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# Just Hospitality: Wage Theft, Grassroots Labor Organizing, and Activist Research in Nashville, Tennessee

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Just Hospitality: Wage Theft, Grassroots Labor Organizing, and Activist Research in  
Nashville, Tennessee

by

Rachel A. Tyree

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## **DEDICATION**

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

The large, flowing yellow and red banners carrying the words “*justicia/justice*,” “*dignidad/dignity*,” and “*sueldos justos/fair wages*” have now become ubiquitous at any social justice gathering in Nashville. They belong to the members of Workers’ Dignity/Dignidad Obrera, Nashville’s only worker center. Founded in 2010, Workers’ Dignity has recovered to date over \$300,000 in stolen wages for workers who reside on the traditional margins of society: women, people of color, and members of a larger immigrant community whose economically beneficial and socially enriching presence is often met with fear and discrimination. Through strategic organizing and collective action, members of Workers’ Dignity have begun to address the injustice of worker exploitation on their own terms. This thesis investigates the broader effects of labor violations in the lives of low-wage immigrant workers in Nashville’s hospitality industry with the intent of bolstering the organizing efforts of Workers’ Dignity, and connecting their work, and the type of work happening in worker centers across the United States, to a wider audience in Nashville, among other worker centers, and perhaps even beyond, into the realm of academia.

### **Location and Background**

Nashville, Tennessee, has several well-known characteristics: a downtown full of honky-tonks and country music; several universities (giving it the nickname “the Athens of the South”); and huge servings of southern food and hospitality. As someone who calls this city home, I can

attest to these postcard descriptions; they can all be found there. Not far from these cultural institutions, however, are folks suffering just outside the glow of the neon lights. A shunned homeless population that greatly surpasses the number of Mission beds, historic Black neighborhoods sprouting high rise condos and new homes too expensive for families generations in the making to stay on their block, a growing immigrant community loved for its labor and discriminated against for its “culture” – this is also my home.

This city has a rich history, particularly that of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. Leaders such as Rev. James Lawson and Diane Nash organized sit-ins at segregated lunch counters, took to the streets in song and march, and started a decades long tradition of waging nonviolent struggle against injustice. Folks are still suffering, and fighting, and while the trifecta of race, class, and gender are still at work, the face of the South is always changing. The once well-known lines delineating White and Black areas of town are shifting with the arrival of a diverse group of immigrants from within and outside the United States seeking opportunity in a new South.

Nashville experienced growth in the refugee population near the end of the twentieth century, thanks in part to the federal government’s reliance on voluntary agencies such as Catholic Charities for resettlement services, with people seeking new homes from Somalia, Kurdistan and Iran just to name a few. However these populations were small, and, in conjunction with general growth Latino immigrants began arriving in large numbers, “encounter[ing] a city unprepared for them” (Winders 2013:140).

The 1990s following the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) brought new waves of immigration, particularly new Latin American migrants, to many Southern states creating “new destination” cities like Nashville. In her study of immigration and

Nashville's cultural geography, Jamie Winders points out the crucial difference between new destinations and the traditional gateway cities like New York or Los Angeles: new destinations like Nashville had no significant, recallable history to build on in terms of conceptualizing this new influx of immigrant settlement (2013:6-7). How to respond to a large-scale demographic change had not been outlined for Nashville policy-makers, city planners, or neighborhoods, and the responses were facilitated by necessity.

At the start of the new millennium, long-term Black and White residents, together with their new Latino neighbors, had to begin the process of figuring out what Nashville was going to look like from then on; rapid changes signaled that folks were going to be "living and working in places whose social and cultural meanings were suddenly up for grabs" (Winders 2013:5). The "composition and politics of its neighborhoods ... were transformed, [and] Nashville sat at a crossroad where immigrant settlement, urban transformation, and social belonging were inextricably linked" (Winders 2013:6).

Workers' Dignity is located in the immigrant-dense area of southeast Nashville, just off the busy thoroughfare Nolensville Road. Latin groceries and *carnicerías*, Kurdish bakeries, gas stations, check cashing providers, and car lots all fill the densely populated roadsides that lead north, straight into the heart of downtown Nashville. The Nolensville corridor was strategically chosen for the center because it is "a working-class community that is racially diverse and includes many Latino immigrants, and African and Middle Eastern refugees," which reflects the heterogeneity of low-wage workers and is easily accessible to members (Workers' Dignity n.d.). The surrounding Woodbine neighborhood is a topic of contention in Winders' study of how longtime residents and their new Latino/a immigrant neighbors negotiate the changing landscape of the city; once a predominantly working-class white neighborhood (my own father grew up in

nearby Crieve Hall, and our family has attended several memorials at the Woodbine Funeral parlor), Woodbine and other southeast Nashville neighborhoods have experienced perhaps the most dramatic demographic changes since the 1990s (2013:1-6). The current Hispanic population in Nashville, according to United States census data is approximately 10 percent, as it has remained since 2010 and the scope of Winders' detail of the city (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). However, in the Nolensville corridor and Woodbine area, the Hispanic population is more than double that of metro Nashville, at 21.3 percent in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Despite its true diversity and multiculturalism, in the imagination of Nashvillians, this area is (endearingly or snidely) referred to as our "Little Mexico" (Winders 2013:1; 6).

Alongside this demographic shift, in the new millennium Nashville became one of the country's newest "it" cities. Since 2000, sixteen *New York Times* online travel articles have been dedicated to Nashville (New York Times n.d.). Somehow the novelty of rhinestones and cowboy boots proved just ironic enough when people realized the city had a lot more to offer for young hipsters and big businesses. One such business is tourism. Nashville is the biggest draw in a state dedicated to boosting tourism. According to the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, in 2013 some 16.7 billion tourist dollars were spent in the state, 5 billion in Nashville alone, generating record-setting tax revenues promised to improve the lives of everyday Tennesseans (Tennessee Department of Tourist Development 2013). Unfortunately, being an "it" city does not translate into economic justice for all. A growing metropolitan area in a right-to-work state in the South has been coupled with a new influx of Latino laborers and a booming tourist industry – and created a perfect storm of growth and exploitation that many of the cities' low income families have been withstanding since. With some downtown Nashville hotel prices soaring to costs that best similar rooms in Manhattan, hospitality workers, like the Workers' Dignity

members I spoke with, would be lucky to see a paycheck the equivalent of the cost of a weekend stay in the hotels they clean everyday (Ferrier 2016).

## **The Problem of Wage Theft**

### Wages, Labor, and Exploitation Under the Capitalist Mode of Production

Before situating the problem of wage theft in the context of this study and Nashville, it is helpful to position this thesis within the framework of Marxist political economy, and define the relevant terms. Wages are easily taken for granted, as is the relationship between workers, their bosses, and the mediating means of production. Below is a brief introduction to a Marxist conception of wages, labor, and exploitation as understood within the capitalist mode of production, which will help to clarify the discussion of wage theft found throughout this thesis.

The wage is indicative of the capitalist mode of production and the role of the state in protecting the capital accumulation of the elite. Central to Marx's definition of the capitalist mode of production is the separation of workers (producers) from the means of production. Further, it is the ability of monetary wealth to purchase labor power in the form of wages, thus creating a separation of classes of people who represent those who are buyers and those who are sellers of labor (Wolf 1982:77-79). Laborers produce a surplus, or profit, for the buyers, meaning that their labor is habitually under-compensated; the concept of a fair day's pay is immediately thrown into question. The production of surplus value is what perpetuates the capitalist mode of production through expansion and increasing this surplus as much as possible is the key to capitalist growth. One major way that capitalists increase profits, as described by Eric Wolf, is to "keep wages low, or to reduce them to the lowest possible point that is biologically or socially feasible" (1982:78). How low a socially feasible wage is has changed over time, and state

regulations in the United States have come to determine the minimum in some semblance of the protection of workers' rights.

Men, women, and children of poor and immigrant families labored in factories, mills, and mines in the United States after the Industrial Revolution of the mid-1800s, often under harsh conditions, for long hours and little pay. Before substantial state protection, all workers were subject to unsafe working conditions that frequently took their lives. Workers in the United States, as part of a global labor movement, began to organize into unions, and through their struggle and wielding of collective power, negotiated improvements (see Dray 2010). Important results of the labor union struggles of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were safety regulations, reduction of child labor, and the state creation of a minimum wage, which can all be seen today in the U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division (WHD) and Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). Central to the issue of wage theft in the United States, in fact how wage theft came to be a point of leverage at all, was the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 (U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division 2011), which gives legal weight to the federal minimum wage and overtime pay.

### Wage Theft and Nashville

While Nashville possesses unique qualities as all localities do, it is a city not unlike many others in the South experiencing demographic changes due to immigration and growth, and a subsequent shift in the structure of the local economy. Like smoke leading to a fire, where there is prosperity in a capitalist system, there are workers holding up the façade from the bottom. One indicator of widespread worker exploitation in the United States is the labor violation known as wage theft, which permeates all sectors of low-wage labor (Theodore 2011; Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore, et al. 2009). A recent phenomenon in name alone, wage theft includes employer

failure to pay employees overtime or a minimum wage, or outright non-payment, for hours worked. Wage theft exemplifies the vulnerability of low-wage workers, who, in many situations, do not have access to clear means of redress when they are taken advantage of via inadequate, and illegal, (non-)compensation. Relatedly, wage theft has also become a tangible labor violation around which low-wage and immigrant workers are able to organize; Workers' Dignity, like many worker centers in the United States, situates wage recovery as a principal organizing focus.

There is no universal or legal definition of a low-wage worker; some scholars define this group as workers who make at or below a particular hourly wage, such as \$12 an hour (see Selmi 2009), those who make a certain percentage of the median income, or those whose income in relation to the local cost of living places them squarely below the federal poverty line (McKay 2015: 3). I choose to adhere to the latter definition, as it takes into account more factors than hourly wages alone. According to the recent *Hotels Shouldn't Hurt* report from Workers' Dignity, the average pay for a housekeeper in Nashville is \$8.36 an hour, and most do not receive overtime pay when they work more than 40 hours in a week (Workers' Dignity 2016: 4); for the purpose of this thesis, it is assumed that all hotel cleaning workers in Nashville fit into the low-wage worker category, however one chooses to define it.

Through the recovery of stolen wages, by public direct action or other means, low-wage and immigrant workers are drawing attention to the systemic nature of the labor violation and other injustices experienced in the workplace, as well as developing a rights discourse related to dignity and respect on the job. There is significant literature from a variety of disciplines, from legal scholarship to public health, on the widespread nature and economic impacts of wage theft as they relate to the individual worker and the broader context of regional and national economies (see Garrick 2014; Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore, et al 2009). There is less

anthropological representation, however, and less critical attention has been paid to the state-sanctioned reality of wages, and how a critique of wages can further not only anthropological conceptions of labor, but also the organizing efforts of vulnerable workers. Much like a worker center chipping away at a larger system of worker exploitation, the centrality of wage theft to this thesis is useful in orienting a larger investigation into the lived experiences of low-wage immigrant workers, as well as the potential for change, at the local level and beyond.

### **Research Questions**

The problem of wage theft provides entry to the broader inquiry of this thesis. In line with other studies that have both deconstructed wage theft as an economically-driven process that reflects social inequality and discrimination as well as a debilitating force in the lives of low-wage workers (Theodore 2011; The Workplace Violations Survey Project 2010; Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore et al 2009), my inquiry into wage theft sought to also assist in the processes taking place at Workers' Dignity to organize against this labor violation. Industries and workers in the South have not been the focus of large-scale wage theft studies (Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore et al 2009), so my starting point was with the workers that make up the membership base of Workers' Dignity. How does wage theft affect these workers and their families, including, but not limited to, economic hardship? How are these workers conceptualizing their situations?

Beyond the ripple effects of wage theft in the intimate lives of workers, I also sought to investigate how this problem is catalyzing workers to organize with Workers' Dignity and how, as a collective, Workers' Dignity is addressing wage theft and worker exploitation at the local level in Nashville. What are the theories of change and methods of organizing that drive movement building in small worker center like Workers' Dignity? What changes are taking

place because of their organizing efforts? What changes do workers wish to make but may not have the resources to accomplish as quickly or easily as they could?

This last iteration of my research question centered on change gives rise to the third tier of this thesis project; how can activist research, like that I chose to undertake with Workers' Dignity, bolster the efforts of labor justice organizations and aid in the social change-making coming out of worker centers? In the hopes to highlight the implications of academic partnerships with worker justice organizations for future social change, this thesis expands out from Workers' Dignity to include examples of other labor justice organizations across to United States. Learning and growing from labor history, however recent, is key to moving forward in a new labor movement – one in which intellectual and physical labor are able to coordinate against worker exploitation together, and the production of collective knowledge disrupts the systematic abuse at the point of production.

