted 20 to 13 in favor of union representation.¹¹ Immediately following the NLRB elections, UFCW Local 271 filed a petition with the NLRB listing 23 instances of “objectionable conduct” by Northern States representatives including company managers and supervisors before and during the union’s campaign. The UFCW alleged that the company created an environment that violated workers’ rights to a fair election. Among the UFCW’s list of objections were that company representatives: 1) threatened workers with the plant’s closing if they voted for the union; 2) threatened wage cuts and loss of

¹¹ On July 9, 2001, nearly eight months after they won their election, maintenance workers at ConAgra’s Northern States plant ratified the first union contract in the plant’s history. This three-year contract brought an immediate across the board 50-cent per hour wage increase for the 50 workers it covered. According to the UFCW, other contract highlights include: 1) a defined grievance and arbitration procedure that gives workers the opportunity to solve problems through a neutral third-party; 2) a 401(k) plan for workers to invest in their retirement security; 3) improvements in vacation leave and life insurance; 4) a bidding procedure for new jobs that gives everyone a fair chance for advancement; and 5) new defined skill grades in the jobs, along with further training, so that workers have more opportunity for promotions and raises (United Food and Commercial Workers 2001c).

benefits if the union won the election; 3) promised workers that they would be given a raise or other benefits if they voted against unionization; and 4) conducted surveillance of workers' union activities (Taylor 2000e:20). However, the following month, December 2000, the UFCW withdrew its "objections to the election" and replaced them with "unfair labor practice" charges. According to UFCW representative Greg Denier, the union withdrew its objections to the election "so it could proceed with the certification of the maintenance workers" (Taylor 2000f:14). A UFCW organizer claimed that it was a "tactical decision" to withdraw the objections to the election and file unfair labor practice charges. He explained, "By filing unfair labor practices charges, we can petition for another election at the plant after waiting a year, whereas if we pursue the objections to the election, it could take a number of years before getting another election at the plant" (Interview January 18, 2001).¹² He spelled out:

The remedies are greater for unfair labor practices. If we win on the grounds of unfair labor practices, we will gain better access to the plant and its workforce. If we win on the grounds of objecting to the election, we will just be granted a new election at the plant. We can file for another election after a year anyway. We are better off trying to gain access to the plant and just filing for another election in a year (Interview January 18, 2001).

The organizers and Northern States workers I interviewed universally attributed the union's loss among production workers at the plant to the company's anti-union campaign. For instance, an OTOC organizer explained:

¹² On March 27, 2002, nearly fifteen months after the election, UFCW Local 271 filed a petition with the NLRB for a second election at the Northern States plant. Approximately, five weeks later, on May 3, 2002 the plant's production workers voted in a NLRB election 252 to 126 in favor of union representation.

This was our [OTOC organizers] first union election. It was also the first union election for a majority of the workers. We were not familiar with the process and therefore not prepared for the company's anti-union tactics. These tactics intimidated a lot of the workers. And we were simply not prepared. Now we know what to expect and will be better able to prepare workers for what the company is likely to do before and during a union election (Interview February 6, 2001).

Similarly, a member of the workers' committee at the plant stated:

The company fooled lots of workers. They fooled them into believing that they would improve conditions at the plant without a union. They bribed them by slowing the line speed, increasing wages and building a new cafeteria. The workers the company couldn't bribe, they scared. They scared them by telling them the company would close the plant and they would lose their jobs (Interview February 11, 2001).

Another Northern States production worker affirmed:

I suppose we [production workers] lost the election because of the company's efforts against the union. They were able to get enough workers to vote against the union. Workers were afraid of what might happen if they voted for the union, mostly that the company would close the plant. Because that's what they were telling us they would do. I'd say that just before the election, the day the Vice President from ConAgra came to the plant, is when workers changed their minds about voting for the union. They believed what the Vice President was saying. That day really turned things around (Interview March 6, 2001).

Finally, when questioned why the maintenance workers voted in favor of union representation while the production workers voted against union representation, UFCW organizers explained that the maintenance workers comprised a much smaller bargaining unit and therefore were easier to organize. In addition, they explained that several of the maintenance workers had union experience and thus were more receptive to unionization.

As reported by a UFCW organizer:

We were successful with the maintenance workers because a number of them had prior union experience and were able to persuade their co-workers that voting for the union was in their best interest. Plus, the size of

the bargaining unit matters. There were less than fifty workers in the maintenance bargaining unit, so they were easier to organize than the production workers. It is just easier to organize and build solidarity among 50 workers than it is among 400 workers (Interview February 4, 2001).

Moving On: The Northern States Campaign Inspires Armour Swift-Eckrich Workers

On November 15, 2000, just two days before the elections at Northern States, the UFCW filed for an NLRB election at the Armour Swift-Eckrich (ASE), formerly Cudahy, meatpacking plant in South Omaha. And almost immediately after losing the union representation election among production workers at Northern States, the UFCW/OTOC campaign shifted to the ASE facility. When asked why their efforts shifted to this particular plant, both UFCW and OTOC organizers explained that workers at ASE had been organizing amongst themselves for a couple of months and by the time of the Northern States elections, a majority of the ASE workforce had signed authorizations cards. A UFCW organizer explained:

While our efforts were focused on winning the Northern States elections, workers at Cudahy were organizing themselves. They basically organized the plant on their own. Back in September, they [Cudahy workers] approached the Local [UFCW Local 271] wanting us to unionize their plant. We gave them authorization cards and they started signing up their co-workers. By the time we finished with the elections at Northern States, they had a majority of their workforce signed up (Interview January 18, 2001).

Similarly, an OTOC organizer stated:

There was a lot of publicity surrounding the Northern States campaign. This publicity generated organizing efforts among Cudahy workers. Basically, when Cudahy workers heard about what was going on at Northern States, they started organizing their own plant (Interview March 15, 2001).

Likewise, an ASE worker described that after the UFCW/OTOC rally at ConAgra's headquarters in September 2000, she contacted UFCW Local 271 explaining that workers at her plant wanted to unionize. She confirmed:

I called Donna McDonald at Local 271 and told her that workers at Cudahy were interested in organizing our plant. Donna said that she would get us some authorization cards. So, a maintenance worker at our plant went downtown to the Local's office and picked up the cards. He brought them back to the plant and we divided them up and started passing them around to the workers (Interview February 25, 2001).

An OTOC organizer with experience working at the plant explained:

The organizing campaign at Cudahy really began after OTOC and the UFCW held a rally in front of ConAgra's headquarters. There were lots of Cudahy workers at the rally and others who heard about it. After they realized what was going on at Northern States, they started an organizing campaign at their plant. They were ready for a union. Many of them have worked at the plant for a long time and remember what it was like when it was union. They know the difference a union can make and were ready to be a union again (Interview June 11, 2001).

Anti-Union Campaign Aimed at Latino Workforce. Similar to the Northern States campaign, once a majority of ASE's estimated 175 workers had signed authorization cards, the UFCW formally asked the company for voluntary recognition. Not surprisingly, the company declined the UFCW's request and so the union filed for an NLRB election at the plant. As expected, the company responded by initiating an anti-union campaign. A UFCW organizer explained that ConAgra also owns the ASE plant and therefore the anti-union tactics the company employed during the ASE campaign were very similar to those they used at Northern States. However, this organizer also indicated that because the workforce at ASE was much more ethnically diverse than the Northern States

workforce, the company's efforts focused primarily on the Latino workers. He explained:

Whereas the vast majority of Northern States workers are Hispanic, a significant proportion of the workers at Cudahy are Anglo, Black and Asian. Several of these workers have been at the plant since back when it was union. These workers know what it means to be union, so the company figured its anti-union strategies wouldn't intimidate them. They thought the Hispanic workers would be easier to intimidate (Interview January 18, 2001).

Likewise, another UFCW organizer affirmed:

The workforce at Cudahy is unique compared to other packing plants. There are a lot more native-born, long-term workers at Cudahy. These workers are more likely to have union experience and thus support unionization. The company knows this, so they tried to resist unionization by focusing on the immigrant Latinos (Interview February 6, 2001).

Both organizers and workers suggested that the demographics of the workforce at ASE differed from the other South Omaha meatpacking plants, because the working conditions and wages here were relatively better. For instance, A UFCW organizer claimed:

The composition of Cudahy's workforce is unusual because it is one of the better meatpacking plants to work for in South Omaha. Cudahy has less worker turnover and so there are more long-term employees at the plant. These long-term employees are more likely to be native-born workers (Interview February 6, 2001).

Organizers and workers alike stated that as workers circulate through South Omaha's meatpacking plants searching for the most favorable working conditions, if they manage to gain employment at ASE (Cudahy), they usually stay put. As explained by an OTOC organizer, "Latino workers generally rotate through the packing plants in South Omaha looking for the best possible plant. Once they get hired at Cudahy, they usually stay there since it has the best wages and working conditions" (Interview March 11,

2001). A worker with experience at a number of plants in South Omaha indicated, “Before Cudahy [ASE], I worked for Greater Omaha, Nebraska Beef, MPS and IBP. Cudahy is the best of these plants because the pay is better and the work is easier” (Interview March 8, 2001). In addition, an OTOC organizer observed:

Workers favor working at Cudahy over other plants because it offers them better working conditions. There’s no slaughtering or kill floor at Cudahy. It’s just a processing plant. So, generally speaking, the work is less physically demanding than other plants. Also, Latino workers have explained to me that working conditions are better at Cudahy because there are Anglos working at the plant who are accustomed to better working conditions and wages and are more familiar with their rights as workers. Therefore, the Anglos put pressure on the company to maintain better working conditions and wages and to uphold their rights. Basically, they claim that Anglos are less likely to be exploited than undocumented workers who feel they have no rights. So, the meatpacking plants that have a greater number of Anglos and fewer undocumented workers are likely to have better working conditions, and visa versa (Interview April 13, 2001).

