

“I’ve reflected that King’s progression was from civil rights to economic rights, from voting rights to the Memphis sanitation workers and the Poor People’s Campaign. Our trajectory has been in the reverse direction, from economic and employment rights to civil rights and understanding how, systemically, those things all fit together.”

Gihan Perera, executive director of the Miami Workers Center

Miami Workers Center: Holistic Approach to Economic Justice

When organizers Gihan Perera and Tony Romano first launched the Miami Workers Center in 1999, they approached the task through their experiences as union organizers. Their goal was to help create a strategy and organizing center for low-wage workers and low-income communities in Miami-Dade County. They envisioned an organization that would forge deep roots and model democratic participation, leadership, and analysis from the ground up.

“We were talking about organizing workers in relationship to employment and employment issues,” Perera recalls. “We knew we didn’t have the level of resources and time to take on corporations. So we thought we’d innovatively tackle those issues from an entry point in the communities, rather than the workplaces.”

Along with a smattering of community organizations around the country, the Miami Workers Center determined that a natural intersection between workplace issues and community was the welfare-to-work initiative, which was pushing low-income welfare recipients into dead-end jobs paying poverty wages. In addition, state governmental involvement provided a point of leverage that could be utilized by organized citizenry, even given limited resources.

Based on this analysis, the Workers Center began to develop a base of welfare recipients to challenge denial of services and abuse within the welfare system and initiated Minority Families Fighting Against Wages (MFFAW) – a grassroots membership organization of and for current and former welfare recipients. The organizing focus was to demand the childcare, transportation, and health services that families could not possibly afford on their paltry welfare-to-work wages.

The effort resulted in: training for more than 200 welfare recipients on their legal rights in the welfare system; reinstating hundreds of families illegally cut off Medicaid by the welfare authority; and creating mechanisms for preventing future malpractice. The organization fought for childcare improvements, winning \$3 million in subsidies for low-income families. It also won a comprehensive grievance procedure for welfare recipients to contest denial of services and hold the local privatized entity accountable for service delivery.

“Our initial goal was to build a base and leadership among welfare recipients, with the long-term objective of tracking them through to their new workplaces in all the low-wage industries where they were being placed – security, childcare, telemarketing,” Perera relates.

“But by virtue of our engagement with the community, we realized there’s so much that’s defined by community relationships; we call them the social wage issues – housing, transportation, childcare, education. We started to understand how materially important those things were to workers’ lives.

“And because the work people were taking on was mostly temporary and part-time, the community was actually more stable than the workplace. The community was the anchor that jobs no longer are. And those issues could still be influenced by place-based policies and structures.”

That insight transformed the Center’s approach, making it more flexible about the issues to be addressed, and broadening the demands. By way of example, Perera notes the group’s unexpected involvement with housing issues.

Like urban areas across the nation, Miami was in the throes of massive gentrification. The city’s African American community had been displaced as early as the 1930s and then again in the 1960s, its economic infrastructure eviscerated and impoverished in the intervening decades. Now, under a federal Hope VI public housing and community redevelopment grant, the Miami-Dade Housing Authority (MDHA) was planning to raze the Liberty Square Housing Projects and Scott Carver Homes and replace them with townhouses and mixed housing – reducing the number of public housing units from 750 to 70 – a 90 percent drop!

“We were doing our welfare and childcare organizing with people in project housing. Now, in the name of urban revitalization, that housing was going to be torn down, and the community wiped out.

“We hadn’t realized that as many as 6000 people were going to be displaced,” Perera relates. “Our leadership forced us to take on the fight to stave off destruction and preserve the community. We realized that without a physical base, we’d have *no* base. The housing is the political space in which our folks are anchored – lose control over the land, lose your political power as well. That deep realization made us look at the whole thing more holistically.”

Perera notes that the low-income citizenry of New Orleans is now facing that selfsame situation; having lost its housing base, it stands to lose its community being and political voice as well. “If you look at what happened in the last few elections in Florida,” he observes, these neighborhoods have been bastions of progressive communities. Redistricting via redevelopment has a direct influence on political power – no geographical concentration leads to no social or political network.”

To deal with this challenge, MFFAW expanded its base beyond welfare recipients and welfare-to-work participants; it reconstituted itself as Low Income Families Fighting Together (LIFFT), and began to tackle the issues of displacement and public housing vacancies.

Community residents created an alternate proposal demanding that current project residents benefit from the HOPE VI revitalization process, and that the redevelopment include the same number of long-term equally affordable housing units within the neighborhood. In addition, the proposal sets the stage for broader visions of development, including: building a sustainable economic base for the community, preserving existing local small- and mid-scale businesses, and framing economic community development through the needs of community members themselves.

“Hope VI talks about revitalization, but it actually wipes out community,” explains Perera. “The ideology has poor people at fault. There’s a very heated regional fight against gentrification of through reinvesting in working class housing and infrastructure. It’s all about how to keep coherent blocs of working class people together.”

Now the Miami Workers Center is reaching out to organize in a Puerto Rican and a Dominican community as well. "It's taken us six years to reach this readiness, but now it's time to take the next step," Perera says. "We've been processing the transition with our members and what it means to the African American community that's been at the core of our work. And that's going to be tested over issues like resource allocation and language, as we put the organizing into practice. But we've done a lot of political work to prepare.

"And we are now wholly committed to employment and working class issues through community and rights, as an organic whole. Once you see organic whole, you see what we're up against, and what we have to do."