Together, these research questions are concerned with the experiences of low-wage immigrant workers in the South, their experiences with wage theft and organizing for change, and how academic collaboration with the theories generated out of grassroots efforts can potentially affect change in both academic and public spaces. The implications for anthropology, specifically applied and activist iterations of the discipline, are found in this collaborative approach to understanding social problems with the intent to address them alongside those groups of people who are most affected by them. Activist anthropology and applied and participatory approaches to research have long taken the knowledge that already exists within studied groups as valid and necessary to identifying the most pressing problems and developing possible solutions. This thesis contributes to the literature on activist anthropology, as well as the

multidisciplinary literature on Latino/a immigrant work in the United States South, worker centers, and the insidious and widespread problem of wage theft.

## **Literature Review**

### Latino/a Immigrant Labor in the U.S. South

There is extensive multidisciplinary literature about immigration and globalization in the United States South. Different from the traditional receiving cities and states like California, Texas, and New York, the South experienced a very rapid demographic change just before the turn of the twenty-first century: “by the 1990s, the South had the fastest growing Latino population in the United States” and states like Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina saw their “Hispanic” populations increase by threefold or more within the span of a decade (Striffler 2007: 676). Driven by economic growth and in the context of a significant increase in the general population of the South, the sharp increase in the Hispanic population between 1990 and 2000 affected all Southern states; North Carolina saw the largest growth with a 394 percent increase, while Tennessee saw its Hispanic population rise by 278 percent (Pew Hispanic Center 2005: ii). The change was even more significant in Metro Nashville-Davidson County, in which the Hispanic population grew by 482.1 percent (Pew Hispanic Center 2005: 26). This dramatic shift no doubt has had an impact on every aspect of life in the South, Nashville included, and social scientists in particular mirrored the phenomenon with publications on studies documenting the many ways the South was changing in the context of neoliberal globalization (Smith and Furuseth 2006; Peacock et al. 2005; Smith 2001; Murphy et al. 2001). Jamie Winders’ recent work in Nashville looks at this demographic shift through the lens of neighborhoods and schools, from the eyes of both native Nashvillians and new Latino/a immigrants and their families, recognizing a more dynamic social transformation (2013). The academic works I draw from are

inherently about immigrant labor, because labor is a central factor in immigration to this region and, thus, to the changing cultural landscape of the South.

The recent scholarship surrounding Latino/a immigrant labor in the South has taken different approaches, including discussions beyond the demographic changes on shop floors to the social and political consequences of immigration in a historically complex region of the United States. Analytical explorations of low-wage workforces with an increasing number of Latino/a immigrants have opened up discussions to include more intersectional structures and the complexities of U.S. labor. Several factors affect what type of work a person has, how much or how little they are paid for that work, and the power available to them to file complaints or seek redress from abusive employers; chief among these factors are a person's gender, ethnicity, race, and immigration status. Important examples considered in recent scholarship engage with the problematic history and present of race relations in the South and the negotiations of both native black and white residents and their new Latino/a neighbors who challenge a long-standing social dichotomy and system of white supremacy (Stuesse and Helton 2013; Marrow 2011; Smith 2001). Further, scholars have taken on specific industries, not unlike labor organizing, to deconstruct the processes of maintaining a vulnerable and renewable workforce and the ways corporations use race, class, and gender to do so (Stuesse 2016; Ribas 2015; Jayaraman 2013; Burnham and Theodore 2012; Striffler 2007). Latino/a immigrant labor in the United States South has garnered academic attention in the context of newness on multiple levels; the Nuevo South is globally connected and historically situated, contested and problematic, a site of economic growth and stagnant wages – all of which resembles the new landscape of United States labor organizing as well.

## Worker Organizing: Worker Centers

One very cold night in Middle Tennessee, I stood with several brave immigrant workers and their families as they heard the news that their long-fought union campaign within an abusive mattress factory was lost, union-busting tactics swaying the votes of many workers inside. While there was still hope for a next time, this failed union campaign was illustrative of a more widespread trend in unionizing efforts. While there is extensive literature surrounding anthropology and labor unions (see, for example, E. Paul Durrenberger 2007), some labor scholars have pointed out that the long-standing model of traditional union organizing under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRB) in the United States has become inefficient for many marginalized workers due to outdated election processes and amendments that favor employers over workers (Garrick 2014; Livengood 2013; Milkman 2011). In fact, research supports the fact that worker centers and other grassroots labor organizing efforts are “reshaping, rather than simply revitalizing, the U.S. labor movement” (Garrick 2014: 491). Labor struggles are not dead, but they are changing form. Ruth Milkman was right when she claimed “immigrant organizing and advocacy have infused the beleaguered U.S. labor movement with new energy, new tactics, and new ideas,” including “community-based worker centers” (2011: 295-299). Scholarship on these novel approaches suggests that worker-led, grassroots struggles that build power across the lines of race and class and gender (and even nation) and embrace new immigrant workers are key to a new labor movement in the United States and beyond.

Janice Fine’s seminal work chronicles 137 workers centers across the United States and the varied places they occupy, answering several questions about how they function, organize, and effect change (2006). This work is important to understanding the diversity of worker centers, as well as their combined power for structural change, which Livengood argues lies in

building the power to take political action beyond most centers' current capacities (2013). While it is true that worker centers face many of the same challenges posed by global capitalism as trade unions (Fine 2011), and their efforts are often focused on localized events (e.g., wage theft in the hospitality industry), worker centers are also working to “fill the void created by an ineffectual and disengaged state” (Fine 2011:45) – they are building movements.

Worker centers are hard to categorize because of their diversity in approach, size, and activities – some offer services ranging from English classes to health care, others legal clinics or immigration assistance – but Fine narrows down three important elements of worker centers: organizing, service provision, and advocacy (Fine 2006). Many worker centers are organized around particular industries, as needs arise from the surrounding environment. Others, like Workers' Dignity, are more issue based; workers from diverse low-wage industries work toward disrupting patterns of widespread labor violations through popular education, direct action, and building community networks. However, the Just Hospitality campaign, like other worker-led movements, arose out of necessity from the surrounding economic and political environment. Much like the efforts in construction in Austin, Texas (Torres et al. 2013), poultry processing in Mississippi (Stuesse 2016), restaurants in New York City and beyond (Jayaraman 2013; Sen and Mamdouh 2008), and drywall hangers in Los Angeles (Milkman and Wong 2000), Workers' Dignity's focus on the hospitality industry in Nashville reflects the abysmal working conditions in local area's most profitable industries.

Worker centers build power through unity, much like traditional trade unions, yet it is remarkable that they are often made up of particularly vulnerable subpopulations of low-wage workers, which speaks to the importance of the place worker centers fill in working-class and/or immigrant communities. The literature on worker centers shows that while many immigrant

workers who originally sought economic advancement in the United States found “themselves trapped at the bottom of the labor market” with several obstacles standing between them and a living wage and safe working conditions (Milkman 2011:297), these workers have taken their desire to make a decent living and brought it to the U.S. labor movement, in the form of community-based worker centers (Milkman 2011:299). These worker centers, like Workers’ Dignity, often focus on seeking redress from corrupt employers and changing public policy, but some scholars such as Janice Fine and Ruth Milkman argue that “they have achieved far more on the moral and discursive level, gaining extensive publicity for labor law violations and other problems affecting immigrants as well as other low-wage workers” (Milkman 2011:301; see also Fine 2011:47). It is this capacity for worker centers big and small to create a space in which workers can create real change within their own lives, change the hearts and minds of the broader community about low-wage and immigrant workers and the widespread existence of labor violations, and change the systems that support poor labor practices that sets them apart and makes them a valuable addition to the greater labor movement of the United States.

Anthropological inquiry has not taken the lead in turning focus on worker centers in the United States, which have garnered more attention from labor scholars and multi-disciplinary teams of social science and social justice-oriented researchers. However, there is significant room for anthropology to join the discussion. Activist anthropologist Angela Stuesse has written extensively on the implications of doing research with organized poultry workers in the South, what it means to align with diverse and contradictory groups under the umbrella of community and an organizational name, and how an activist approach to anthropology contributes to our understanding of neoliberal globalization, race, class, and gender (Stuesse 2016; 2015).

Anthropologist E. Paul Durrenberger has opened up new possibilities for the anthropological

study of organized labor (2007), while Leslie Gill has brought new light to understanding social movements on an international level, and what solidarity looks like within them (2009). By focusing on worker centers in particular, the anthropology of labor has the opportunity to investigate other social processes that lead vulnerable workers away from unions and toward grassroots social justice organizing and human rights discourse. Systemic forms of discrimination and exploitation, the international movement of capital and people, and the intimate relationships between people uniting in struggle are not unfamiliar in anthropological research; turning toward worker centers as a point of reference allows us to look deeper into not just the vulnerability of low-wage workers, but their power as well.

### Wage Theft

With the help of Workers' Dignity, I have outlined several of the labor violations that workers regularly encounter in low-wage work, inclusive of, but not particularly limited to the hospitality industry. These include safety violations, sexual and verbal harassment, physical abuse, racial discrimination, and wage and hour violations. These final offenses, wage and hour violations, are not just confined to immigrant work, or low-wage work, or new destination economies – they are rampant in U.S. labor. It is arguable that all wage and hour violations are in fact outright wage theft and they include, but are not limited to, subcontractor misclassification, unpaid overtime, stolen tips or wages, and minimum wage violations. Several labor and policy researchers recently conducted an unprecedented study on the violation of employment and labor laws within low-wage industries in the three largest cities in the United States: Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City (Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore et al 2009). The study revealed the dire need for future research concerning these violations, specifically research in other geographic locations, which they found to be widespread and somewhat industry specific

(2009:9). In 2008, 4,387 workers were surveyed for the *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers* report. Researchers found that 26 percent of those workers were not paid a legal minimum wage for the previous week's work, and 76 percent of those who worked overtime hours were not paid the full amount owed to them (2009:2). This suggests a social problem in need of extensive study including a broader base of cities like Nashville and other growing metropolitan areas.

Another report, titled *The Movement to End Wage Theft*, went beyond defining the widespread economic problem of wage theft which the *Broken Laws* study did so well, and began to identify the worker centers and community organizations involved in activities to redress stolen wages, change public policy, and increase labor law enforcement (Theodore 2011). Several organizations in cities and municipalities such as Miami-Dade County, New York City, Chicago, Austin, and Seattle were identified as the instigators of public policy changes, and the passage of local laws and ordinances against wage theft; further, the Movement report made the call for stronger enforcement on behalf of the U.S. Department of Labor and local authorities to truly eradicate wage theft (Theodore 2011). In Nashville, Workers' Dignity is at the precipice of generating change beyond redressing stolen wages, but, according to these studies, their work must be connected to a broader community that includes policy makers and labor unions to change a city.

Rebuilding our economy on the back of illegal working conditions is not only morally but also economically untenable. When unscrupulous employers break the law and drive down labor standards, they rob families of badly needed money to put food on the table. They rob communities of spending power. They rob state and local governments of vital tax revenues. And they rob the nation of the good jobs and workplace standards needed to compete in the global economy. (Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore et al 2009:9)

Studies on wage theft are often included in the more broad literature on worker centers, because it is a common central issue in grassroots labor organizing (Garrick 2014; Livengood 2013; Milkman 2011; Fine 2011; Fine 2006). However, the descriptive publications like the

Broken Laws and the Movement reports reveal a gap in the research and a need for more critical, ethnographic approaches to wage theft in order to fully grasp the breadth and severity of this labor phenomenon by connecting the lived experiences of low-wage workers to recommendations for systemic change (Theodore 2011; The Workplace Violations Survey Project 2010; Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore et al 2009).

Wage theft studies and reports have, however, touched on the important aspect of worker vulnerability as a determinant of labor violations due to an inability or fear of seeking legal recourse. Fussell elucidates that unauthorized Latino/a immigrant workers are particularly vulnerable to the “deportation threat dynamic,” which includes employer threats and intimidation as a means to deny workers the full amount of earnings they are due in favor of decreased labor costs and increased profits at the expense of workers’ well-being (2011:595). Related to the moral impact of worker centers, it cannot be ignored that while immigrant workers, authorized or unauthorized, are legally covered by labor laws, sometimes their “vulnerability under immigration law undermines their putative protection under employment and labor law” (Milkman 2011:306). This does give organizations like worker centers and immigrant labor advocacy groups something to work with, despite the problematic overlap of legality.

Widespread, systemic oppression of low-wage workers is nonetheless a legal and moral stain on U.S. labor, and wage theft has complex impacts on workers and communities. Future research is important to sustaining real change in U.S. labor, and starting at the local level can help create a bigger picture of worker oppression and policy implications on several levels.

This thesis sits squarely in the realm of activist anthropology, in solidarity with worker centers and social justice movements that start from the ground up, and hopes to contribute to the existing literature of activist anthropology and the anthropology of labor in the United States. By

building from the foundation of social science literature on Latino/a immigrant labor in the United States South, worker centers, and the labor violation known intimately by so many low-wage workers, this thesis is one example of the possibilities available to anthropological study in the United States. Long used to finding the global in the local, anthropological research can take on a more holistic view of grassroots labor organizing efforts, the people behind them, and alternatives to resolving social problems like wage theft.