Organizers and workers described that the Company focused its anti-union campaign on the plant’s Latinos because it assumed that they would be easier to intimidate and more receptive to anti-union rhetoric than other workers. An OTOC organizer claimed, “The company focused on the Latinos mainly because they assumed a couple of things: 1) that Latinos would be easier to intimidate than their Anglo, Asian and African American counterparts; and 2) that Latinos were not familiar with unions and therefore would be easier to persuade against unionizing” (Interview March 11, 2001).

He clarified:

The company assumed that some of its Latino workers were undocumented, especially Latinos from the second shift, and therefore could be intimidated by INS threats. They also assumed that the Latinos knew less about unions than their counterparts and therefore would be easier to convince that having a union was not in their best interest. They

figured the Latinos would believe what they were telling them about unions, like “unions are corrupt,” “unions only want your money,” and “unions cause plants to close.” Things like that. The company also knew that many of its Latino workers had worked at other meatpacking plants and preferred working at Cudahy. They used this information to try to convince them they didn’t need a union (Interview March 11, 2001).

Likewise, a Caucasian worker with nearly two decades experience working at the plant explained:

The Company held meetings with just the Hispanic workers. They brought in this Hispanic lady from the corporate office to talk to them and try to convince them that the union was corrupt. The Company targeted them because most of them were unfamiliar with the union and they thought they could manipulate them (Interview February 25, 2001).

According to organizers and workers, the company’s anti-union tactics included holding captive audience meetings with just the Latino workers at the plant and also meeting with these workers on a one-on-one basis in order to determine whether or not they were union sympathizers and to intimidate them accordingly. A UFCW organizer explained, “The Company held captive audience meetings with the plant’s Latino workforce, during which they tried to intimidate these workers by talking about the INS and plant closure” (Interview January 18, 2001). Additional organizers, as well as workers, claimed that during these meetings with the Latino workers, company representatives implied that if the plant became union, two things were likely to happen: 1) the INS would check the workers’ legal status; and 2) the plant could face closure. For instance, an ASE worker with several years at the plant reported, “At these meetings, our managers threatened to call in the INS to check our papers and they threatened to close the plant down, like what happen at Beef America. They also told us that the only thing the union was interested in was union dues” (Interview April 3, 2001). ASE workers also

explained that a ConAgra representative took the Latino workers aside one at a time in an effort to intimidate them. One of the workers stated, “She asked me if I supported the union and I told her ‘no.’ I just said ‘no’ so she would leave me alone, because the real answer was ‘yes’” (Interview March 19, 2001). Moreover, organizers and workers described how ASE managers singled out Latino workers with questionable legal status and told them that the INS would check their status if they signed authorization cards. An OTOC organizer explained, “Managers selected workers they thought might be undocumented, especially workers from the second shift, and threatened them with the INS. Plus, they told them that because they were undocumented they wouldn’t be able to find another job as good as their job at Cudahy” (Interview April 6, 2001).

The Significance of the Religious Community. Interviews with organizers and ASE workers indicated that OTOC’s member congregations, particularly Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, played a crucial role in building union support among the workers, especially Latinos, and also helping to mitigate the company’s anti-union tactics. Both organizers and workers explained that because the Latino workers knew church backed the organizing campaign, they were willing to support unionization and participate in the campaign. As an ASE worker explained, “The company really tried hard to intimidate us, but they couldn’t because we had the church’s support. With the church’s support, we weren’t intimidated” (Interview April 3, 2001). Another ASE worker stated, “Knowing the church was behind us gave us the courage we needed to support the union” (Interview April 6, 2001). Similarly, an OTOC organizer claimed, “The religious community’s involvement in the campaign helped minimize workers’

fears” (Interview May 7, 2001). Moreover, an OTOC organizer with experience working at the plant claimed:

Support from the church and community has been very important in this campaign, especially for the Latino workers. Latino workers fight when they know that the church and community are behind them. The support workers received from the priests and nuns has been important. When they knew the priests and nuns were behind them, they had the courage to support the union. The church created a sense of security for the workers. They needed that security to participate in the campaign (Interview June 11, 2001).

On December 8th, a week before the plant’s NLRB election, Father Damian Zuerlein and Sister Janet Horstman of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church sent letters to the ASE workers stating:

A few days from now, on Friday December 15th, you will have an opportunity to vote and be represented by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union...OTOC and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish support you and your co-workers in this election...We have been helping workers to organize in some Omaha packing plants because you deserve better wages, better working conditions and a voice in the workplace; the only way this can happen is through union contracts.

According to ASE workers, and the organizers I interviewed, this letter encouraged many of the ASE workers to vote for the union. For instance, one worker indicated, “I was not sure what to think about the union, but when I received a letter from Father Damien and Sister Janet pledging their support for the union, I was 100 percent convinced that it was something I needed to support too” (Interview March 30, 2001).

In addition to sending letters to the ASE workers, just days before the election OTOC member congregations organized a “phone bank.” An OTOC organizer explained:

Just before the election we organized an effort to phone all of the Cudahy workers and let them know that the community was behind them in the union election. The diversity of these workers, including Latinos, Anglos, Blacks and Asians, meant that they belonged to different communities. So in order to reach them all, OTOC pastors and leaders from different congregations throughout Omaha called workers from their respective communities. For example, Baptist Ministers from congregations in North Omaha called the black workers, while Catholic Priests and Nuns from Our Lady of Guadalupe in South Omaha called the Latino workers (Interview January 22, 2003).

Workers described how these letters and phone calls gave them the confidence they needed to support the union. For instance, an ASE worker observed:

As it came closer and closer to the day of the union election, our managers started putting more and more pressure on us. They were trying to intimidate us and make us uneasy about the election and the union. Workers at the plant were mostly afraid of losing their jobs if they voted for the union. But once we received letters and phone calls from the church and knew that the church and community were supporting us, we had the support and courage we needed to stand up to our managers and to vote for the union (Interview April 3, 2001).

Another ASE worker stated:

The day before the election I received a phone call from someone from the church [Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church]. They called to tell me that the church was supporting me and my co-workers in the election and that they were praying for us. That is the first time in my 25 years as a meatpacking worker that I had ever heard of anything like that happening...the church getting involved in a union election. Knowing the church was behind us and supported our efforts really made a difference. It boosted my morale and gave me confidence that we were going to win the election. I believe it made quite a difference for a lot of workers (Interview February 25, 2001).

The Importance of “Indigenous” Organizers: The Role of Latino Immigrant

Meatpacking Workers as Organizers. Organizers and workers also indicated that an OTOC organizer with experience working at the ASE plant played a vital role in helping

build support for the campaign among the plant's Latino workforce. As explained by an OTOC organizer:

Marcella was crucial in building support among the Latino workers and bridging the cultural divide that existed among the ethnically diverse workers. Many of the Latino workers at the plant were not familiar with unions or the UFCW, but they knew Marcella and trusted her because she used to work with them. She helped them to understand unions and encouraged them to support the campaign. Because of her hard work, many of the workers who probably wouldn't have supported the union, did. She was also crucial in building relationships and trust among the culturally and ethnically divided workers. She explained to the Latino workers that their Anglo and Black co-workers supported the union because they had union experience. She encouraged these workers to share their union experiences with the Latino workers and help them understand why it was important to win the campaign (Interview April 9, 2001).

Likewise, a UFCW organizer stated:

Marcella's outreach to the Latino workers at the plant made a huge difference in this campaign. She knew many of these workers because she used to work with them at the plant. She really did a great job helping them understand the unionization process and bringing them into this campaign (Interview February 8, 2001).

Four of the six ASE workers that I interviewed mentioned that they supported the union because of this particular person. For instance one reported, "Marcella knows what it is like working for Cudahy. So, if she thinks we need a union, then we need a union" (Interview April 3, 2001). In addition, a caucasian ASE worker stated, "The Latino organizers and the Latino workers who supported the union talking to the other Latinos at the plant really convinced them that we needed a union. Latinos talking to other Latinos is what really got them to support the union" (Interview February 25, 2001).

The Union Wins and the Retaliation Begins. On December 15, 2000, almost a month after the elections at Northern States, ASE workers voted 90 to 65 in favor of

union representation. Immediately following the election, according to both organizers and workers, the company retaliated against its workers. A UFCW organizer claimed:

After the union won the election, the company began retaliating by: 1) eliminating its perfect attendance bonus; 2) eliminating its boot and shoe allowance; 3) changing its vacation policy; and 4) introducing new company policies, like making workers punch out for their lunch breaks (Interview February 6, 2001).

Subsequent to these changes in company policy, on January 23, 2001, the UFCW filed charges against ASE for retaliating against workers as a result of their choosing union representation. However, an organizer explained that these charges were resolved between the union and the company during contract negotiations.

Organizers and workers alike attributed the union's success at ASE to two key factors: 1) the stability and diversity of the plant's workforce; and 2) the support provided by OTOC's member congregations and organizers. Organizers and workers claimed that the relatively low turnover rate among ASE workers and the fact that many of the plant's long-term employees had prior union experience facilitated the success of the organizing campaign. For instance, an OTOC organizer explained:

We won the election at Cudahy because there were many white and black workers at the plant who had been there for a long time. Many of them were there when the plant was union so they were familiar with unions and could appreciate the benefits of working at a union plant. The Latino workers at the plant, for the most part, followed their lead. When the Latinos realized that the whites and blacks were pro-union, they figured that these workers knew what they were doing and so they followed their lead (Interview June 11, 2001).

Similarly, a UFCW organizer stated:

Because worker turnover at this plant is low, at least compared to other area plants, there were a number of workers who had been working at the plant while it was unionized. These workers not only supported unionization, but

also helped us gain the support of their co-workers, who were without union experience (Interview February 6, 2001).

Finally, an ASE worker, who had been at the plant since the early 1980s claimed, “I believe that having the church involved made all the difference. I really don’t think we could have won the election without OTOC and the church” (Interview February 15, 2001).

INS Raid and Hot Shop Organizing: The Campaign Shifts to Nebraska Beef

On December 5, 2000, just days before the union election at ASE, the INS raided the Nebraska Beef meatpacking plant in South Omaha. The raid resulted in the deportation of over 200 workers, despite the fact that the INS has internal operating procedures directing its agents not to initiate immigration enforcement actions during union organizing campaigns. The INS defended the raid, arguing that its investigation at the plant began prior to the campaign (Taylor 2000b). Two days after the raid, workers at the plant stopped production, protesting their working conditions. As a result of this protest, seven meatpacking workers were fired. One of the fired workers explained the events as follows:

After the raid we were doing the same amount of work with a couple hundred fewer workers. The managers didn’t slow down the line speed and the meat was piling up. We were working as fast and as hard as we could, but we couldn’t keep up. So, about half of us [an estimated 400 workers] just stopped working. We walked off the line and into the cafeteria. Our supervisors and managers followed us into the cafeteria, where we asked them to slow down the line speed and give us a raise. After they agreed to give us a 50-cent an hour raise, most of the workers returned to the line. A few of us, however, stayed behind in the cafeteria, and were fired for doing so. The managers said we were fired for “inciting a riot” (Interview April 3, 2001).

Moreover, a UFCW organizer reported:

Workers at Nebraska Beef were frustrated with the insufficient number of workers on the line and their increased workloads following the raid and responded to these conditions by organizing and protesting. Several workers were fired in the process. After they were fired they came to us [the UFCW] for help and we filed charges on their behalf (Interview January 18, 2001).

In defense of the fired workers, the UFCW filed unfair labor practice charges against Nebraska Beef, alleging that the workers were fired for engaging in a protected activity (protesting working conditions) and seeking to get them reinstated with back pay.

As a result of the raid and firings, the UFCW/OTOC campaign shifted to the Nebraska Beef plant. Within approximately a week of the union election at the ASE plant, UFCW and OTOC organizers began meeting with Nebraska Beef workers and agreed to step up organizing efforts at the plant (Interview January 18, 2001). An OTOC organizer explained:

Following the raid and the firings, Nebraska Beef workers were very agitated. They began organizing themselves. Then they came to OTOC and the UFCW looking for support and signifying that they wanted to unionize their plant. So, we [OTOC and the UFCW] decided to focus our immediate attention and efforts on Nebraska Beef. It became our highest priority. Organizers and workers gathered outside of the plant gates daily in between shifts to handbill and talk to workers. The discontent among workers at the plant allowed us to intensify our efforts and gain the required authorization cards to petition for a union election (Interview February 23, 2001).

UFCW and OTOC organizers claimed that they were able to utilize the situation at Nebraska Beef to build support for their campaign. For instance, a UFCW organizer claimed that because of the raid and firings “there was increased discontent among workers at Nebraska Beef, which created a basis upon which we were able to build

support for our campaign at that plant” (Interview January 23, 2001). Moreover, several of the Nebraska Beef workers I interviewed commented on how the raid and firings at the plant changed their attitude about the UFCW and the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. For instance, one of them stated:

I supported the organizing campaign by signing an authorization card back in October when the UFCW was handing them out to workers outside the plant. But I wasn't involved in the campaign until after the raid. A couple of days after the raid I was fired for complaining about the speed of the line and not having enough workers on the line. The union filed charges against the company to help me get my job back. Since then I have been going to union meetings and helping build support for the campaign by getting other workers to come to the meetings and sign cards (Interview April 3, 2001).

Approximately four months after the raid and firings, in April 2001, the NLRB ruled in favor of the seven fired workers and sent Nebraska Beef a settlement offer that called for the workers to be reinstated and paid their back wages. When the company failed to respond to the NLRB letter, the Board issued a complaint against the company and scheduled a hearing for October 10, 2001 (Walton 2001:4A).¹³ According to organizers this victory for the fired workers facilitated the UFCW/OTOC campaign at Northern States by demonstrating to the workers not only that the UFCW was committed to them, but also the material benefits of union representation. For example, a UFCW organizer claimed, “Workers at the plant realized that we were committed to them” (Interview February 26, 2001). Likewise, another organizer stated, “This demonstrated

¹³ According to a UFCW representative, just a few days before the scheduled hearing the company reached a settlement with the workers and the UFCW in which they agreed to reinstate the workers and compensate them for their lost wages.

our commitment to them. It demonstrated that even though they are not union members we are committed to fighting for them” (Interview January 18, 2001).

After several months of handbilling and housecalling, Nebraska Beef workers organizers claimed that 70 percent of the 800 to 850 workers at the plant had signed authorization cards indicating that they wanted union representation. Therefore, on June 18, 2001, in an effort analogous to the one the union utilized during its campaigns at Northern States and ASE, UFCW Local 271 president Donna McDonald wrote a letter to Nebraska Beef officials asking the company for card check recognition. And similar to the response of the other two companies, Nebraska Beef representative Dean Miller declined the UFCW’s request, stating that he did not agree that a majority of Nebraska Beef employees had designated UFCW Local 271 as their bargaining agent (Taylor 2001a:33). Moreover, he stated, “Employees should be given the opportunity to choose whether they want union representation. The procedures which provide for secret ballot elections under current federal law would seem to be in the best interest of all concerned” (Taylor 2001a:33).

On June 19, 2001, the UFCW and OTOC held a press conference at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish Hall to celebrate the first anniversary of Gov. Johanns’ “Meatpacking Industry Workers’ Bill of Rights.” There, the union announced it would file a petition with the NLRB for a union representation election. It also reported that it had filed charges with the NLRB against Nebraska Beef for illegally interrogating workers as to their union sentiments and conducting surveillance of them (Taylor 2001a:33). A UFCW organizer claimed, “The Company’s managers and supervisors have been coercing

workers by creating the impression that their union activities are being kept under surveillance and by interrogating workers regarding their union activities (January 18, 2001). Likewise, an OTOC organizer explained how one of the Nebraska Beef managers owned a store that was located across the street from an office the UFCW and OTOC leased in South Omaha and kept surveillance from there as Nebraska Beef workers visited the UFCW/OTOC office. This organizer claimed:

He had people at the store spying on workers when they came to our office. Because the store is literally less than fifty feet from our office, they were able to see who was coming to our meetings. Workers told me that they were also taking down license plate numbers to figure out which workers were coming to our meetings. When workers figured out what was going on, they were concerned about being seen at our office. So, we decided to move our meetings to the church [Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church], where we used to have meetings before we leased the South Omaha office and where workers were more comfortable (Interview, March 9, 2001).

Moreover, a Nebraska Beef worker explained, “When organizers are outside our plant handing out fliers, our supervisors go out to the parking lot and sit in their cars to write down the names of workers who take the fliers and stop to talk to the organizers” (Interview April 6, 2001). Organizers and workers claimed that these were just a few of the many tactics the company used to intimidate workers and resist unionization. They claimed that the company also made threats in relation to the INS deportations, job terminations and plant closure.

Another tactic the company used in its opposition to unionization and one that several workers commented on was to provide its workers with a 36-page plastic cover, spiral bound notebook containing anti-union material in both English and Spanish. The notebook, with which a worker provided me, contained a list of UFCW officials’ salaries

ranging from the UFCW International President's salary of \$368,747 to an International Representative's salary of \$50, 226. With this, the company claimed, "The union officials need your initiation fees and monthly dues to pay the high salaries they pay themselves." In the notebook, the company also accused the UFCW of embezzlement and corruption. For example, the company claimed, "The UFCW is based on the east coast and has a recent history of embezzlement, corruption and mismanagement both in their National office and Omaha office Local 271." In support of these accusations, the company reproduced newspaper articles related to union embezzlement. The notebook also contained statements and articles regarding plant strikes and closures, particularly the UFCW Local 271 strike at Beef America and the plant's closure in 1998. The company claimed, "What happened at Beef America? July 13 UFCW Local 271 calls for strike to begin. Union strike forces 1,100 employees off their jobs....July 28 Plant closes permanently and 1,100 people lose their jobs." In addition, the notebook included several pages listing the benefits the company offers its workers. For instance, one of these pages reads:

The company understands that employees may need extended time away from the company. An example of this would be employees visiting Mexico. The company understands the importance of these visits to employees and has implemented a flexible re-hire policy to accommodate these circumstances.

In preparation for the NLRB election, which was scheduled for August 16, 2001, UFCW and OTOC organizers continued concentrating most of their organizing efforts on handbilling and housecalling, holding organizing meetings, gathering signed authorization cards and countering the company's anti-union tactics. Meanwhile, contract negotiations were underway at the ASE plant.