### **How I Came to Workers' Dignity**

I was nervous the first time I prepared to march outside two Music Row hotels with workers and allies seeking justice for the unpaid labor of four employees, a little unsure of the effectiveness of direct action from my past experiences in social justice-oriented groups. The energy on that February day was infectious, though, and any trepidation soon dissolved into excitement, and more than a little righteous indignation. Housekeepers at these two hotels in the heart of Nashville, Tennessee, were making about \$50 a (ten to fourteen hour) day and had been denied breaks, threatening not only their own livelihood, but that of their families as well. Dozens of workers, community members, children, and faith leaders chanted over and over that they wanted justice – *ahora*. However, they did not get justice that day. It took a few more tries.

This action in 2013, which was the beginning of a long term public wage theft campaign on Music Row, was the first of many actions I would attend in support of Workers' Dignity<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time, Workers' Dignity was really picking up steam; between 2013 and 2016, I watched from the sidelines as the worker center that once started out of the trunks of cars in 2010 grew to represent hundreds of workers in Nashville, and began to have more room to address systemic social problems by “offering a space in the city for workers to organize for economic justice” (Workers' Dignity, n.d.).

Soon after, I was introduced to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a farmworker-led human rights organization based in Florida and Workers' Dignity's sister organization, through the Student/Farmworker Alliance (SFA) at Vanderbilt University. My position as a university student shaped the way that I came to Workers' Dignity (and the SFA/CIW), and these movements in turn influenced how I approached anthropology. While I had a longer history with efforts to fight homelessness in Nashville, it was the power of worker-led movements that allowed me to connect struggles and recognize the bigger picture of a global capitalist economy that oppresses in myriad ways. These two related movements have had an impact on how I see the world and social movements, and how I approach my academic endeavors in anthropology.

I have since volunteered in various ways at Workers' Dignity, from providing childcare during member meetings, cleaning and reorganizing the center, making art for actions, and supporting workers as they take the first steps to reclaiming their rights. I participated in exploratory research for the Just Hospitality campaign as an undergraduate, and, with this project, conducted research that sometimes looked more like organizing than anthropology. Throughout 2015, including my time spent in Nashville for fieldwork, I also served on the steering committee for the Student/Farmworker Alliance, often meeting with the local CIW support organization at Workers' Dignity. I have become more aware of my positionality and privilege as a working-class white woman from a union home, graduate student and U.S. citizen, through my involvement with Workers' Dignity and the CIW, and through their model have come to understand more deeply what it means to be an ally, an activist, and a scholar.

### **Thesis Outline**

How wage theft manifests in the lives of low-wage workers, how these same workers retaliate, and what the role of activist (academic) research can or cannot be in this milieu are the

principal research questions driving this thesis. The driving force for its development stems from my own involvement in labor justice movements, and a desire to utilize the tools of activist anthropology to the benefit of those movements. This thesis engages with the existing literature, from social science and beyond, surrounding Latino/a immigrant workers in the United States South, wage theft as a widespread labor violation and organizing focus, and the growing network of worker centers and labor justice organizations in the United States. By starting at the local level and moving outward, this thesis attempts to construct a more holistic analysis of labor violations and the various methods being used to eradicate them from low-wage work.

Beginning at the source, this thesis will first examine the effects wage theft and labor violations have had on low-wage cleaning workers who are affiliated with Workers' Dignity. Drawing on ethnographic data collected during my time as a volunteer at the worker center, and interviews conducted with cleaning workers, I argue that wage theft and labor violations have significant impacts beyond those that are felt economically. Wage theft is but one symptom of the exploitative and unjust working conditions experienced by these cleaning workers. By centering workers' experiences, the question of effects extends from the tangible inability to pay for basic necessities) to the less concrete affronts to workers' ability to work in an environment conducive to respect and dignity.

After situating wage theft and other labor violations within the broader context of unjust labor conditions and the systematic undervaluing of laborers, the point of focus turns toward the efforts to address these problems at the local level of Nashville and Middle Tennessee. Workers' Dignity is fighting worker exploitation through grassroots organizing, employing various methods and techniques to build a strong base of workers and their allies to hold employers accountable. They build strategic campaigns and help to implement policies to protect workers

after individual wage theft cases are resolved. The theories of change that have developed over time at Workers' Dignity are useful to understanding how grassroots labor organizing can circumvent the state mechanisms that often fail to protect workers and create change through worker-to-worker organizing and collective knowledge production.

Finally, using Workers' Dignity as a jumping off point, I address the ways that activist research is able to support organizing efforts by drawing on data collected through organizational research and interviews with labor justice organizations across the United States. This third prong of the thesis explores the different ways that Workers' Dignity and other worker centers approach research projects, what goals are in mind when these projects are undertaken, and possible implications for future partnerships between activist researchers and labor justice organizations. Whether campaign escalation, worker-to-worker outreach, or policy intervention is the motivation for undertaking collaborative research projects, activist scholars can be useful to organizational goals in various ways. The implications for future research and applied projects between activist researchers and social justice movements are important to consider for bridging the gap between scholarship and activism and envisioning equitable improvements to existing models.

The conclusion of this thesis summarizes the above research questions and related findings in relation to their significance for anthropology, activist research, and grassroots labor organizing. I hope to add to a more holistic view of labor violations like wage theft, that takes into account the effects on daily life, on the possibility of work with dignity, as well as the incorporation of a critique of capitalist state structures in order to envision possible alternative futures for workers and worker power. With an eye to future possibilities, the conclusion also examines areas for research that would move beyond and enhance what is presented here. These

include a more sustained focus on gendered labor dynamics and a turn to “studying up” that investigates relations of power at their source.

## **CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGIES AND ACTIVIST RESEARCH**

The research that I conducted alongside Workers' Dignity would not have been possible without having built relationships with the worker center prior to my graduate study. My involvement in the social justice community in Nashville, Tennessee, and elsewhere has influenced my goals as an applied anthropologist and did so for this research as well. By positioning myself as an applied anthropologist in the activist anthropology framework I was able to ask questions that were both enriching intellectually and strategically geared toward building organizing strength at Workers' Dignity. By centering this research on the theoretical and methodological standpoint of activist anthropology, including my position as a politically engaged researcher, it is my hope that the relevance of this contribution will be not only to the academic knowledge of worker centers and the impact of labor violations, but to my extended community of people working to support labor justice in the United States.

The politics, theory, and methodology of activist research were integral to my research design. Unlike other anthropological approaches, activist anthropology is openly aligned with people in struggle, and the research process, including knowledge production and dissemination, is carried out alongside those people. Often referred to as an engaged approach (Low and Merry 2010), activist anthropology follows the thought that scholarship need not only benefit other scholars, but that research can be useful in the lives of the people we study. While this sentiment is not exclusive to activist anthropology, it is an explicit cornerstone, which is not necessarily

universal to the wider discipline. Relevance and usefulness are also key to an applied approach to anthropology, which dovetails well within an activist framework. Activist anthropology is a form of decolonizing anthropology, because the once-extractive process of fieldwork becomes a reciprocal act of the scholar and power is mediated through collaboration as the types of knowledge valued expand away from academia. The possibility of supporting organizing efforts at Workers' Dignity by producing useful knowledge was the goal that inspired this thesis, and, in turn, to also contribute to the anthropological knowledge of the changing landscape of U.S. labor struggles, academia's role in supporting them, and future possibilities for grassroots social change.

Activist scholarship cannot be described thoroughly without operationalizing what activism means in this setting. Many would not distinguish activism from advocacy, but there are key differences between the two. Advocacy connotes working on behalf of someone, when they are unable or lack the resources or social capital to do so. Advocacy can be problematically conceptualized as giving voice to the voiceless. On the other hand, diverse groups of people, who together seek social, political, and/or economic change, and who are aligned by their mutual place in struggle, take on activism. I would argue that advocacy may be a part of activism, but they are not one and the same. For example, volunteers at Workers' Dignity are trained as *promotora/es* (translation: advocates) to assist workers starting new wage theft claims, but doing so as an act of accompaniment, not service, is strongly emphasized. For persons coming from the positionality of academia, choices to undertake both activism and advocacy "draw on a person's knowledge and commitments as an anthropologist, ... activism also builds on commitments as a citizen or as a human confronting the violations or suffering of other humans" (Low and Merry 2010: S211). Activism recognizes the voices of the oppressed and marginalized, and places them

front and center with a loudspeaker. As an activist, I work within a community of allies and affected workers toward the same goals because the idea of collective liberation informs our politics. Activist anthropology is not only a politically conscious approach, but a politically aligned one as well. Like several activist scholars who precede me, I came to anthropology having already cast my lot with the oppressed in my community and seeking tools to better understand my position in the struggle (Speed 2008; Vargas 2006). Understanding my own politicized position as an anthropologist and activist has become just as important as conceptualizing and aligning the theoretical and methodological frameworks I utilized throughout the research project.

Decolonizing efforts in social science have led to innovations in negotiating and mediating the inherent power imbalance of academic research. The idea of decolonizing anthropology addresses the longest-standing blemishes on the discipline: the complicit and sometimes supportive role of anthropological research in furthering the goals of colonial empires, and the ongoing and similar role of maintaining the dominance of Western elites (Gordon 1991:152). Decolonizing anthropology requires critical reflexivity on behalf of the discipline, an insistence and recognition that the past is still present in many societal frameworks and notions of governance, and a commitment to ethnography that destabilizes long-held power dynamics (Pels 1997: 178). A decolonized anthropology benefits us all, and just as those of us with the unearned privilege of light skin should also work to tear down racism, anthropologists should work to tear down a discipline that favors the oppressors over the oppressed (Smith 1998:96; Gordon 1991:153).

Charles Hale discusses the implications for activist scholarship and its theoretical contributions in the introduction to the edited volume *Engaging Contradictions*. In short,

specifically because activist scholars are in deeply committed, politically aligned positions before, during, and after the actual research process, this can create “privileged insight, analysis, and theoretical innovation that otherwise would be impossible to achieve” (2008: 20). Activist anthropology can offer the discipline unique insight into the broader structures those seeking social justice function within, as well as notions of identity, knowledge production, and disjuncture in new theoretical contributions (Hale 2008:20-21). Further, “academic and activist endeavors are never autonomous”; activist communities do not operate in a field devoid of their own theories and understandings, and engaged scholarship confronts the competing conceptualizations (Low and Merry 2010:S211). The theories of change generated through grassroots organizing at Workers’ Dignity also influenced this thesis.

As mentioned above, the methods of activist anthropology are central to an engaged research project. Activist scholars have a responsibility to the people they work with to conduct reliable research, and the methods serve to reach the combined goals of all research participants. Collaborative knowledge production, transparency on behalf of the researcher, and accountability to the community are all aspects of an activist anthropology methodology. Activist scholarship in the field of anthropology is often under more intense scrutiny than many other approaches, because of its refusal to attempt to replicate the role of the detached, scientific observer and its inclusion of non-scholars in the research process. Because of this opposition to the traditional concept of objective/positivist research, activist research must be clear and thorough in its intentions and methods, and go about redefining what is meant by objective. While objectivity still holds sway as a powerful concept and should not be underestimated by activist scholars (Hale 2008:11), I appreciate the sentiment expressed by João H. Costa Vargas as well: “Neutrality is impossible – or better still, neutrality may work for the maintenance of

privileges, but it does not work for all. Many forms of oppression, exclusion, and death continue to be perpetrated in the name of objectivity and detachment” (2006:19).

## **Research Methods**

The methods of activist and engaged research are often quite similar to the anthropological cornerstones of ethnographic research; extended periods of close contact with research “subjects” in a field site are supplemented with in-depth conversations, observations, and background research. There is, however, a definite commitment, present from the very beginning, which informs activist research projects and carries through from the methodology, to analysis and knowledge production, and on to the final product(s). The methods that I utilized to conduct research at Workers’ Dignity were not unlike other anthropological research methods; in fact, they were all quite typical: organizational and archival research, informal and formal interviews, and participant observation (modified slightly in the form of observant participation) grounded my ethnographic inquiry. However, as mentioned above, activist research requires a rigorous and transparent approach to methodology to which I have tried to adhere.

The bulk of the research took place during the summer of 2015, from May to late August, while some organizational interviews continued into the fall and winter. During these months I was living and working in Nashville, Tennessee, spending a majority of days at Workers’ Dignity participating in everyday organizing efforts and other research activities. What my research would look like and when it would take place was decided in dialogue with Workers’ Dignity; I committed to being a volunteer for 20 hours a week, during which time Workers’ Dignity needs took priority. Low and Merry describe this type of participation as “a low-key form of collaboration in which the researcher works with local organizations or social movements in carrying out their missions but does not lead them” (2010:209). The methods I

chose to facilitate the collection of data to answer my research questions were designed in part based on disciplinary and ethical standards, personal commitment and accountability, as well as the appropriateness of each method to merge well with the overall research design (see Table 1). As mentioned above, these methodological choices were not decided upon without some input from Workers' Dignity staff as well. While the research aspect of my time there was welcomed, it was unacceptable for my presence as a researcher to threaten the safety and trust of the center by making members or other workers feel as if they were "being studied."