From Mobilization to Business Unionism: Contract Negotiations at ASE

A couple of weeks after the December 15, 2000 union election at the ASE plant, UFCW Local 271 president Donna McDonald sent letters to the ASE workers informing them that as soon as the union received official certification from the NLRB it would begin contract negotiations. A UFCW organizer summarized the contract negotiations process as follows:

First, workers will nominate and elect the workers they want to serve on the negotiating committee. Next, we [the UFCW] will survey the workers to see what they want in their contract proposal. Then, we [the UFCW and the negotiations committee] will take the contract proposal to the company. It usually takes several months and several meetings negotiating with the company before we are able to finally come up with a contract. After that, we will take the contract back to the workers and they will vote whether or not they want to ratify it (Interview April 19, 2001).

The UFCW held a meeting in early February 2001 to elect workers for the contract negotiations committee and to be union stewards at the plant. There, it also distributed questionnaires to ASE workers in order to determine what issues they wanted addressed in their contract. An ASE worker explained, “The union gave the workers that were at the meeting questionnaires to take back to the plant and give to their co-workers. These questionnaires listed a handful of items and asked us to rank them according to how important they were to us” (Interview, April 18, 2001). A questionnaire provided by this ASE worker, entitled “UFCW Local 271 Membership Contract Questionnaire,” states:

Please weight the issues from the following list by using an assigned points system. You may assign as many points (or no points) to any issue as you desire, keeping in mind that the maximum for any single issue is 50 points and the combined total must add up to 100 points.

- | | |
|---|-----------|
| 1. Improved wage structure | _____pts. |
| 2. More paid holidays | _____pts. |
| 3. More vacation time | _____pts. |
| 4. Improved medical coverage | _____pts. |
| 5. Improved pension benefits | _____pts. |
| 6. Improved sick leave plan | _____pts. |
| 7. Better seniority protection | _____pts. |
| 8. Improved grievance procedure | _____pts. |
| 9. Better work schedule | _____pts. |
| 10. Better health and safety protection | _____pts. |

According to an organizer, the results of these questionnaires indicated that the issues workers were most interested in addressing in their contract were improvements in: 1) wages; 2) pension benefits; 3) medical coverage; and 4) sick leave (Interview April 6, 2001). Based on these issues and working from existing UFCW contracts covering similar sausage processing plants, the union drafted a contract proposal and began negotiating with the company in late February. An ASE worker who was on the negotiating committee explained, “We used a contract at Cudahy’s sister plant in Chicago and a contract from a sausage plant in St. Charles, Illinois as models for our contract proposal and negotiations” (Interview February 25, 2001).

There were three ASE workers on the negotiating committee, all of who were native-born workers from the first shift. An OTOC organizer reported:

There were approximately 40 workers at the meeting in which the negotiations committee and union stewards were elected. Consequently, only these 40 workers had the opportunity to vote for the workers they wanted to represent them during contract negotiations and as union stewards. They elected two Anglos, one of which was female, and a Hispanic male to be on the negotiations committee. They also elected five union stewards including an Anglo female, an African American male, a Hispanic male, and two Latinas. All of these workers, the committee members and stewards, were from the first shift (Interview January 25, 2001).

Likewise, an ASE worker stated:

I attended the first meeting the union held after we won the election. There were only two of us from the second shift at the meeting. At the meeting, we elected a contract negotiating committee and plant stewards. The two of us from the second shift proposed a couple of workers from our shift who weren't at the meeting. The union took their names, but they weren't elected (Interview March 31, 2001).

I interviewed two of the three workers that were on the negotiating committee and they explained how they were selected. One of them indicated:

There are three of us on the committee and I am the only Hispanic and also the only one that is bilingual. That is really the only reason I am on the committee, because I am bilingual. Workers want someone on the committee that is bilingual so that they will know what is happening during negotiations (Interview February 22, 2001).

Another explained:

I was not elected to the committee. It was a big misunderstanding. I told everyone that I didn't want to be a union steward because I don't have enough time to take on that responsibility. I did however want to be on the negotiations committee. Meanwhile, one of my co-workers wanted to be a union steward, but she didn't want to be on the negotiations committee. After she was elected to be a negotiator, Donna [the President of Local 271] called me and asked me why I didn't want to be part of the negotiations committee and I explained to her that I did in fact want to be on the committee just not a union steward. That is when the three of us, Donna, my coworker and myself, discussed the situation and worked it out so that I would be on the committee and my coworker would be a union steward. Plus, Donna wants me on the negotiations committee because I am outspoken and won't put up with the company's crap (Interview February 25, 2001).

Several of the ASE workers I interviewed mentioned that they were upset with the fact that the second shift had no one serving on the negotiations committee or as union stewards. For instance an ASE worker from the second shift complained:

There are only three workers on the negotiations committee and they are all from the first shift. There is not a single worker from the second shift

on the committee, so who is going to speak for our concerns? The concerns of the second shift workers are going to be ignored in negotiations (Interview March 9, 2001).

Another second shift worker stated:

We need someone on the committee to represent workers on the second shift. Workers on the second shift don't know what's going on with the committee and the union. No one is telling us what is going on. We also need stewards on the second shift. What are the workers on the second shift supposed to do when we encounter problems? Who is going to represent us? (Interview March 31, 2001).

When asked whether there is a limit to the number of workers that can be on the negotiating committee, an organizer explained, "Since the union is paying for the lost wages of those workers who participate in negotiations, the union limits the number of workers on the negotiating committee" (Interview March 19, 2001).

Interviews with ASE workers and OTOC organizers revealed that workers were frustrated with the contract negotiations, as well as the UFCW and OTOC. For instance, ASE workers stated the following:

- I attended the first meeting the union held after we won the election....Since the first meeting nobody has told me, or any of the workers I have talked to, what's happening. Workers are upset because we didn't know what's happening. The union isn't telling us anything (Interview with a Latina from the second shift March 31, 2001).
- I don't know what is going on with the negotiations, none of us know. No one from the second shift knows what is going on. Maybe if I asked someone from the first shift they might know, but I'm not sure because there are lots of workers from both shifts asking "What happened to the union" and "What happened to our union contract" (Interview with a Latina from the second shift April 6, 2001).
- Since we won the election, I haven't seen anybody from the UFCW or OTOC. I haven't heard of any meetings. They have done a poor job of communicating with us since the election. They haven't been in contact

with us regarding the contract, but I have a friend on the contract committee and she told me that it “looks pretty good” (Interview with a Latina from the first shift April 12, 2001).

When asked why the workers were not aware of what was happening in contract negotiations, an OTOC organizer claimed:

A UFCW organizer explained to me that the workers on the negotiations committee were instructed not to tell their co-workers what was going on in negotiations. He said to me “Workers on the negotiations committee were instructed not to say anything to their co-workers about what was going on.” The reasoning he gave me was that workers would be disappointed with the union if they lost something that was initially in the proposal. The example he gave me was that if the union proposed two holidays and then eliminated one of these holidays in exchange for an increase in wages, workers would be pissed off at the union because they lost one of the holidays (Interview April 19, 2001).

Moreover, this OTOC organizer stated:

I believe workers would understand if the union would just explain to them how the negotiations process works. Unions just need to educate workers about the process. I believe workers should be informed and participating in the process. I do not agree with the union’s approach (Interview April 3, 2001).

Another OTOC organizer acknowledged that the OTOC organizers were inexperienced when it came to NLRB elections and contract negotiations. However, this individual claimed that they [OTOC organizers] wanted to be more involved in the negotiations in order to gain a better understanding of and some experience with the process, but were not allowed. He stated, “We would have liked to have been more involved in the contract negotiations, but when we asked to participate in the negotiations the UFCW refused our request, claiming that it was against the NLRB’s policy to have us on the negotiations committee” (Interview May 15, 2001).

Although OTOC organizers were essential in mobilizing workers up through the union representation election, they were restricted from playing an active role in the process of negotiating a union contract. OTOC organizers explained their predicament as follows:

- The contract negotiations have created problems between workers and OTOC organizers because we [OTOC organizers] are not exactly sure what's going on with negotiations. ...Workers don't know what is going on either and so they are frustrated. They come up to me at church and ask what's going on with the union and the contract. All I can tell them is that I don't know and then they become frustrated with me. When I ask the UFCW organizers they tell me "negotiations are going good." What does "good" mean? I have no idea (Interview June 18, 2001).
- Workers come to me and want to know how things are going. They look to me for answers, but I don't have the answers. I'm afraid that if workers are not happy with their contract and their representation, they will blame me and the other OTOC organizers. We are going to the ones that workers hold responsible. It is our faces they see, not the faces of the UFCW organizers. We are the ones that live in the same community, go to the same church, shop in the same stores and eat in the same restaurants. When the UFCW organizers move on to another organizing campaign, we'll be the only ones around. We'll be the ones that workers come to with questions and complaints (Interview March 9, 2001).

Moreover, reflecting on the contract negotiations at ASE, an OTOC organizer explained his plan for keeping workers informed and involved during future contract negotiations. He explained, "I plan to have 'an overview committee,' which would serve as an intermediary between the negotiations committee and the larger workforce. The members of this 'overview committee' would be kept aware of how the negotiations were proceeding and in turn would be responsible for keeping the rest of the workforce aware of the status of the negotiations" (Interview May 18, 2001).

Accommodating Organizing Cultures: Incorporating Immigrant-Specific Language into Collective Bargaining Agreements. On August 2, 2001, after approximately six months of negotiations and nearly eight months after the union election, ASE workers ratified a three-year union contract covering approximately 160 workers. A UFCW press release explains:

The ASE employees had worked 11 years with a total of a dollar increase in their wages. The new contract will give workers a dollar raise over the next three years....Other highlights include: 1) an improved health care plan that includes prescription, vision, and dental coverage at a fixed rate of three dollars per week for single coverage and six dollars per week for families; 2) a safety committee in which workers will have an equal voice with management to address safety issues in the plant; 3) a defined grievance and arbitrations procedure that gives workers the opportunity to solve problems through a neutral third-party; 4) an improved 401(k) plan for workers to invest in their retirement security; 5) double the amount of life insurance previously provided to workers; and 6) a bidding procedure for new jobs that gives everyone a fair chance for advancement (United Food and Commercial Workers 2001d).

Although this contract represents significant gains for ASE workers, interviews with immigrant Latino workers at ASE, as well as OTOC organizers, revealed that the contract left much to be desired. They suggested that the contract questionnaire and ultimately the union contract itself defined workers' issues too narrowly and assumed that the universal desires of all workers, including immigrant Latinos, were so-called bread-and-butter issues such as wages and working conditions. When in fact, there were a number of issues specific to the immigrant workers at the plant that could have been addressed in the contract. Workers and OTOC organizers suggested that in order to make unionization more appealing to the immigrant Latino workers, the UFCW could have incorporated contract language that dealt with specific concerns of these workers.

A number of progressive unions throughout the United States, which represent industries dependent on immigrant workers, have in fact incorporated such language into their contracts. Unions such as the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), along with several other AFL-CIO affiliates, have immigrant-specific language into their collective bargaining agreements. Such language includes provisions that guarantee that workers do not lose their seniority, compensation and/or benefits due to any changes in their names or social security numbers. These provisions protect immigrants who use false names and social security numbers before they receive their legal immigration status. Unions have also included provisions in their contracts to protect immigrant workers in the event of INS audits and/or raids, as well as provide legal assistance, citizenship preparation and English language training.

In addition, some contracts provide for extended leave policies, so that immigrants will not be terminated when they fail to return “on time” after visits to their native country to tend to their relatives or other responsibilities. An OTOC organizer observed that immigrant meatpacking workers with extended ties to relatives abroad would also benefit from such extended leave policies in their union contracts. For example, this organizer stated:

In order to confront the issue of back-and-forth migration among meatpacking workers who have extended families and responsibilities in their home countries, policies regarding the issue should be incorporated into union contracts. Such policies would be useful so that immigrant workers don't lose their pay, benefits, and seniority when they take leave, or in some cases quit, to return home for an extended period of time. Such policies would also benefit unions in at least two ways. First, unions wouldn't lose their members when they are fired for taking extended leave.

And second, by having such policies in their contracts, unions would be more appealing to immigrant workers (Interview June 25, 2001).

Some meatpacking employers in South Omaha such as Nebraska Beef and Greater Omaha Packing that are not unionized had such policies for their employees. For example, in the previously mentioned spiral-bound notebook that Nebraska Beef handed out to its employees, the company explains its policy as follows:

The company understands that employees may need extended time away from the company. An example of this would be employees visiting Mexico. The company understands the importance of these visits to employees and has implemented a flexible re-hire policy to accommodate these circumstances.

Some UFCW Locals also have included such immigrant-specific language. For instance, UFCW Local 428 in San Jose, California has a section entitled, "Rights of Immigrant Workers," in some of its contracts. It states:

(a) Should the INS or any other government agency contact the Employer regarding the work authorization status of any bargaining unit employee, the Employer shall notify the Union by the next business day.

(b) The Employer shall not reveal confidential information concerning employees to the INS or its agents, except as required by law. Confidential information includes employees' names, addresses, Social Security Numbers, or immigration status.

(c) The Employer shall grant up to seven days absence without pay with a minimum of seven days notice where possible and proper INS notification, for INS proceedings.

(d) The Employer shall comply with requests of workers to change their names and Social Security Numbers in the Employer's records with appropriate documentation, without prejudice to their seniority or other rights under this agreement.

(e) The Employer shall not request information or documents from employees or applicants for employment as to their work authorization or identity, except as required by law. The Employer shall not retain in its file

copies of the identity and work authorization documents presented by the employee.

(f) Nothing herein shall require the Employer to violate the law, abridge its legal responsibilities, or circumvent any ordinances or laws.

(g) The Employer shall not participate in any computer verification of immigration or work authorization status, except as required by law.

(h) If the Employer receives notice from any government agency other than the INS regarding employee work authorization or identification, the Employer may inform the affected employee(s) so that they may take action on an individual basis (The National Immigration Law Center 2004).

While the UFCW Local 271's contract questionnaire results suggested that ASE workers were mostly interested in improvements in their wages, pension benefits and medical coverage, immigrant-specific issues were not part of the questionnaire. As a result, it is difficult to say where these issues might have ranked among the workers' interests. Still, there is reason to believe that the results of the questionnaire are more representative of the interests of the first shift workers, whom often were native-born, long-term employees, than the second shift workers since the first shift was more likely to complete and return the questionnaire. Workers and organizers alike indicated that the second shift workers, most of whom were immigrant Latinos, were less involved in both the process of drafting and negotiating the contract. Only two of the six ASE workers I interviewed mentioned wages and pensions as important benefits of unionization. Both of them were native-born, long-term workers. They had worked at the plant since at least the early 1980s when it was unionized and therefore had experienced over two decades of declining real wages and were thinking about retirement.

Employer Offensive Ends in Union Defeat: The Election at Nebraska Beef

On August 16, 2001, just two weeks after the contract at ASE was ratified, the UFCW/OTOC campaign suffered a major setback when workers at the Nebraska Beef plant voted 452 to 345 against the union. The UFCW attributed this loss to the company's intense antiunion campaign and subsequently charged the company with numerous violations of federal labor law in its campaign (Reed 2002:3). In a petition filed August 22, 2001 with the NLRB's regional office, the UFCW listed 41 objections to the election and requested another election at the plant. Among these violations, according to the UFCW's petition, Nebraska Beef:

- Threatened employees by telling them the plant would close if they selected the union as their collective bargaining representative;
- Interrogated employees regarding their union sympathies;
- Created the impression of surveillance and conducted surveillance on its employees;
- Applied work rules in a discriminatory manner;
- Enforced its no-solicitation/no-distribution rule in a discriminatory manner;
- Threatened employees with stricter enforcement of work rules if they selected the union as their collective bargaining representative;
- Threatened employees with a change in working conditions if they selected the union as their collective bargaining representative;
- Threatened employees with overtime if they selected the union as their collective bargaining representative;
- Threatened employees with the loss of employment benefits if they selected the union as their collective bargaining representative;
- Threatened workers with immigration-related reprisals if they selected the union as their collective bargaining representative;
- Threatened employees with job loss if they supported the union;
- Discharged workers because of their union sympathies;
- Refused to hire employees sympathetic to the union;
- Promised employees benefits, including a bonus and a raise, if they voted against the union.
- Failed to provide the union with a list of eligible voters;

- Hired additional employees just before the election solely to increase the size of the bargaining unit and thus lessen the union's chances of success;
- Permitted supervisory and non-bargaining unit employees to vote in the election; and
- Allowed some employees to vote more than once.

The number of violations, later reduced to 32, became the basis of a six-day NLRB hearing held in mid-October 2001 at a federal courthouse in Omaha. (Taylor 2002). An NLRB administrative law judge, Francis Molenda, conducted the hearing in which 14 Nebraska Beef workers testified against the company (Reed 2002:3).

Nearly two months later, on December 20, 2001, Molenda sided with the UFCW on seven of the violations and tossed out the remaining 25 (Taylor 2002). He agreed with the union on the following allegations: 1) Nebraska Beef interrogated employees concerning their union sympathies; 2) the company enforced an overly broad rule against workers wearing pro-union stickers on their clothing, which caused substantial disruption in the workplace on the day before the election; 3) the company threatened employees with job losses if they selected the union as their collective bargaining representative; 4) the company threatened employees with the loss of employment benefits if they selected the union; 5) the company threatened employees with stricter enforcement of work rules if they selected the union; 6) the company threatened employees with a change in working conditions if they selected the union; and 7) Nebraska Beef failed to provide the union with an accurate list of eligible voters and their addresses (Taylor 2002). Moreover, Molenda recommended that a new election be organized (Reed 2002:3). As the UFCW explained in a press release dated January 10, 2002:

A Hearing Officer of the National Labor Relations Board recommended overturning the results from the August 16, 2001 vote in which workers faced a vicious anti-union campaign by company management....Nebraska Beef waged an aggressive program to intimidate, coerce and harass employees from standing up for a voice on the job. The Labor Board official cited the following actions as cause to overturn the results of the election: 1) Illegal interrogation of employees concerning their union sympathies; 2) Illegal threats of job losses or loss of benefits if workers selected the union as their collective bargaining representative; and 3) Illegal threats to change working conditions if they selected the union. Nebraska Beef workers will have the opportunity to hold another union election (United Food and Commercial Workers 2002).

The company subsequently appealed Molenda's ruling invalidating the results of the election and ordering a new one. As Reed (2002:3) explained, "The Company has filed 'exceptions' to the hearing officer's findings with the regional NLRB in Kansas City, asking the labor board to overturn the opinion." According to organizers, the workers at Nebraska Beef are still awaiting a final ruling by the NLRB (Interview December 22, 2003).