### Observant Participation

As Didier Fassin states: "Fieldwork is everywhere" and instead of adhering to the anthropological standard of participant observation, I prefer the term "observant participation," which is characterized by my role as an engaged actor in the research setting, and recognizes that there is a unique learning opportunity available when the "boundaries between research and life" are blurred (2006:523). Observant participation was my primary research strategy, the one that guided and contextualized all other research methods. Like some other activist scholars, I chose this methodology to emphasize the participation component of the anthropological standby participant-observation due to my positionality as a politically engaged researcher (see Stuesse 2016 and Vargas 2006). By participating in the daily organizing efforts at Workers' Dignity a minimum of 20 hours each week during the summer of 2015, I gained a deeper understanding of how worker centers address widespread labor violations at the local level (as well as the inner workings of the day to day efforts at Workers' Dignity) and spaces to reflect on how academia fits into these movements.

My participation at the center this particular summer was often not unlike my past involvement; I carried out such tasks as providing childcare during meetings and events, making

flyers for “Defend Your Rights” trainings, placing phone calls to potential members and donors, organizing and logging worker intake forms, cleaning, and, more often than not in July, doing outreach in low-income neighborhoods. Academia, in this aspect of participation, didn’t really fit exactly. This could be seen as a drawback, but I chose to prioritize my close experience with Workers’ Dignity over my ability to take notes openly from a quiet corner during worker meetings. Instead, I made academia fit while I drove home at night recording fieldnotes using voice dictation on my phone, as I read about other worker centers in my downtime, and when I conducted interviews. Activist researchers have the opportunity to be beneficial in the immediate, mundane ways that are always needed at worker centers strapped for resources, while working to create collaborative knowledge that can be useful in the longer term as well.

Observant participation importantly allowed for informal interviews with workers, staff, and allies, relationship building, and a negotiation of power imbalances through collaboration and my reciprocal input of work at the center. Worker centers are often recognized for their public campaigns and direct actions, but it is in the mundane processes that power is built. Understanding the place that is Workers’ Dignity, the place it holds in the community (beyond my capacity as an ally and volunteer), would not have been possible without regular interaction within its walls.

This method of observant participation, true to anthropological form, provided ethnographic data to help answer all three of the research questions. Hearing workers’ stories during Thursday night meetings and on porches during outreach opened my eyes to the expansiveness of wage theft, and how often it is felt in the lives of low-wage workers. Such informal conversations, similar to scheduled interviews, were facilitated through regular organizing efforts at Worker’s Dignity – and these were the workers that crossed paths with

Workers' Dignity, not to mention the countless others in Nashville that organizers are trying to reach. Likewise, being at Workers' Dignity more regularly gave me better insight into the many ways that worker centers are combatting workplace abuses at the local level and how they build community to build power. Even with my past organizing experience, these strategies were not always apparent. My own participation provided regular opportunities to engage with my positionality as a volunteer and researcher, and how, if at all, I could benefit Workers' Dignity beyond my physical presence and availability.

### Interviews

Semi-structured, formal interviews (n=19) took place throughout the research project with three distinct populations: 1) members who, due to wage theft cases of their own, had a relationship with Workers' Dignity (and some of whom were active in the organizing efforts at the center); 2) close allies of Workers' Dignity; and 3) independent researchers/other worker center and/or community organization leaders. The first interviews with Workers' Dignity members and allies are discussed in this section; I discuss the organizational interviews later in the chapter. These interviews, and the data they produced, have helped to conceptualize the relationships between these varied and overlapping groups and Workers' Dignity, and, more importantly, shed light on all three of my research questions.

Interviews are a crucial ethnographic method, because, unlike the conversations that emerge from observant participation, they create intentional space to discuss the issues at hand, and allow research participants to explain their experiences in their own words. Likewise, it is through formal interviewing that patterns, contradictions, and narratives can emerge and connect to an audience in and outside academia. Interviews are personal events that require trust and willingness on behalf of those being interviewed; in activist research settings, building

relationships is prerequisite to interviewing people who are directly affected by the social problem under investigation. It is important to note, that by partnering with Workers' Dignity, I was afforded a privileged position to speak with many workers, a few of whom I had never met before.

Interview guides for all three groups were reviewed with Workers' Dignity members, not only for the sake of transparency, but also to ensure robustness and compatibility to work toward our collective goals. Interviews also worked to ground check and open up the data I collected during observant participation to more points of view than my own.

#### *Worker interviews (n=10)*

Due to their centrality to this project, and collaborative effort to conduct them, interviews with Workers' Dignity members (n=10) outnumbered those from other sample populations, making up half of the total interviews. This was in part intentional, because for this project to adhere to the tenets of activist scholarship, negotiate power imbalance, create new knowledge and add to the academic literature of worker oppression, the narrative responses of workers were to be heard more than others.

The worker interviews were facilitated by Workers' Dignity, and were approached as a joint effort. While I was interested in speaking with cleaning workers about their experience with wage theft and other labor violations, as well as their participation in the Just Hospitality campaign, the leadership at Workers' Dignity was, too; these interviews would generate data for my research project and internal Workers' Dignity organizing products at the same time. Thus, the interview protocols were influenced by their interest, and the first few translations were adapted through trial and error and collaborative reflection.

I conducted all worker interviews in Spanish with Cristina, an organizer at Workers' Dignity, mother of two, and cleaning worker herself. All but one interviewee were women with various degrees of attachment to Workers' Dignity and the Just Hospitality campaign, and were pre-selected by Workers' Dignity organizers as people they thought may be interested in speaking with us about their cleaning work and wage theft experiences. Cristina came to every interview as a representative of Workers' Dignity invested in their story, a familiar face, and as a native Spanish speaker, to protect workers from any misunderstanding or language barriers I may have unwittingly created had I been alone.

In order for workers to pursue a wage theft case beyond the initial Thursday night meeting, meaning, beyond learning about their rights and how to defend them at the workplace and speaking with a *promotor/a* about their situation, they are required to become members of Workers' Dignity. This creates a cycle of solidarity and accompaniment: workers who have been through the process of seeking redress for stolen wages or other violations, in turn, help other workers who come after them. Therefore, the members I spoke with during these interviews necessarily all had past involvement with Workers' Dignity. Potential members to interview were identified by Workers' Dignity organizers, who had built rapport with these women through past interactions during wage theft cases and public campaigns, and anticipated their willingness to participate. Cristina and I were given this list of people, along with contact information, and we methodically reached out to each of them via phone calls, sometimes snowballing these interactions to reach out to other workers they knew. Worker interviews were relatively short, consisting of eleven to thirteen open-ended questions and lasting anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour and a half, and often took place in workers' homes, as this was easiest to

accommodate their busy schedules. More than once, we spoke with women as they prepared various, delicious-smelling, forms of *masa* dough.

Workers' stories were important to answering research questions 1 and 2 because workers hold the answers to how labor violations and organizing at the worker center alike have impacted their lives and the lives of their families. By allowing workers to describe their experience in the work force, the labor violations and abuse they have encountered, and participation in organizing efforts at Workers' Dignity, these powerful stories connect living, breathing people to the more quantitative aspects of wage theft and widespread labor violations. The main focus of the worker interviews were questions concerning experiences with wage theft, current and past working conditions, abuses they had seen on the job, and their hopes for change.

When co-developing our interview protocol, organizers at Workers' Dignity were generally satisfied with those from my research design. I had, in fact, taken previous communication into account when choosing the questions that would guide our discussion. Aside from these, however, there were several optional questions that made it onto our shared list as potential examples to bring up from the Just Hospitality Cleaning Workers Bill of Rights. These particular questions usually came up in conjunction with a more substantial question concerning workers' hopes for change and were juxtaposed with conversations about workers' current experiences. Many of these optional, leading questions that backed up the original guides I provided were derived from issues that featured prominently within the Just Hospitality campaign: fair wages, medical insurance, paid leave and sick days, etc.

It was Cristina's presence, fluent Spanish, and previous interaction with these women that made the mood of the interviews more laidback and comfortable. Cristina and I shared the responsibility of asking questions, although Cristina was more adept at following up with the

points more relevant to the Just Hospitality campaign. While the interview process was spurred by my research, and my interview protocols were added to, rather than significantly edited, without her support and leadership (and tenacity) my access to these women would have decreased. The interviews were important to Workers' Dignity, and they became a priority for Cristina; her skill at convincing people to speak with us, and her demeanor when they did, was an expression of her dedication to the work, and often left me in a state of admiration.

The worker interviews also took on an unexpected quality due to this partnership, which I met with uncertainty at first. Despite our conversations after interviews, and my insistence that they not feel so structured but instead more conversant, Cristina and I ended up sticking fairly closely to the protocol, resulting in interviews that took on certain survey-like qualities. After my initial panic, I realized that this format worked much better for the women we were contacting, who were often hesitant to devote an hour or more of their busy schedules to us based on a vague description. Further, the analysis of these interviews took on a bit more structure than I expected, which helped significantly as I soon realized my Spanish would have been inadequate with purely conversant interviews; I was essentially provided with analysis roadmaps, and Workers' Dignity was provided with concise excerpts to clear questions.

#### *Ally interviews (n=3)*

Allies were identified by their past experience participating in research at Workers' Dignity. The three ally interviews I conducted were all with people who have taken some part in research activities at the center – essentially, the four of us combined make up the unofficial research committees Workers' Dignity has had over the last few years. These were the folks who had conducted interviews, facilitated university connections, and analyzed data in the past. Additionally, the allies I spoke with had extensive activist and organizing experience outside

their involvement with Workers' Dignity and could offer insight into how they envisioned the labor movement in the United States with regard to worker centers, as well as academic research in grassroots organizing settings.

Semi-structured interviews with Workers' Dignity allies focused on the collection of data surrounding organizing and research efforts at Workers' Dignity, which helped to supplement the answers to research questions 2 and 3. Question 2 asks how Workers' Dignity is addressing the problem of wage theft at the local level, which I found to be through the various strategies that fall under the umbrella of grassroots organizing to build worker power and a strong supportive community, and by speaking with allies about their roles and how their personal views of organizing have been influenced by Workers' Dignity I was able to ground check my own experiences and observations. Question 3 expands out, looking toward the potential role(s) of activist research in grassroots labor organizing settings, and these allies had not only participated in research efforts at Workers' Dignity, but also had outside experience with research and organizing as politically-engaged (former) students. Concerning the bridge between my localized research at Workers' Dignity and the vast, alternative side to the United States labor movement, the ally interviews helped to broaden my own interpretation and enrich my perspective.

While those who are not directly affected by wage theft and other labor violations cannot fully grasp the impacts they have, allies are an important element of the Workers' Dignity model and they hold important perspectives on grassroots labor organizing. The questions posed to this group were thus not the same as those asked of workers, but instead focused on the activities they have participated in at the worker center, and how these experiences have shaped their opinions on grassroots labor organizing in general.

These rich interviews provided not only insight into the ways that research has been carried out at Workers' Dignity, which helped to ground my findings at other worker centers, but how close allies are affected by their participation at Workers' Dignity as well. While these interviews were small in number, I was surprised by the candidness of my interviewees, who I also consider my friends, and learned much more than I could have imagined from their personal insight and analysis during these short, hour-long interviews. We talked across the kitchen table at my temporary residence near downtown Nashville, laughed, snacked, and discussed our experiences with an organization that, in differing ways, has influenced our understanding of grassroots movement building.

#### Organizational and Archival Research

As part of an effort to elaborate on the place of worker centers in the U.S. labor movement and how academic research might contribute to these grassroots organizations, I began organizational research in May 2015 through online scans and investigations into the archives and recent publications of worker centers who have incorporated research activities into their models (see, for example, Workers' Defense Project/Proyecto Defensa Laboral, Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United, and Domestic Workers United). Workers' Dignity had also voiced an interest in knowing more about other worker centers' research models and what they look like, which fit into my personal goals of understanding how academic research can or cannot meaningfully contribute to this aspect of labor in the United States.

This aspect of my research was an integral part of understanding Workers' Dignity and my own place in the labor movements I seek to be a part of, and the data collected through this method was necessary to answering research question 3 in particular. Looking beyond Workers' Dignity to other labor justice organizations helped to make connections and comparisons in the

ways worker centers are conceptualizing and creating research models, as well as the implications for activist research in these settings. My own experience at Workers' Dignity grounded these findings and helped me to better understand my own positioning at the center and the weight of my daily interactions. Further, by choosing a broader scope of experience to focus on, I was able to make inferences about the possibilities at worker centers of various capacities, not just those in similar size and function as Worker's Dignity. The initial responses to Question 3 have important implications beyond this research project, too, because they help to understand how activist research can (or cannot) be useful to labor struggles and worker centers.

Organizational and archival research included literature reviews and online scans of website content of over 40 worker justice organizations, which provided data on the various forms of research dissemination in these settings, as well as interviews (n=5) with leaders and researchers, which took place via phone calls in the field. The ongoing nature of this research method allowed me to focus the list of worker centers and independent researchers to contact, and the interviews (described below in the following subsection) were guided by my field experiences at Workers' Dignity.