"We Won't Be Fooled Again": The Campaign Returns to Northern States

Shortly after losing the election at Nebraska Beef, the UFCW/OTOC campaign returned to ConAgra's Northern States plant, where it had lost an election 17 months earlier, when production workers rejected union representation 238 to 150. When asked why they returned to this plant rather than focusing on another South Omaha plant such as Greater Omaha Packing, both UFCW and OTOC organizers explained that it had been their intention all along to return to Northern States after waiting out the 12-month NLRA requirement. As previously mentioned, under the NLRA, unions must wait at least

twelve months after a NLRB election before filing for another election at the same plant.¹⁴ An OTOC organizer explained:

We had already planned to go back to the Northern States plant after the Nebraska Beef election when Northern States workers came to us [OTOC and the UFCW] wanting to reorganize their plant and wanting another union election. They realized that the company had fooled them during the last campaign at their plant and so they wanted another election. So, we decided to combine our organizing efforts among Nebraska Beef workers and Northern States workers. The strategy was to organize both plants at the same time. So, we made handbills for Nebraska Beef in which Northern States workers told how they were fooled by the company into believing they didn't need a union to improve conditions at their plant. Northern States workers helped us handbill and housecall Nebraska Beef workers. They also started coming to our meetings with Nebraska Beef workers. During these meetings the Northern States workers explained how the company fooled them and how they wanted another chance to vote for the union. By the time the election at Nebraska Beef was over with, we had already rebuilt our workers' committee at Northern States and had a sizable number of authorization cards signed at the plant (Interview January 22, 2004).

After losing the Nebraska Beef election and while awaiting the NLRB's final ruling on the union's objections to the election, the UFCW and OTOC once again concentrated their organizing efforts on the Northern States plant. As a result, by the end of March they had enough signed authorization cards to petition the NLRB for another election. On March 27, 2002, after the company once again denied the UFCW's request for voluntary recognition, the UFCW and OTOC held a rally outside the plant's main entrance to announce that they had filed a petition with the NLRB for another election.

¹⁴ An election may not be held in a bargaining unit where a valid election was held during the preceding 12-month period. However, the petition for a new representation election can be filed within the existing 12-month period. The date that starts the 12-month period is the date of the election (Diamond 1995:12).

Organizers claimed that this time, Northern States workers were easier to organize because they realized that they had been deceived by the company during the previous campaign. Workers' statements aired on an Omaha Spanish-language radio station, *La Maquina Musical 1420AM*, a week before the scheduled election revealed their sentiments this time:

- My name is Olga Espinoza. I have eight years working for ConAgra Beef in the kill floor. Workers from ConAgra will have an election this Friday. We will vote yes because the company will not fool us again. Enough with the false promises, enough with low wages, enough having co-workers injured! We value our work, let's make our vote count. Unity makes us strong – vote yes! (La Maquina Musical 1420AM April 29, 2002).
- My name is Ruben Sandoval and I have worked at ConAgra Beef for the past twenty years. We were fooled in the election. The company lowered the chain speed just before the election only to raise it up again after the votes were counted. We reorganized to get a union in our plant and make changes at work. We will have another election on May 3rd....We will succeed this time. Vote union yes! (La Maquina Musical 1420AM April 29, 2002).
- Hello, my name is Trinidad Arias. I have worked at ConAgra Beef for two years. We will vote yes for the union in our election. In the past election, the company organized a meeting where they made many promises and many people were fooled. We lost that election. The company didn't make good on their promises. This time we will not be fooled... (La Maquina Musical 1420AM April 29, 2002).

On May 3, 2002, production workers voted two to one, 252 to 126, in favor of union representation. This election brought the UFCW and OTOC their biggest victory since their collaborative campaign began in the summer of 2000. Approximately five and a half months later, on October 23, 2002, the production workers ratified their first-ever union contract. As the UFCW explained in a press release dated October 24, 2002:

The production workers overwhelmingly ratified a new two-year agreement that brings significant gains for the 500 workers and their families. The contract, ratified at meetings late last night, provides a real wage increase for workers that will improve their standard of living. The production workers will receive 35¢ an hour raise this year and 35¢ an hour more the following year. Both 2nd and 3rd shift workers will receive an additional 15¢ per hour premium. The first contract for the production workers lays the groundwork for the future – one where workers have a voice over important workplace issues. It provides:

- Affordable, quality health insurance for workers and their families.
- Retirement security through a 401(k) savings with a 3% employer match.
- Improved vacation pay.
- A Safety and Ergonomics Committee appointed and trained by the UFCW.
- Two pair of safety work boots per employee per year.
- ConAgra will contribute \$10,000 per year to the UFCW Multicultural Fund to help educate and assist workers in the community with language, safety and citizenship education.

The new ConAgra contract provides unprecedented protections against discrimination and abuse for new immigrant workers. Workers now have the opportunity to take up to 30 days unpaid leave of absences for situations that involve long-distance travel. UFCW Local 271 also won the right to provide additional orientation training for new hires and in-plant representatives (United Food and Commercial Workers 2002).

When questioned why the UFCW incorporated immigrant-specific language into this union contract and not the ASE (Cudahy) contract, an OTOC organizer explained:

We learned from our mistakes at Cudahy. Unlike Cudahy, there were Latinos elected to the contract negotiations committee at Northern States. Workers at Northern States were also much more involved in the contract negotiations than workers at Cudahy. Immediately after the UFCW won the election and before they had a chance to distribute their contract survey, Northern States workers began meeting amongst themselves to come up with a list of issues they wanted in their union contract....They organized themselves into two groups, one of kill floor workers and the other of production workers. In these two groups, they came up with a list of issues they wanted in their contract. Basically, leaders from each of these groups organized house meetings wherein they discussed what issues they wanted to see in their contract and then they organized larger meetings with their respective group of workers and discussed

these issues. Each group eventually came up with a list of issues. Then they organized a meeting with UFCW representatives from both the International and Local, OTOC representatives and organizers and Northern States workers. At the meeting, the leaders from each group presented their list of issues and then these issues were openly discussed. Workers eventually combined the two groups' lists into one list, which they turned over to the president of UFCW Local 271. She thanked them for their list and then gave them the union contract survey to supplement their list of issues. At the meeting workers also elected workers to represent them on the negotiations committee. They elected five production workers and two kill floor workers. These seven workers were later appointed to serve as union stewards (Interview January 22, 2004).

Perhaps also influencing the incorporation of immigrant-specific language into the union contract at Northern States was a grant the UFCW International Union received from the Office of Special Council for Immigration Related Unfair Employment Practices (OSC) and the subsequent training the UFCW Local staff members received regarding how to protect immigrant members through contract language. On October 23, 2000, the UFCW International Union received a \$95,000 grant from the OSC, which is affiliated with the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice. With the funds from the OSC, the UFCW developed an anti-discrimination training program. As explained in a UFCW press release, "The UFCW's new training program is designed to give immigrant workers and union staff members education and tools to reach out to protect themselves and other workers who are vulnerable to discrimination" (United Food and Commercial Workers 2000c). Moreover, it stated, "Immigrant meatpacking workers in Omaha, Nebraska will be a focal point of this program, with regional training conferences also being held in Dallas, Texas and Gainesville, Georgia." (United Food and Commercial Workers 2000c). At these regional training conferences, UFCW staff members received training on how to protect immigrant members through contract

language. Perhaps this program prompted UFCW Local 271 to incorporate immigrant-specific language into its contract at ConAgra's Northern States.

Regardless of why and how the immigrant-specific language actually was incorporated into this contract, the fact that such language exists suggests that the UFCW is beginning to acknowledge immigrant workers' need for special protection and assistance. Moreover, it suggests the ways in which the immigrant composition of the meatpacking workforce in South Omaha has reconfigured the language of contracts and expanded them beyond the narrow bread-and-butter issues of wages and working conditions to address the particular concerns of immigrant workers. Hopefully, these changes in union contractual provisions will carry over into changes in the union's organizational structure and practices, making the union more representative of, and appealing to, immigrant workers.

Conclusions

Since the UFCW/OTOC campaign began in June 2000, three new bargaining units from South Omaha's meatpacking plants have been added to the ranks of the UFCW Local 271.¹⁵ These three bargaining units include approximately 400 production workers and 50 maintenance workers at ConAgra's Northern States and 160 workers at Armour Swift-Eckrich. As a result, Local 271 gained hundreds of new union members and hundreds of meatpacking workers have gained the security and benefits that unionization provides. Based on both workers' and organizers' accounts, the success of

¹⁵ Subsequent to concluding my research, on September 23, 2003, the UFCW/OTOC campaign successfully unionized a group of 250, mostly immigrant workers, at Casa de Oro, which is a tortilla factory in South Omaha (Rottach 2003).

this campaign was predicated on OTOC's organizing efforts among the workers throughout the 1990s and OTOC's collaboration with the UFCW. As a UFCW organizer appointed to the South Omaha campaign by the International acknowledged, "This campaign would not have been successful without OTOC" (January 18, 2001).

In short, OTOC's grassroots organizing efforts among the meatpacking workers in South Omaha laid the foundation for a successful UFCW/OTOC campaign. OTOC had spent several years prior to the campaign building an organizational base among the workers and helping these workers form their own workers' committee. This committee played a vital role in engendering workers' support for the UFCW and ultimately the success of the UFCW/OTOC campaign. As explained by a UFCW organizer, "This campaign would never have happened if it wasn't for the hard work and determination of OTOC. They, along with the workers' committee they helped form, are the ones who are really responsible for this campaign" (Interview February 26, 2001).

The UFCW's organizing efforts among meatpacking workers in South Omaha were few and far between in the years prior to collaborating with OTOC. It was not until OTOC had built a substantial organizational base among these workers that the UFCW appeared in South Omaha. The UFCW arrived after OTOC made contact with a sizeable number of workers through one-on-ones and house meetings, and succeeded in establishing a workers' committee, which was in the process of forming a workers' association. A representative from the UFCW International explained the union's relative absence from South Omaha in the years preceding the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign as follows:

We have been in and out of the area trying to organize over the years, but not on the scale we are now. This campaign represents the single largest union effort to organize Omaha's packing plants since probably the 1980s....We have really never before put together the effort we have here now. Never before have we had the "person power" we have here now. Never before have we put together the resources we needed to organize Omaha's packing plants until this June (Interview January 18, 2001).

Another UFCW organizer claimed, "There has been a lot of apathy within the union when it comes to organizing meatpacking workers" (Interview February 13, 2001).

Moreover, he maintained that the UFCW, in fact, needed OTOC to organize the meatpacking workers in South Omaha (Interview February 13, 2001).

Nonetheless, there were complementary strengths that both organizations added to the campaign. The UFCW International, for example, committed extensive financial and legal resources to the campaign. It brought in ten AFL-CIO Union Summer Interns and over a dozen bilingual individuals from its SPUR program to work on the campaign. It also set up a "campaign headquarters" at a local hotel and leased office space in South Omaha for the campaign. Perhaps most important, the union offered the experience needed to ensure representation was achieved, contracts were signed, and improvements were made in wages and working conditions. Given OTOC's lack of familiarity with labor laws and collective bargaining, the UFCW's expertise regarding the NLRA and NLRB was indispensable during the course of the campaign. Essentially, OTOC was headed into uncharted waters when it began collaborating with the UFCW. However, given its roots in the community and emphasis on one-on-one contact, education, training and leadership building over an extended period of time, OTOC offered many workers a friendly, more familiar face than the UFCW. Whereas many of the meatpacking workers

considered UFCW organizers outsiders, they were very familiar with OTOC. Its organizers belonged to the same community and institutions as many of the meatpacking workers. As one of the organizers explained, “We...live in the same community, go to the same church, shop in the same stores and eat in the same restaurants” (Interview March 9, 2001). A few of the OTOC organizers even had worked in South Omaha meatpacking plants alongside the workers they were now helping to organize.

It is understandable why many Latino meatpacking workers would perceive the UFCW organizers as “outsiders,” given that the union’s organizing efforts were managed in a top-down manner by the International UFCW rather than Local 271. For the most part, the UFCW representatives and organizers assigned to the campaign were from outside the Omaha area. Meanwhile, the OTOC organizers working on the campaign were mostly from within the South Omaha community. Moreover, since UFCW Local 271 did not have its own organizing department or organizers, there were mostly International and Regional UFCW organizers working on the campaign. During the first year of the campaign alone, for example, at least seventeen different organizers and ten Union Summer interns, assisted the UFCW in its campaign. Meanwhile, OTOC had the same three immigrant Latino organizers.

Even with the resources the UFCW invested in the campaign, based on both workers’ and organizers’ accounts, it is very doubtful that it would have been successful without the help of OTOC and its organizers. Workers were not familiar with the UFCW like they were with OTOC. They trusted OTOC and its organizers, who spoke their language and belonged to their community. They welcomed OTOC organizers into their

homes and confided in them. For instance, one OTOC organizer described the way workers responded to OTOC organizers as opposed to UFCW organizers:

A couple of the union organizers went to this worker's house and when they arrived, they called her up on her telecom and introduced themselves. They asked the worker if they could come in and talk with her about the union. The worker told them to go away, that she was not interested in what they had to say. A couple of days later, I went back to this worker's house. When I called up to her and told her my name and that I was a community organizer, and was interested in talking with her, she let me right in (Interview June 11, 2001).

Clearly, OTOC helped establish the UFCW's credibility among meatpacking workers in South Omaha. The union needed this credibility in order to be successful. Overall, workers' accounts of why they supported unionization and/or the UFCW/OTOC campaign revealed that the majority of them were not familiar with the UFCW, but supported the union and the campaign because of OTOC and/or the Church.

Both organizers and workers explained that the number one obstacle they had to overcome during the campaign was opposition by the meatpacking employers to unionization. According to organizers and workers, every employer targeted by the campaign, including ConAgra's Northern States, Armour Swift-Eckrich (ASE) and Nebraska Beef, violated federal labor law in their efforts to resist unionization. However, organizers and workers alike explained that OTOC's member congregations, particularly Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, played a central role in helping workers, especially the immigrant Latino workers, overcome their fear of employer opposition. They observed that because the workers knew the Church was backing the organizing campaign, they were willing to participate in the campaign. As one OTOC organizer explained, the religious community's involvement in the campaign helped workers

overcome their fear of reprisals by their employers for supporting unionization (Interview May 7, 2001). As a worker herself stated, “Knowing the Church was behind us gave us the courage we needed to support the union” (Interview April 6, 2001).

Ultimately, the findings of this research suggest that the changing demographics of the meatpacking workforce in South Omaha has fostered changes within the UFCW. The fact that UFCW Local 271, for example, has begun incorporating immigrant-specific language into union contracts, indicates that the immigrant composition of the workforce has influenced the UFCW to address the particular needs and concerns of immigrant workers. Perhaps the changes that have occurred in union contractual language will lead to broader changes within the union, making it more representative of, and appealing to, immigrant meatpacking workers.

Chapter VI

Conclusions

***Si, Se Puede!:* Organizing the “Unorganizable”**

Milkman (2002:115) explains that the conventional wisdom is that immigrant workers are vulnerable, docile individuals who are intensely fearful of any confrontation with authority, who accept substandard wages and poor working conditions because their standard of comparison is drawn from their home countries, and who therefore are extremely unlikely to actively seek unionization. This case study, of the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign in South Omaha, challenges such “conventional wisdom.” It suggests that unionization among contemporary immigrant workers, specifically Latino immigrant meatpacking workers, depends less on their social characteristics and more on the organizational commitment and capacity of unions to organize them.

This study examined the following individual and group characteristics of immigrant workers suggested in the literature as affecting unionization: 1) legal status; 2) length of time residing in the United States and intended length of stay in the country; 3) social networks; 4) previous union experience; and 5) demographic characteristics such as nationality, gender and age. Analysis of in-depth interviews with a cross-section of 23 meatpacking workers, the majority (over 90 percent) of whom were Latino immigrants, suggests that regardless of any of these characteristics, Latino immigrant workers are highly receptive to unionization.

The legal vulnerability of undocumented workers is often cited as a significant barrier to unionization in industries such as meatpacking where a substantial portion of

the workforce is comprised of undocumented workers. It is generally assumed, in fact, some labor scholars and organizers argue that because of their vulnerability to deportation, undocumented workers have a negative impact on unionization. Delgado (1992:131) explains, “They [undocumented workers] are said to act as deterrents to unionization, since their fear of apprehension and deportation by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) purportedly forces them to tolerate very low wages, abusive treatment by supervisors, and poor working conditions.” This study suggests that regardless of their legal status, the majority of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in South Omaha supported unionization.

In addition, this study suggests that even those meatpacking workers who were relatively recent arrivals to the United States and/or viewed their migration to the country as temporary were receptive to unions. It also shows that the majority of immigrant Latino meatpacking workers in South Omaha have had little to no union experience prior to the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, yet this lack of experience did not affect their willingness to support unionization. Moreover, the findings of this study do not reveal differences in whether these workers supported unionization based on their nationality, gender or age. The fact that Latino immigrants belong to extensive social networks and live in ethnically concentrated areas, however, played a fundamental role in the success of the UFCW/OTOC campaign.

The results of this study are in line with those of Milkman (2002, 2000), Delgado (2000, 1993) and Zabin (2000), who suggest that Latino immigrants’ social networks facilitate unionization. Most of South Omaha’s meatpacking workers belong to extensive

social networks, which are based on their family, friendship and cultural ties, and these ties make the process of labor organizing easier. Organizers explained that these ties were fundamental in reaching meatpacking workers and recruiting them into the campaign. They explained, for example, how the workers' social networks were used to get information, handbills and authorization cards circulated and signed throughout the meatpacking plants and community. As one UFCW organizer explained, "At every level of this campaign, from handbilling to housecalling workers, to getting authorization cards signed and meetings organized, the workers' family and friendship ties have been essential" (Interview February 8, 2001). Similarly, an OTOC organizer stated:

Meatpacking workers in South Omaha are already highly organized based on their immigrant social networks. We just need to find leadership within these social networks and explain to these leaders the benefits of unionization and they will go back and talk to the rest of their friends and families. They will organize themselves (Interview March 17, 2001).

The findings of this study suggest that the ethnic and residential concentration of Latino immigrant meatpacking workers in South Omaha also facilitated unionization. The ethnic and residential concentration of these workers not only helps maintain and solidify their social networks, but also made the union's task of organizing the workers easier. Given that labor organizing requires visiting workers in their homes, the fact that they lived in an ethnically concentrated area made the task of these visits much easier and less time consuming. Moreover, organizers explained that this residential concentration made their efforts to locate and recruit additional workers into the campaign easier. As explained by a UFCW organizer:

During a typical organizing campaign, we will map out the plant and then identify workers on each line, in each department, etc. Once we've

identified these workers, we try and find out where they are living in order to do housecalls. This process can be very difficult. However, that has not been the case with meatpacking workers in South Omaha. It has been rather easy obtaining the names and addresses of workers for this campaign. Because most of the meatpacking workers live in the same neighborhoods, if you ask them to list other workers on their lines, in their departments, or working at their plants, not only can they tell you the names of additional workers, but they can also tell you where they are living. For the most part, they are concentrated in South Omaha neighborhoods (Interview January 18, 2001).