#### *Organization interviews (n=5)*

The idea of conducting organizational research, including interviews, was initially sparked by Workers' Dignity, whose leadership was eager to learn from other worker centers and labor justice organizations. They provided me with themes they wanted addressed, such as how to negotiate funding, who carries out the research at these organizations (workers or expert allies), impact assessments of past projects, and what methods were found to be most useful, and these themes informed the semi-structured interview protocol that was developed. This organizational research as a whole took on a life of its own throughout the course of my research

project, eventually outgrowing my interest as a thesis topic and expanding into independent academic study in the spring of 2016. This interest became most apparent after my first interviews with researchers and representatives at worker justice organizations across the United States. While the world of social justice research and organizing is a somewhat hectic one, and I experienced some difficulty getting labor justice representatives on the phone despite enthusiastic interest, the interviews I did manage to conduct in the summer of 2015 were invaluable. As a comparative group, these interviews provided depth and contrast to my data collected at Workers' Dignity, and offered further insight into how academia might fit into the efforts of grassroots labor and community organizations, a question that has consumed my current academic and personal interests. These data from organizational interviews have become crucial to answering my third research question in particular.

### **Analysis and the Production of Knowledge**

Fieldnotes became a useful tool for not only gathering data during observant participation and interviews, but for documenting and analyzing data through the multiple forms available. DeWalt and DeWalt detail several different types of notes: jot/scratch notes, proper fieldnotes, methodological notes, diaries/journals, logs, and meta/analytic notes (2002). Throughout my fieldwork, I recorded jot/scratch notes whenever possible, especially in the process of observant participation, and more proper fieldnotes immediately after my time spent at Workers' Dignity. Often I would use the voice recognition software on my mobile phone to record my thoughts as I drove home from the worker center, which created notes that were particularly useful later on when those initial frustrations or joys were dulled with time and I continued my analysis from a more distant perspective. I also believe that speaking my initial fieldnotes, which in hindsight could be considered a running diary, allowed for a less restricted, and more present, form of

documentation. The process of writing (and speaking), detailing each day spent in the field, is its own form of ongoing analysis. Analytic notes in particular come from re-reading these daily writings and teasing out the inferences made, recognizing new questions to ask, and reflecting on the bigger picture; they are important steps to analyzing ethnographic data (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002).

Due to the nature of this project, a majority of the data I have collected are ethnographic, and the analysis of these data constituted an ongoing process both during and after fieldwork; ethnographic research does not happen in a linear fashion, but in a cyclical movement that encourages ongoing analysis and the development of new questions, and new analysis in turn (Spradley 1980: 28-29). Further, due to the activist orientation of this anthropological project, the analysis of my ethnographic data has also included significant critical reflexivity concerning my role as a researcher with prior relationships with Workers' Dignity. Tabling my own assumptions of what I understood Workers' Dignity to be was important to situate the knowledge I came to hold within a broader movement of grassroots labor organizing.

Most tangible were the interviews I conducted, which were indexed, selectively transcribed, and translated, and emergent themes were noted. A majority of transcription and translation took place after fieldwork was completed. One benefit of conducting the semi-structured interviews was that, for each sample group (workers, allies, and organizations), a particular and consistent theme informed the questions, which helped to compare and contrast responses.

## **Conclusion**

The methodology utilized over the course of this thesis research is reflective of my political alignment as an activist scholar and position within the discipline of anthropology. I

draw from the work of other activist anthropologists who advocate for rigorous methods, academic transparency, and personal accountability. While the methods herein are not on the surface radically different from ethnographic research cornerstones, the interviews, organizational and archival research, and observant participation were all chosen to fit within a research design that took into consideration the goals of Workers' Dignity alongside my own as a graduate student. The questions asked, like the methods employed to answer them, were generated from a shared desire to produce knowledge relevant to the grassroots, worker center model that is currently breathing new life into the United States labor movement.

**CHAPTER THREE:**  
**CLEAN JOBS, DIRTY BOSS: LABOR VIOLATIONS AND CLEANING WORKERS IN**  
**NASHVILLE**

Jessica's day starts before the sun rises. It is summer time, so the normal routine of waking her two children, preparing them breakfast and getting them ready for school is a little easier. Fortunate to have the support of her mother who lives nearby, she shuttles the kids to *abuela's* house, where they get to sleep in a bit while Jessica heads downtown to start her hotel cleaning shift at seven. On the way, she picks up two other co-workers who do not have vehicles. The schedules of cleaning workers like Jessica fluctuate, and today she can expect to leave between three-thirty and five-thirty in the afternoon. Jessica cleans a new luxury hotel room every thirty minutes, her supervisor seemingly ever-present to ensure her speed. Maybe today there will be more hotel guests staying than leaving; "check-out" rooms are left in disarray and are harder to polish in the short amount of time. When she leaves work, physically exhausted from the constant rush over the course of an eight-plus hour shift, she heads back to her mother's, picks up her children, and returns home in time to rest for a few brief moments before starting her second, unpaid, job – cooking dinner and other household tasks. She notes that, "the burden is not too heavy because we help each other out. My partner and my two kids, we all help out. We all take part of the work, but that doesn't mean it stops being tiring. It is still work." Her life is no doubt rewarding and full, but her day job could be better.

## **A Day in the Life of a Hospitality Cleaning Worker: *Trabajo Pesado***

Jessica's days are not unlike other cleaning workers I have spoken with throughout my involvement as a researcher and volunteer at Workers' Dignity. In fact, her available transportation with a car and the support of her mother close by was not typical; many cleaning workers rely on public transportation, so much so that Workers' Dignity organizers often target bus stops to conduct outreach for the Just Hospitality campaign, and childcare is a serious concern. Familial and community support is common, but more so in the form of spouses and co-workers, who themselves work long hours, sometimes experiencing wage theft as well, to contribute to their families' wellbeing.

When I ask workers what it is like to work in hotels, and how they like or dislike it, one word resounds all summer, so much so that I begin to take special notice when it is used: *pesado*. It surfaced in our very first interview with Mariela, and at first I was confused, not being used to this expression and wondering if I heard her wrong; but Cristina placed her hands on her own shoulders to gesture and say in her limited English, "You know – heavy." A friend and native Spanish speaker reiterated this, and told me that *pesado* can be physical as well as mental, and it relates to both the actual work and working conditions, including the effects of co-workers or supervisors. "*Bien, bien pesado,*" "*muy pesado,*" and other iterations came up frequently to describe cleaning work in interviews and Thursday night conversations. It did not take long for me to understand why; the actual tasks cleaning workers were performing were fine, even agreeable, it was the amount of work expected and the pressure to go quickly that made it draining and heavy.

Jessica described conditions under one particular manager she worked with at the downtown Sheraton: "It didn't matter if the room had three beds, if the bathroom was a mess, if

there was dust everywhere, you only had thirty minutes [to clean it] ... I think that is the worst kind of stress, because [supervisors] are continually pressuring you. The pressure makes it more difficult than the actual task of cleaning the room.” Mariela seconded this sentiment.

“[Supervisors] will ask you for a room and they want it now, then thirty minutes later another room. They are always wanting, wanting, wanting. What frustrates you even more is that the guests will sometimes leave you tips, but supervisors will take those. They are taking even the little that you are making.” It is important to note that this last detail about tips is yet another common manifestation of wage theft, although it is reported even less than other forms of the violation.

Cleaning work is physical, whole-body work, as anyone who has felt the sweat beads accumulate on brow and upper lip during a bout of spring cleaning can attest. Now, imagine not a breezy home but an endless hallway of rooms, all identical, all previously occupied by the abandon of knowing someone else would clean up. Imagine still, the presence of a supervisor over your shoulder, particularly interested in their wristwatch and its relationship to your every move. Cleaning workers like Jessica are subjected to unnecessary pressure and abusive working conditions in the interest of profit; supervisors pay them as little as possible for excessive amounts of work squeezed into the shortest windows of time, when hiring a few more workers instead would meet demand more fairly. Several cleaning workers described this pressure to work as fast as possible, sometimes cleaning twenty rooms a day, and supervisors uninterested in the state of those rooms, only that they be spotless within the small, allotted amount of time.

Race and ethnicity factor into the construction of *trabajo pesado* as well. Mariela, a working mother like Jessica, emphasized the discrimination she perceived as a Hispanic woman, specifically, for whom work was to be completed not only faster than her U.S.-born co-workers,

but perfectly as well. “I feel mistreated when they start harassing me about time, saying things like, ‘What are you doing in there? What is taking so long?’ My Hispanic co-workers and I have talked about this, that time is a big issue for us. If [another cleaning worker] is Hindu, Arabic, or American everything is fine, [supervisors] don’t say anything to them. For us (Latinas/Hispanic workers), things ‘take forever.’ When a cleaning worker is Latino, everything has to be done perfectly, and it has to be done really fast. It is not fair treatment.”

The daily lives of cleaning workers are thus marked by many encounters with power dynamics, social discrimination, and unfair working conditions; wage theft and other labor violations do not happen in a vacuum for them. The experience of wage theft is in turn influenced by these contextual factors, and I realized after speaking with workers that any analysis of the effects of wage theft on lived experience I could attempt would need to include the other labor violations, broadly construed, that threaten workers’ dignity and wellbeing.

### **Background: Approaching Wage Theft in Context**

This chapter focuses on research question 1, which is first for a reason; I seek to begin with the lived experience of the workers who have felt the blows of wage theft so as not to keep this widespread labor violation in the abstract, but to bring it down to earth. Understanding the ways in which labor violations such as wage theft affect the lives and wellbeing of cleaning workers and their families is an important starting point to recognize what grassroots labor organizations like Workers’ Dignity are fighting for. Labor violations, including wage theft, affect workers and their families economically and emotionally. Missed or inadequate paychecks cause workers to be unable to pay a variety of bills, or afford typical necessities such as groceries and transportation. Instances of wage theft compound workers’ vulnerability and the lack of

security found in their low-wage jobs. Finally, labor violations are an affront to workers' dignity, as evidenced by disrespectful working conditions and workers' desires for change.

Of all the things I had discussed with the leadership of Workers' Dignity prior to starting this research, they were most excited about the worker interviews we would conduct together. As a researcher, I knew the actual stories and perspectives of cleaning workers were the key to understanding everything else my project focused on, from organizing against labor violations to building potential for change. For the worker center, the interviews are key organizing tools, because much like anthropological efforts, organizers understand acutely that social problems are made tangible through the words of those most affected. We've got the statistics. Yet, while the sheer prevalence of labor violations can shock, these numbers are made human through the documentation of lived experience, and the relationships that emerge through one-on-one interactions form powerful bonds that support movement building. How are workers actually experiencing the epidemic of wage theft? What does the impact of wage theft and abusive working conditions look like from the perspective of workers, their families, and daily lives? By amassing these interviews from cleaning workers, their stories could be told to other workers through newsletters, and to policy makers, academics, and community leaders through white paper reports and conference papers. For obvious reasons, we wanted to start interviews as soon as possible.

I started volunteering at Workers' Dignity in early May 2015, and aside from the routine of Thursday night workshops and worker intakes, I spent the initial days with Cristina, doing outreach and house calls, making connections for future interviews. Our efforts were briefly put on hold throughout June due to medical reasons, but we hit the ground running when we came back together in July. July, my last full month in Nashville before returning to Florida and

graduate coursework, was a non-stop flurry of phone calls, rushing to last minute interviews scheduled moments before, and a lot of cancellations. Cleaning workers' schedules are barely accommodating for non-essential leisure activities, let alone hosting visitors from the worker center. Neither Cristina nor I was ever upset about a cancellation, that was life, but it did make for interesting days. Plans changed quickly, and Cristina and I never stopped trying to secure more interviews. It was obvious the goal meant a lot to her. Sometimes she would get off the phone at the worker center, look at me like a cheerleader ready to send pom-poms into the sky, fists to cheeks – “we got an interview, let's go!”

As I have tried to convey above, our challenges were not due to a lack of contacts with cleaning workers who had experienced wage theft; getting hold of them was the problem. We know that wage theft is happening everywhere in low-wage work, across lines of race, gender, and citizenship, yet beyond identifying the problem, things get harder (Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore, et al 2009). This immediately put the wage theft studies coming from other worker center-academic collaborations in a whole different light (see, for example, Schoenbach 2013; Workers Defense Project 2013; The Workplace Violations Survey Project 2010). While our passion and willingness was abundant, our capacity was not. Two people, working together or not at all in the case of Cristina and I, do not compare to a well-funded, larger scale project; worker centers often lack institutional and monetary resources. However, our consistent presence also lends a different element to the interviews with workers that a team would not, and I was pleased we met our goal.