Another UFCW organizer explained:

The fact that many of these workers live in the same neighborhoods and even the same houses has made housecalling less difficult. For example, I had the address of a guy working at Nebraska Beef. When I arrived at his apartment I found four other meatpacking workers living there and several additional workers living in the same apartment complex. By the time I concluded my housecall, I had authorization cards signed by seven workers from three different plants. These workers also gave me the addresses of a handful more of meatpacking workers living in the neighborhood (Interview January 25, 2001).

In sum, organizers suggested that because of the meatpacking workers' extensive social networks and residential concentration, they were able to reach a majority of them relatively easily. Furthermore, this study suggests that the success of the UFCW/OTOC campaign had to some extent depended on the organizers' ability to tap into these social networks to mobilize workers and build support for their campaign. The fact that the majority of meatpacking workers are concentrated in South Omaha also means that many of them attend the same Catholic Church. In this study, 70 percent of the meatpacking workers that I interviewed were members and/or attended religious services on a regular basis at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, which played a pivotal role in the success of the UFCW/OTOC campaign. First, the church functions as a mechanism through which Latino immigrant social networks are built and maintained, which in turn facilitates the

process of unionization. Second, by actively participating in the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign, priests, nuns, and other clergy members provided support and lent legitimacy to the effort. Not only were clergy members outspoken in their support for the UFCW/OTOC campaign, but they also participated by: 1) writing letters and making phone calls to workers, employers and public officials; 2) visiting workers in their homes and/or assisting organizers with their housecalls and one-on-ones; 3) holding meetings with workers and their families, as well as other community members; and 4) dedicating masses, homilies and other religious services to the workers and their struggle to unionize.

Immigrant Latino meatpacking workers in South Omaha proved to be highly receptive to unionization, yet prior to OTOC's grassroots organizing efforts among these workers the UFCW showed relatively limited interest in organizing them. The initiative for this campaign came from OTOC and the meatpacking workers themselves, rather than the UFCW. In fact, OTOC and the workers' initial efforts were met with considerable skepticism by the UFCW. For example, an OTOC organizer explained that when he told a UFCW organizer about OTOC's organizing efforts among the workers and the organization's temporary workers' committee, his response was, "Those workers can't be organized" (Interview March 11, 2001). According to labor scholars such as Kim Moody, this is a fairly common response. Moody explains that help has not always been forthcoming from U.S. unions, whose leaders and members have often viewed new immigrants as 'unorganizable' (1997:166).

OTOC's grassroots organizing efforts among the meatpacking workers in South Omaha laid the foundation for the UFCW/OTOC campaign. OTOC spent several years prior to this campaign building a substantial organizational base among the workers and assisting them in forming their own workers' committee. It was not until OTOC had built this base and formed the workers' committee that the UFCW committed to the campaign. This is not to imply that the UFCW's commitment to the campaign was not essential to its overall success. The success of the campaign was predicated on OTOC's grassroots organizing efforts and the efforts of the meatpacking workers themselves, as well as a significant commitment on the part of the UFCW. The International, for example, provided extensive financial resources as well as legal expertise and assistance to the campaign. The union offered the resources, experience and expertise needed to ensure representation was achieved, contracts were signed, and improvements were made in wages and working conditions. Given OTOC's relatively limited familiarity with labor law and collective bargaining, the union's expertise in these areas was fundamental to the campaign's success. OTOC, on the other hand, engendered support for unionization in general, and the UFCW in particular, among South Omaha's meatpacking workers.

Whereas many of the meatpacking workers in South Omaha were not familiar with the UFCW, they were, however, familiar with OTOC which had established a presence in South Omaha's Latino community over the years and participated in a number of efforts aimed at addressing pressing issues in the community. For example, OTOC assisted the community in: 1) forming their own Latino Soccer League; 2)

improving the service provided by the local INS office; 3) calling attention to working conditions in the area's meatpacking plants by sponsoring a "One-Day Clinic" for meatpacking workers; and 4) pressuring public officials to establish a "Meatpacking Industry's Workers Bill of Rights."

OTOC's role in engendering trust in the union cannot be understated. Many meatpacking workers had considered the UFCW and its organizers as "outsiders." One reason meatpacking workers may have had this perception is due to the union's "top-down" approach to organizing, in that their organizing campaign in South Omaha was managed by the International UFCW rather than Local 271. For the most part, the UFCW organizers assigned to the campaign were from outside the Omaha area and were constantly in and out of the area. During the first year of the campaign alone, for example, at least seventeen different organizers and ten Union Summer interns assisted the UFCW in the campaign. Meanwhile, OTOC had the same three Latino immigrant organizers assigned to the campaign, all of whom were from the area. In fact, two of the three were residing in the same community as most of the Latino immigrant meatpacking workers. These two individuals also had experience working in the South Omaha meatpacking plants alongside the workers they were now organizing.

The fact that OTOC was an established institution in the Latino community and that its organizers were from the local community and had experience working in the industry cannot be overstated with respect to its relevance to the success of the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign. Based on both workers' and organizers' accounts, it was the credibility that OTOC built among the meatpacking workers that was the key

to the success of the organizing campaign. During interviews workers noted, for example, that they trusted OTOC organizers because they spoke their language and belonged to their community.

Clearly, the involvement of OTOC and its member congregations, especially Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church, in the organizing campaign engendered support among South Omaha meatpacking workers. OTOC and its member organizations and organizers helped establish the UFCW's credibility among these workers, which it greatly needed to be successful in this campaign. Regardless of the UFCW's commitment and determination to organize South Omaha's meatpacking workers, it is almost certain that a critical mass of these workers would never have been receptive to the union's organizing efforts without OTOC. Overall, workers' accounts of why they supported unionization and/or the UFCW/OTOC campaign revealed that most of them were not familiar with the UFCW, but participated in the campaign because of the trust they had in OTOC and/or the Church.¹⁶

The success of the UFCW/OTOC organizing campaign demonstrates that meatpacking workers, most of whom are Latino immigrants, are in fact organizable. It also demonstrates that the unionization of these workers depends less on their particular individual and group characteristics as immigrants and more on the union's commitment and capacity to organize them. This study suggests that in order to effectively organize

¹⁶ Readers should be aware that missing from this thesis is an in-depth critique of OTOC. Future research should consider the limitations of community-based organizations, and, more specifically, IAF-sponsored organizations, in producing long-lasting worker mobilization and political participation.

immigrant workers, unions must not only commit to organize them, but also must reach out to community-based organizations such as OTOC which have an established relationship with the workers.

In addition, this study suggests that the changing demographics of South Omaha's meatpacking workforce are fostering changes within the UFCW. For instance, UFCW Local 271 has begun incorporating immigrant-specific language into its meatpacking union contracts. This, to some extent, suggests that the union is responding to the concerns and needs of its new Latino immigrant members. However, it remains to be seen whether or not the union moves on to the next step, namely, transforming its internal organizational structure and practices as well as its leadership composition in such a way as to fully incorporate its new and growing Latino immigrant membership. In other words, it is uncertain whether or not the changes that have occurred in union contractual language will carry over to broader changes within the UFCW allowing it to more effectively reach out to and accommodate its newest members. In particular, the local union must find ways to adequately represent and service them. Most importantly, it must have staff members and plant stewards that are able to communicate with the workers. Thus, the union needs Spanish-speaking staff members and plant stewards. Otherwise, it is likely that OTOC will be left with the responsibility of servicing the union's members.

Finally, it remains to be seen whether or not the UFCW is able to sustain the initial achievements of this campaign and build a more durable and effective Local. In order to do so, unionization must be treated as an ongoing process that does not end with

the successful negotiation of union contracts. As Jennifer Gordon, the founder of the nationally recognized *Workplace Project* in New York, which organizes low-wage Latino immigrants, explains:

A contract is not a substitute for ongoing organizing. Too often unions operate on the philosophy that organizing is what you do until you get a contract, then you stop organizing and service the contract. That is a real waste of the leadership and energy that the initial campaign generates. Organizing is an ongoing process that should be happening all the time. (2001:89-90).

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Appendix. List of Omaha Together One Community Member Institutions

Asbury United Methodist	Pearl Memorial United Methodist
Augustana Lutheran	Pilgrim Baptist
Blessed Sacrament Catholic	Prince of Peace Baptist
Community Covenant	Resurrection Episcopal
Dietz United Methodist	Rockbrook United Methodist
Faith Westwood United Methodist	Sacred Heart Catholic
First United Methodist	St. Benedict the Moor Catholic
First Unitarian	St. Bernard Catholic
Gethsemane COGIC	St. Cecilia Cathedral Catholic
Greater New Hope Baptist	St. John (Creighton) Catholic
Heartland United Methodist, Bellevue	St. Leo Catholic
Highlander Neighborhood Association	St. Francis of Assisi Catholic
Holy Family Catholic	St. Margaret Mary Catholic
Holy Name Catholic	St. Paul United Methodist
King Solomon Baptist	St. Pius X Catholic
Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries	St. Richard Catholic
Maplewood United Methodist	St. Stanislaus Catholic
Mt. Nebo Baptist	St. Vincent de Paul Catholic
Old Zion Baptist	St. Wenceslaus Catholic
Omaha Friends Meeting	Second Unitarian
Omaha Latino Soccer League	Spirit of God AME Zion
Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic	Temple Israel

(Omaha Together One Community 2003)