While I approached this research with a strong interest in wage theft, particularly as it is central to organizing at Workers' Dignity, I came to understand workers' lived experience of wage theft as inseparable from other abusive experiences at work. Cleaning workers like Jessica

and Mariela who have felt the impacts of long-term wage theft connect this exploitation to *trabajo pesado* more broadly in the ways they describe wage theft in relation to other labor violations. Answering the questions that lead to wage theft – *Who is it happening to? What are their days like? What else is happening at their jobs to contribute to this widespread labor violation?* – became central to establishing context for how wage theft affects workers. In this chapter, I try to provide this context through small windows into the dynamic lives that are being affected by wage theft, because without a bigger picture, we can only address a singular part and not the whole. The discussion, introduced above with a typical day for Jessica, is thus centered on the question of how low-wage cleaning workers are experiencing wage theft and other labor violations, and the answers I found during my research. Labor violations affect the lives and wellbeing of workers and their families by creating unnecessary stress and tension that is physical, emotional, and economical. When these women take their work home, the weight follows them; when they are not bringing home an adequate paycheck or anything at all, it hurts more than the bank account.

### **Wages and the Economic Weight of Wage Theft**

Adhering to the federally-established amount, the minimum wage in Tennessee is \$7.25 an hour, and it is one of only five states in the United States that does not have its own minimum wage law (Department of Labor 2016). According to a 2014 report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Tennessee leads the nation in the percentage of people (7.4) working at or below the federal minimum wage; the industry that employs the most workers earning the minimum (19 percent) happens to be leisure and hospitality. Suffice it to say, it is not misguided to assume that most hotel cleaning workers in Nashville are not earning a living wage. One aspect of the Just Hospitality campaign at Workers' Dignity was to establish a collectively determined, fair, living

wage; while the number typically fluctuated between \$10 to \$15 dollars an hour depending on the meeting, it was clear that the wage most workers were earning was simply not enough.

For low-wage workers in the United States, instances of wage theft are economically devastating. Receiving paychecks that do not meet the minimum wage, or fail to accurately account for overtime pay are common forms of wage theft that cleaning workers experience and that regularly threaten their livelihood. When workers are denied outright compensation, times are even harder as they are forced to juggle even the most basic expenses: electricity, rent, groceries, and transportation to name a few. It is not surprising that wage theft has become a central organizing focus in the grassroots labor movement, something that workers and community allies alike are willing to stand up and fight against.

Ursula came into Workers' Dignity the first time by herself, after receiving a paycheck for only \$116 and missing three weeks' worth of stolen wages. "I went down to Workers' Dignity because I didn't want to accept the check. I went in alone, and they supported me. We worked really hard. *We worked really hard.* It was a six-month fight, but we got paid. I learned that everyone has rights, their human rights, and their worker rights. So even if we are here, as other people say, 'without papers,' we still have our rights and we have to protect them."

When I asked about how the wage theft itself affected her home life, her status as a single mother became particularly relevant. "It really affected me a lot. I was behind on my bills, on my car payment. [The wage theft] really put me behind. I was delayed on my rent, on my electricity, on my expenditures, even food. I had to slow down all my spending ... When you work in that job you're expecting to get paid every week. You're expecting that payment to come in. I live alone with my son. I pay rent alone. I pay my own expenses. I don't have any help."

Jessica, a partnered mother of two younger children, echoed Ursula, despite the differences in their home life. She laughed a bit when she was asked about wage theft, as if to say, how could it *not* affect us? “Sure, [wage theft] affects you a lot. Well, you don’t work for fun, you don’t work because you want to, you work because you need to, and because you have responsibilities. So not receiving the money that you were expecting for the work you have done, not receiving what you have earned, *and knowing that*, it throws off your economic balances at home.”

Workers’ Dignity, as part of the larger movement of grassroots labor justice organizations, places a strong emphasis on wage theft and accompanying workers seeking redress for this labor violation. It is tangible and direct, unlike other violations experienced by these same workers, such as verbal abuse and sexual harassment, which do not always leave an obvious trace. Further, wage theft violates the morally-charged capitalist ideal that a fair days’ work deserves a fair days’ pay and threatens what is understood as a basic right in the United States despite its falsehood. Wage theft is not the disease, however, it is only a symptom of a larger exploitative system that undervalues all workers, including low-wage and immigrant workers. Worker-members like those at Worker’ Dignity are not only addressing a labor violation when they fight for uncompensated labor, they are addressing the failure of the state to protect workers and uphold fair labor practices.

### **Beyond Wage Theft: Working Conditions and Hopes for Change**

Wage theft does not manifest as an isolated labor violation that happens to be prevalent across low-wage sectors of labor, although it may appear this way. The conditions that nurture the spread of wage theft are conducive to the exploitative nature of low-wage work and the undervaluation of low-wage and immigrant workers. This is found in the experiences of the

cleaning workers I interviewed with Cristina, who expressed in their hopes for change a clearer picture of the broader conditions of which wage theft is a part. What do workers want most?

Respect.

“On the good days, I wake up and take my kids to daycare, and [when I arrive to work] the supervisors have a pleasant attitude and greet you, they say thank you for being here. So it makes you happy to be there. Then there are days when they start pushing you. But in the mornings when I wake up, I wake up and I say, *thank you god for my life. It’s going to be a good day and things are going to go well. I’m going to fight.*”

The long days and heaviness of cleaning work described above is facilitated by daily micro-aggressions and verbal abuse from supervisors. For one worker Fátima, a boss that said “please” when giving a command instead of “*rápido, rápido!*” would be a huge improvement. Other workers point to an ever-present fear that dominates the workplace and makes immigrant workers in particular subject to mistreatment and pressure from higher-ups. “When they tell you that you are an immigrant, they instill fear in you. They tell you that you don’t have rights, that you don’t have a right to vote, a right to complain or ask for a fair salary. Because you don’t have papers. That’s the kind of fear they instill in us.” Ursula described a less overt affront to Hispanic workers’ dignity when talking about how many of her co-workers spent their lunch breaks. “We have a break, but we’re Hispanic so we are not used to a break. The majority of us who are Hispanics we don’t take our break because we want to get the job done. We wait until our thirty-minute lunch break [and then] we also take our fifteen-minute break [at the same time]. Why? Because there are so many of us, we have to make a line to warm up our lunch. Our time goes there, waiting in line to warm up our food.”

When asked about their hopes for change, or what they would like to be different at their next job, the cleaning workers Cristina and I interviewed all conceded that a fair salary would be ideal, but they also desired to be treated with respect and dignity. Wage theft was one of many

abuses that workers would like to see eradicated from their jobs. Relatedly, most workers adamantly expressed their hopes for change more so than their negative experiences with wage theft alone; cleaning workers wanted to spend less time at work and more time with their families (which would require an increase in their wages), adequate time to clean the “check-out” rooms, breaks and time to eat lunch, medical insurance, and the occasional word of encouragement for doing a good job.

The desire for a *living wage* is common to low-wage cleaning workers, especially so that they can take care of their families. When discussing her wage theft case, Mariela was concerned first with the threat to her family’s ability to afford daycare and school supplies before she even mentioned rent and bills. Ursula blames her low-wage jobs for her son’s chronic depression, and expressed a longing for all working mothers to be able to be with their children.

“If we had fair pay, we wouldn’t have to work two or three jobs. We would have one job, and we could spend time with our kids and take care of them. Some single mothers, they have two or three jobs. I have one child, he is a teenager, so he needs more attention. Where is he, who is he with? If I don’t have fair wages, I can’t be with him. And I don’t, I have to have two jobs to get by. I think that is why he’s depressed. My son falls into depression a lot because he is alone so much. This summer he has been staying by himself. He spends many hours, a lot of time alone ... We had a plan that he could get a part time job this summer, but he could not because he gets sad and depressed, and he gets sick. Instead, he is spending this summer with his psychiatrist ... What can I do? I can’t be with him.”

To be clear, the demands included in the Workers’ Dignity Cleaning Workers Bill of Rights are not outrageous, but reflective of standard expectations for full-time employment in the United States. The people fighting for Just Hospitality, like those behind other worker center campaigns in other industries, are fighting to make one thing certain: all work has dignity.

## **Conclusion**

The question of how wage theft affects workers and their families, then, does not have a simple answer, because wage theft does not take place independent of other labor violations and abuses. If there is any hope to reversing the prevalence of this labor violation in low-wage work, the entire acceptance of low-wage work as a category needs to be reevaluated. The livelihood of workers earning low-wages and the families they support is at best precarious, a stagnant federal minimum wage guarantees this, and wage theft only compounds their vulnerability. A living wage and protection from employer abuses is afforded to workers who are valued. Without cleaning workers, the tourist industry in Nashville would surely suffer, as would any industry that is supported by the labor of low-wage workers. The women that shared their experiences of wage theft with me have fought back, and are leading the way to better conditions. Workers' Dignity and other grassroots labor justice organizations, by addressing wage theft, are effectively challenging a system that undervalues workers and holding employers accountable for exploitative practices beyond inadequate pay.

**CHAPTER FOUR:**  
**WORKER-LED CHANGE IN NASHVILLE: CONFRONTING LABOR VIOLATIONS**  
**AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

About one hundred people are gathered outside today; it is sunny and warm, with the aroma of homemade paella, tamales, and soul food wafting through the breeze under the pavilion at the Catholic Church near Workers' Dignity. All of us are here to celebrate Workers' Dignity's fifth anniversary serving Nashville's low-wage and immigrant workers. I am selling the tickets and merchandise at a folding table near the entrance to the party, listening and dancing in place to the different bands that take the stage at the opposite end of the shelter. I came back to Nashville early from Florida just for this celebration, to re-enter into this community before starting my fieldwork. These parties, which are always full of art, music, food, fundraising, and even a little social justice education, represent the spirit and place that is Workers' Dignity. We are not here to picket or protest today, but to look back on all that this worker-led organization has accomplished, and where we will all help it go in the future. Still, here today are the same people that will turn up to lift their voices against the next hotel or boss that refuses to pay its workers: workers, allies, and their families, a diverse crowd of Nashvillians that Workers' Dignity has brought together in struggle to hold our city accountable to the low-wage workers that form the base of our economy.

As of this writing in 2016, Workers' Dignity surpassed six years in action fighting wage theft, and what a trail they have blazed. What once started out of the trunk of an organizer's car

in 2010 has now grown into three (and out of two) different locations, each move another victory, with the most recent location housing a brand new worker-led radio station, “*Radio Dignidad*,” fundraising for which, aside from Just Hospitality, was their major campaign for late 2015 and early 2016 (see, for example, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers’ “*Radio Conciencia*” for an existing model). Approximately \$300,000 in stolen wages has been recovered to workers in the six years between 2010 and 2016, many of those dollars coming from hotels via Just Hospitality; all the while the landscape of organizing in Nashville has been changed by the presence of Workers’ Dignity.

This chapter focuses on the ways that Workers’ Dignity is addressing the problem of wage theft and other labor violations at the local level in Nashville and Middle Tennessee – through the grassroots organizing methods of outreach, education and leadership development, and action. Wage theft and unjust working conditions are now under threat in this area, as, similar to other worker centers in the United States, Workers’ Dignity participates in a moral and rights-based discourse within the broader Nashville community, centering the voices of low-wage workers in the process, which works to hold businesses accountable.

### **Protecting Workers: State Mechanisms and Worker Centers**

We recognize that the root cause of social problems is that the people directly affected by the problem lack the power to effect real, lasting changes. The solution then, is to build power with the people directly affected by the issues. The *experts* on the issue are those who, by virtue of their lived experience, *are directly affected* by the issue – they are the ones best situated to “speak truth to power.” - Workers’ Dignity, Organizer Training Manual

There is a myth in the United States, deeply embedded in the national psyche, which persists despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary; that is, if a person works hard enough, they will succeed. The United States is the land of opportunity, and failure to make a living is attached to individual failure and lack of integrity, not a system that actively creates poverty.

This myth persists because, at the heart of the dogma, wages are assumed to be fair compensation for labor, that an even exchange takes place when a worker receives a pre-determined amount of money for each hour worked. Even those groups of people working toward economic justice take for granted the wage system, myself included, in hopes that improvements to this system will lessen the blows felt by the marginalized classes and afford people more opportunity to live comfortably. This is due largely in part because to survive in a capitalist economy like that of the United States, people are dependent on wages. What happens when these wages are not paid? One particular labor violation has, in the past two decades especially, emerged as a leverage point for low-wage workers to address a larger unjust system: wage theft.

Wage theft is frequently experienced by workers in low-wage industries in the United States and it takes various forms, all of which function to further exploit workers already making poverty wages, many of whom also embody other forms of marginalization through race and citizenship. Because of this, wage theft is also a major focal point for grassroots labor organizing, particularly worker centers like Workers' Dignity. Through the recovery of stolen wages, by public direct action or other means, low-wage and immigrant workers are drawing attention to the systemic nature of the labor violation and other injustices experienced in the workplace, as well as developing a rights discourse related to dignity and respect on the job. But if wage theft is against the law, why is it the focus of grassroots labor organizing and not the state? The state, for one, has proven again and again that it is ineffectual when it comes to protecting low-wage and immigrant workers.

Technically, there are laws in place to protect workers, yet fewer and fewer people assigned by the U.S. Department of Labor to actually investigate workplaces and enforce them

(Theodore 2011: 7). In recent decades the state has continually seen a decline in its ability to enforce labor laws: between “1980 and 2007, the number of inspectors enforcing federal minimum wage and overtime laws declined by 31 percent, even as the labor force grew by 52 percent;” relatedly, working conditions have become more precarious as the budget of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has dwindled, and “at its current staffing and inspection levels, it would take the agency 133 years to inspect each workplace just once” (Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore et al 2009: 52). A quick look at the Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division (WHD) website, which enforces the Fair Labor Standards Act<sup>2</sup> (FLSA; minimum wage and overtime protections), seems to boast a growing recognition of the plight of low-wage workers; according to WHD, since 2009 the agency has recovered over \$1.6 billion in back (i.e., stolen) wages for workers (U.S. Department of Labor 2016b).

A closer look at the fiscal year 2015 reports shows that there were 981 cases in the hotel industry alone, 563 cases in the janitorial services sector (U.S. Department of Labor 2016a). Nearly 11,000 cleaning and custodial workers is no small number, and neither is \$7.1 million worth of case settlements, however, these WHD statistics may also point to the gap that over 200 worker centers in the United States are still filling. For each of these reported hotel and janitorial cases, an average of 7 workers and considerable amounts of money were involved (U.S.

Department of Labor 2016a). Presumably, the WHD cases are the most obvious infractions, the

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<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out, however, that the central reasoning behind the passage of the FLSA was to eliminate “labor conditions detrimental to the maintenance of the minimum standard of living necessary for health, efficiency, and general well-being of workers” precisely because these conditions, among other things, lead to “labor disputes burdening and obstructing commerce and the free flow of goods in commerce” (U.S. Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division 2011). The state protects workers just enough, but never at the expense of capital. Marx addresses how the type of bureaucracy found within the Department of Labor functions to protect the ruling capitalist classes and private property (Tucker 1978:23-25). Therefore, contemporary labor justice struggles are met with a contradiction: to fight for a state sanctioned wage, or the improvement to one thereof, is to also legitimize state power.

larger cases that can be prosecuted legally. What about the individual cases, the undocumented single mothers like Ursula, or those whose cases total much smaller sums of money? These are the people who fall outside the scope of many societal protections and safety nets, FLSA included, and these are the workers that will never be turned away by Workers' Dignity.

While the general lack of capacity for consistent enforcement in the first place has been shown, the Wage and Hour Division is set up to take and address complaints from workers. The information needed to file a complaint with the Wage and Hour Division is even the same as the basics gathered at Workers' Dignity every Thursday night. So why are so many workers not utilizing these state mechanisms? After all, there are many local offices and even the reassurance that "WHD is committed to ensuring that workers in this country are paid properly and for all the hours they work, regardless of immigration status" (U.S. Department of Labor 2016c). Further, a worker looking into her options on this website will find that her complaint will be confidential, and that no employer retaliation is tolerated. Spanish versions of "Fact Sheets" are available (as well as many other languages) and it is free to file a complaint, as is the investigation.

There are significant barriers preventing workers from seeking assistance from the Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division for wage theft cases, despite the seeming ease and protection afforded all workers, and despite a better recognition that wage theft is a widespread problem in the United States. These barriers include the misclassification of workers as independent contractors, which removes their eligibility to file a complaint under the Fair Labor Standards Act, lack of resources to pursue claims beyond the initial investigation, and a less concrete but just as tangible fear and/or mistrust of the United States government.

Not all workers can easily prove that they are employees in the eyes of the law; if a worker does not fall under the protection of the Fair Labor Standards Act as an employee, the

Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division will not pursue a complaint (U.S. Department of Labor 2016c). Low-wage workers are frequently misclassified as independent contractors when they are in fact employees, an action that removes liability from bosses to pay a minimum wage or withhold taxes and works to leave workers with minimal protection. Relatedly, some low-wage workers are paid in cash and have little proof that attaches them to their employer. These situations are common at Workers' Dignity, but they do not stop allies from accompanying workers seeking their stolen wages.

If a worker does meet the requirements to file a complaint for free, they may lack the resources to pursue it through the end. While litigation is not always necessary to recovering stolen wages, it is a possible line of action outlined by the Department of Labor (U.S. Department of Labor 2016c). Even the thought of hiring a lawyer can deter workers with little savings or fear of scrutiny. Plenty of worker centers have legal teams or provide legal assistance through workshops or free legal clinics, yet going to court for wage theft is avoided by the worker centers I included in my research.

Finally, fear of the United States government, or its representatives, is a very real factor in the everyday lived experiences of many low-wage workers. Whether that be a fear of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) due to an undocumented status, a fear of law enforcement due to criminal history, a mistrust of government entities due to discrimination, or any combination of these and many more factors, workers do not always have good reason to seek out and invite the Department of Labor into their lives.

What is key to the Workers' Dignity model, and to other worker centers that represent memberships that include low-wage immigrant workers, is that while a legal infraction (wage theft) against a state structure (FLSA) is the leverage point for organizing, Workers' Dignity

does not utilize the legal system to seek redress for stolen wages because the state mechanisms in place to protect workers are not always adequate. Workers' Dignity organizes the way it does because they have seen positive, tangible results come from their strategies, and organizing, as opposed to service provision, builds worker power among the most marginalized.

Operating on an alternate parallel with labor unions, which unlike many low-wage and immigrant workers, have collective bargaining rights and contracts, worker center members come "together to set and enforce their own minimum labour standards" outside the confines of traditional unionization (Avendaño and Hiatt 2012: 68; See also: Milkman and Ott 2014: 4). Further, through grassroots organizing, Workers' Dignity has developed a large network of members and allies who stand in solidarity when workers are exploited beyond their limits, and their health and well being is under attack by bosses who recognize their vulnerability both in and outside the labor force, something that Avendaño and Hiatt claim is key to building a new labor movement in the United States (2012: 70).

### **Theories of Change: Grassroots Organizing Strategy**

The internal structure of Workers' Dignity is reflective of the organization's mission and goals, and vision for a possible future. It is worker-led, democratic, and justice-oriented. The steering committee, two-thirds of which always consists of low-wage worker members, is the main decision-making body of Workers' Dignity and is elected by the general membership. "Members are those who are directly affected by wage theft; allies are those who are not directly affected by it but are actively involved in supporting the members to end wage theft" (Workers' Dignity 2016). A new steering committee is elected every six months, ensuring that the organization is always growing and shifting with the needs of the membership and current campaigns, as well as opening opportunity for new leaders to emerge, and others to step down

when needed. Workers' Dignity, like many workers centers, is *for workers and by workers*. This means that the membership is the driving force for the worker center and ally steering committee members have a voice, but they do not have a vote. Organizing staff hold down the fort on a daily basis, conduct extensive outreach and leadership development, and help plan and implement strategies to carry out the goals of the membership.

The vision of the Worker's Dignity leadership in terms of affecting social change is grounded in a long-haul approach to organizing, in contrast to other service and advocacy models. There is a slow revolution that is taking place at worker centers across the country, which starts with the simple act of actually "getting out there" and talking to workers. It is one that builds on the knowledge of workers, and creates new understandings of problems and possible solutions. It is a revolution that builds relationships and leaders, and connects across many boundaries.

### Outreach

It is a straightforward line of reasoning: if you do not physically meet and talk with people, membership is never going to grow, workers will not know there is an organization fighting for their rights and improvements in their workplaces, wage theft will not come to light, and change will not happen. Getting out there was, and is, central to the Workers' Dignity model of base building, much like many other labor justice organizations and unions. I encountered this logic shortly before getting out there myself, alongside a fellow long-time volunteer and a new organizer during our outreach training at Workers' Dignity in June 2015. An amalgamation of trade union methods (e.g., house calling) and experiential knowledge, the Workers' Dignity approach to outreach rested on the idea that small victories lead to big change.

During one training session at the center, we made a map that, to the anthropologist in me, looked vaguely similar to a world systems theory core/periphery model (see Wallerstein 2004). The outside rings included workers who were unaware of Workers' Dignity; moving inward, the rings included potential members, members, active members, and leaders – each a subset of the outer category. This was a leadership map, and we used it to determine first our own perceptions and then the Workers' Dignity assessment of the percentage workers that would fall into each category given we had just knocked on one hundred doors. All having some experience, my fellow trainees and I were not far off but we did overestimate the reality: for about every one hundred doors, three people would eventually become members, and of those three, about one would become a leader. So if we knocked on 500 doors, we could hope to gain 5 leader-members. This approximate but proven statistic was considered good news, and inspiration for moving forward, not a depressing statistic shown to crush all hope of worker-led change. The small victory in developing one leader, or gaining 3 members, from 100 house visits was apparent when the ripple effect that each of these workers would create in their communities and workplaces was taken into consideration. Building relationships takes time and intentionality and cannot be rushed; had Workers' Dignity organizers decided to skip this step, the strong network of worker members and allies would not exist today.

It is important to note that the organizers and many volunteers have experience, or were employed at the time of my research, as low-wage workers, and outreach is often approached as a form of worker-to-worker relationship building, which is another important aspect of creating a network of workers that defies social boundaries, and strong enough to affect change. “Hi, we’re from Workers’ Dignity, have you heard of us? We’re a group of low-wage workers organizing for better wages and better working conditions. What kind of work do you do?”

## Leadership Development

“It’s like when you are learning to drive. At first you are afraid, worried about what is going to happen. But as you start driving, you become more confident. It’s the same thing. At first you are afraid, but then you start getting better at it, and you know what you need to do. Rights are the same – we have to learn them and we have to practice them. In this case, you learned your rights and now you are practicing them with your coworkers and enforcing them. That is how you fight against inequality.”

– Cristina, Workers’ Dignity organizer, during a worker interview, July 2015

Central to the Workers’ Dignity model is leadership development. Unlike some other worker centers or labor justice organizations that provide legal council or job placement, Workers’ Dignity does not provide services, but tools. When a worker first attends a Defend Your Rights workshop, they share their stories and experiences, listen to other workers about theirs, and learn collaboratively that they are not alone and can do something about unjust working conditions.

If the worker came to Workers’ Dignity because of a wage theft case, they have the chance to work with a team of volunteer *promotores/as* to assess the case, how much they are owed, and where to go from there. A typical first step is a phone call or letter to the boss. The worker will come back the next week, and so on. That same worker will ideally be leading a workshop in the future and volunteering as a promotor/a on another worker’s case. Over time, leaders are lifted up and supported, and a cumulative, new knowledge emerges among workers that can be built upon. The two newest full-time organizers at Workers’ Dignity were once the center of wage theft campaigns and became prominent worker-leaders. They both can say they’ve been there, that workers can stand up and defend their rights against wage theft and other labor violations.

During promotor/a trainings, which are held for workers and ally volunteers like myself, there is a strong emphasis on accompaniment, not service or “help” – the workers are in control

of their case and where it goes. The diverse teams bring together different skill sets to contribute to the efforts: bilingual volunteers can facilitate better communication for a Spanish-speaking worker to communicate their ideas to an English-speaking boss through translation or interpretation; workers with past experience can give helpful advice; someone with online research skills can track down a boss's contact information. This is a collaborative process that has been successful not only in recovering stolen wages for workers, but also in leadership development. Workers who, for a number of reasons, are vulnerable to labor violations like wage theft are not vulnerable or alone at Workers' Dignity, and thus more power is built collectively through worker-to-worker organizing.

Events that center on popular education are another central aspect of education, knowledge creation, and leadership development at Workers' Dignity. The bi-monthly Women, Art & Justice (*Mujeres, Arte, y Justicia*) gatherings use artistic expression and creative projects as avenues for women to share skills and knowledge, discuss relevant challenges, and celebrate victories. The women build solidarity and relationships. Likewise, the six-week summer series of workshops known as Justice Schools focus on various topics of workers' rights, women's rights, and historical movements that came before. Workers' Dignity organizers, workers, and volunteers develop workshops for the daylong events and lead them as well, often learning more about a topic through the process. I often provided childcare during these events throughout the summer, but every once in a while would be called on to facilitate in a pinch.

### Action

Conjure an image of yoga practice: does it involve some type of visually impressive, balanced pose? Does an image of grassroots labor organizing look like parades, protests, and public actions with puppets and popular theater and music? These are the very real

manifestations of the beauty of movements, the results of the hard work that must take place before any of these things come to fruition; we must root to rise. Direct action from Workers' Dignity is just as important as the outreach and leadership development that precede it, but it does carry particular weight in their efforts to address the problem of wage theft in Nashville. Actions garner the attention of the media and people outside the Workers' Dignity network, and they challenge the people who may be complacent in their participation in a system that undervalues low-wage and immigrant workers. Action comes in many different shapes and sizes, and not all wage theft cases are settled because of large pickets, but the workers who have experienced the labor violation drive all decisions moving forward.

As described above, when a worker comes in to Workers' Dignity seeking to do something about a labor violation like wage theft, they first learn about ways to defend their rights and the experiences of other workers. Then, when they are working with a group of promotores/as afterward, they decide what the first plan of action will be. Typically, the first steps involve some preliminary research on the employer's contact information, which is not always available to workers. (One worker I accompanied this summer had gone so far as to follow their employer's truck all the way home in order to find an elusive address.) A letter from Workers' Dignity is then drafted on behalf of the worker, and sometimes a promotor/a will make a phone call directly to inform the employer that an organization is now standing beside their employee – "and when will they receive payment for these hours?" Many wage theft cases end here, as employers agree to pay to avoid confrontation.

Workers who have been denied payment even after a phone call and letter from Workers' Dignity may decide to flyer their bosses' place of business or neighborhood, or deliver a letter in person. Every instance looks different, although some similarities remain. The flyers inform

passersby, patrons of the business, or neighbors of the employer of the wage theft that has taken place. Letter delegations to personal residences also take place when a worker decides to ask for their stolen wages, with the support of trained advocates at their side. At this point, many bosses pay up.

When several workers from the same place have not been paid, as has been the case with many hotel cleaning worker cases, and the employer refuses all other advances, a public campaign may be undertaken by the leadership of Workers' Dignity with the willingness of the workers. These are the types of actions that manifest in the streets as marches and pickets, and create the images that are shared online, on the six o'clock news if we are lucky, and remain in the collective memory of Workers' Dignity's Nashville community. The resourcefulness and artistic wellspring of the worker center is tangible during direct actions, the overcrowded art closet come to life; colorful spray painted drums, and shakers made with tape and rocks, numerous painted signs and banners, those bright yellow flags, all created at Workers' Dignity.

The location of the Courtyard Marriott on traffic-choked West End Avenue and a stone's throw from the prestigious Vanderbilt University campus is a prime spot for gaining attention at any picket. Halfway into what would turn out to be an eight-month long fight for four housekeepers and one maintenance worker there, Workers' Dignity decided to forego the peak hours of the afternoon for a seven a.m. start time, drums at the ready for a "Wake-up Call" action. Creative approaches like this, and the following late-night action, put pressure on hotel management by risking the satisfaction of the hotel guests. Actions may be a thorn in the side of many large employers like the several hotel chains that have been a target of Workers' Dignity, and they do work to get worker's stolen wages returned, but they also function to build solidarity within the network, inform the larger public of the problem of wage theft, and result in policies

that protect future workers. The Courtyard Marriott case did not end immediately with the off-hour actions, but when workers were finally paid in August 2015, the sheer timeframe of the fight prompted media attention (see Balakit 2015). The successful campaigns within Just Hospitality have left a legacy at these hotels in the form of employer policies that deter wage theft, improve working conditions, and raise the pay for all cleaning workers.

### **Moral Discourse and the Broader Nashville Community**

“I talked to some of my coworkers, and one had seen me on the television. She said, ‘I can’t believe you were there!’ I said, ‘Yes, I was there because the people who were with me [Workers’ Dignity] gave me courage to be there. Don’t be afraid.’ That is why I tell [my coworkers] to fight for your rights, fight for what you deserve. Don’t let people treat you badly. ‘Oh, because you are an immigrant you don’t have rights...’ We are all worth it. We have to keep moving forward and fighting for our families.”

- Natalia, interview July 2015

There is a morality to the efforts taking place at Workers’ Dignity and worker centers across the United States, a clear distinction between right and wrong that lends low-wage and immigrant workers a source of political power (see, for example: Brodtkin 2014: S124). In the United States, the morality of a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work trumps even the vulnerable status of many low-wage workers, regardless of citizenship, race, or ethnicity. Further, for “poor people’s organizations, the ability to claim the moral high ground is critical to persuading allies to join the fight” (Fine 2006: 256). This moral high ground afforded to Workers’ Dignity lends strength to workers to effect social, if not political, change in Nashville and creates an atmosphere in which wage theft is unacceptable. Allies are charged with taking responsibility for their more privileged neighbors, to educate and bring people into the fold. Worker members are driven by a goal to do what is right, and make sure that employers in Nashville do the same. The broader Nashville community is affected in many ways by the movements at Workers’ Dignity, including how people think about worker organizing and hopes for the future.

The workers Cristina and I interviewed told us about why they came to be involved with Workers' Dignity and what was driving them to continue on even after their wage theft cases were settled. "We have to support each other, we have to be a majority so that they listen to us ... You have to talk. If you don't say anything, nothing is going to be fixed. You have to talk for people to listen to you," Ursula is passionate about her involvement with Workers' Dignity as she explains this to Cristina and me across the street at the Mediterranean café. She and other cleaning workers are fighting now to have the conditions outlined in a Cleaning Workers' Bill of Rights, which would include protection from abuse, fair wages, and adequate time off if implemented legally. Similar in conception to the National Domestic Workers Alliance bills of rights for domestic workers that have passed at the state level across the country, a Cleaning Workers' Bill of Rights would represent a worker-led initiative to implement labor protections at an official-legal level (National Domestic Workers Alliance 2014). For now, individual hotel policies are being created in the wake Workers' Dignity actions that increase cleaning workers' pay and hold hotel employers accountable for contracted work. These are agreements struck at the individual hotel level, but have increased benefits for many hotel workers significantly (Workers' Dignity, n.d.). These demands are not extravagant; they are what is right, and what is fair.

Still, Workers' Dignity members are the minority of people withstanding the pains of wage theft and poor working conditions. Why is it that so few workers decide to do something about their situations? For many, they fear retribution or being fired, they fear that their undocumented status does not afford them any rights, and some just decide that the small amount of money is not worth it and just move on. An organizer once pointed out to me that the people who decide to fight are, if you think about it, a little irrational. This was far from a job, but an

observation that, while the wages workers often fight to get back might not be “worth their time” necessarily, these folks are morally driven to do what is right, and to fight for a better future.

The strong commitment to justice at Workers’ Dignity is felt when the organizers and members come out in solidarity to support other social justice efforts in Nashville; in fact, they consider solidarity a “cornerstone” of their mission (Workers’ Dignity 2016). Workers’ Dignity members regularly attend the annual Martin Luther King Day march in North Nashville, support the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) in their lobbying and community engagement efforts, and this past year some representatives even traveled to Selma, Alabama, for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary events (Workers’ Dignity 2016). The moral discourse that Workers’ Dignity participates in is one piece of a larger struggle in Middle Tennessee to create social justice – to empower the most marginalized in our communities and uplift them into positions of leadership, to hold our elected officials and civil servants accountable, and to take care of each other in community.

Workers’ Dignity, on a direct level, influences the volunteers and allies that walk through its door, by building awareness and connecting them to the common yet hidden problem of wage theft and the workers who live its reality. Workers’ Dignity facilitates a radical community of solidarity, accompaniment, and accountability, and in turn, is changing the landscape of social justice organizing in Nashville to include wage theft and workers’ rights alongside intersecting issues of gender, racial, immigrant, and economic justice.

## **Conclusion**

Workers’ Dignity and dozens of other worker centers across the United States are organizing at the local level to protect low-wage, immigrant, and otherwise marginalized workers from wage theft and inequitable working conditions. Workers’ Dignity is addressing the

problem of wage theft through the grassroots organizing methods of outreach, education and leadership development, and action. Through this organizing model, community is built and fortified, and workers are empowered to lead their own struggles. Reaching beyond their tangible work, Workers' Dignity participates in a similar moral, rights-based discourse that other worker centers in the United States are acting in, centering the voices of low-wage workers in the process, and adding significant energy and power to the new labor movement. The result of their broad based work is changing Nashville and holding its businesses accountable to the low-wage workers employed there.

In addition to the impact that Workers' Dignity is having at the local level in Nashville, they are working toward a much bigger goal that extends beyond Nashville, Tennessee, and beyond hospitality and cleaning work. They are working toward a collective liberation for all workers and allies, and an alternative to the capitalist system that creates wage theft, unsafe working conditions, exploited and abused workers, and the normalized poverty that is experienced by the world's majority. By taking on wage theft, worker centers like Workers' Dignity are taking on the larger processes that create and nurture the profusion of wage theft in low-wage industries; they are addressing the existence of "low-wage" work as a manifestation of an unjust system.

The Workers' Dignity model of organizing to build worker power is an important way to approach inequitable and discriminatory working conditions because while workers are learning ways to defend their rights and educate co-workers, they are also learning ways to create real change that is not dependent on the inadequate state mechanisms that are in place to protect some but not all. Further, through the popular education that takes place at Workers' Dignity, members are connecting their struggles to others across time and space, struggles that also bucked the

dominant status quo such as the Civil Rights movement, women's participation in historic and current social justice movements, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Zapatista movement, just to name a few. It is this recognition of the power and potential of marginalized groups leading struggles that brings life to worker-led efforts like Workers' Dignity and why leadership development is so central to their model. Workers are leading the way to a new, more vibrant labor movement, pulling up injustice from the grassroots.

**CHAPTER FIVE:**  
**INCORPORATING ACTIVIST RESEARCH INTO GRASSROOTS LABOR**  
**ORGANIZING MODELS**

This thesis thus far has shown the widespread nature of wage theft, how this and other labor violations are affecting workers and their families by compounding vulnerability, and how one worker center in Nashville is building worker power and community alliances to address the issue of wage theft and unjust working conditions in the absence of state attention. This chapter brings in the role of the activist researcher, including my own experience conducting research at Workers' Dignity, as well as a broader picture of research in grassroots labor organizing settings, with the intent to reveal the ways in which activist research partnerships can help organized low-wage workers access resources from which they have been systematically blocked and support movement goals.

This third aspect of the thesis stemmed from my initial conversations with Workers' Dignity leaders in Fall 2014. Interested in the ways that other worker centers and labor justice organizations were negotiating larger research projects (particularly funding opportunities and research designs that included workers), my contacts at Workers' Dignity suggested this area as a possible point of interest. The idea of turning toward other worker centers appealed to me, as I shared an interest in the potential for research, specifically activist anthropological research aimed to the benefit of labor movements.

I was, and still am, concerned about how to apply activist research, and wanted to avoid confusing "research on social movements with actually building social movements" (Striffler

2011:235). Attention has been drawn to one related problem facing anthropology; despite our conceptualization of engaged research, we have “focused less on the tactics, methods, and theories of organizing opposition than on professional and ethical considerations and the relations of anthropologists to their research subjects” (Gill 2009:668). I am not arguing for less attention to ethical concerns, quite the contrary, but through this particular line of research I want to explore a “yes, and” framework that is also useful on the ground. By this, I mean to emphasize the importance of pursuing what I see as a fuller potential for engaged research that is both ethically grounded and reflexive, as well as concerned with developing strategies for growing movement power. Engaged research models have the opportunity to contribute important knowledge to the grassroots organizing arena when our subject matter includes how and why organizations are opposing the status quo, and what strategies are most effective. In this case, my focus is on the potential of activist research as an organizing tool, and how research methods fit into the theories of change being generated at worker centers in the United States.

Research is taking place all the time at worker centers and labor justice organizations across the country; some worker centers participate in research to better understand what they are “up against” and how to escalate campaigns, some use research as a form of outreach to build worker-to-worker connections and learn more about their membership, while others focus on legislation and policy. Any one of these research foci can potentially be supported by activist research, although not always in the same ways. What I seek to highlight are some of these efforts and strategies, and offer up potential ways that an activist research partnership might fit in and support organizing goals. For example, anthropological or academic insight can fortify diversely aligned labor struggles; “when dialogue begins with an organization, social movement, or group of people in struggle, the activist scholar has concrete and potentially useful research

skills to bring to the table” (Hale 2008:8). In other words, activist research builds capacity.

Whether the increased capacity is access to resources such as funding, methodology, academic privilege, research products and public perception, or even as extra bodies to work on research and participate in actions, it is determined case by case and in dialogue with the worker justice organization at its center.

The more formal types of research that have taken place at Workers’ Dignity, aside from the almost daily research that all worker centers engage in, focus on campaign escalation and building worker-to-worker connections. While policy and legislative work may be on their horizon given increased resources, at the time of this research, their most concerted efforts have been toward base-building and internal use. I will discuss research at other labor justice organizations in relation to Workers’ Dignity, as well as the various ways that activist research can potentially support these efforts.

### **What We’re Up Against: Research to Escalate Campaigns**

Grassroots labor justice campaigns, like many other social justice movement efforts, carry the weight of a David and Goliath archetype: low-wage and immigrant workers, perceived as vulnerable by their supervisors and society in general, challenging the powerful employers or corporations that benefit from workers’ lack of social and cultural capital. Part of what gives worker centers leverage to win campaigns goes beyond even the strong community networks that support worker power and have the capacity to hold employers accountable; worker centers gain the upper hand by understanding what they are up against on a more systemic level.

Wage theft campaigns like that at downtown hotels go beyond the individual supervisors that dole out verbal abuse, or the manager responsible for writing paychecks, they go to the top. It is not uncommon for a significant portion of hotel cleaning personnel to be employed by a

third party contractor hired by the corporate hotel chain. When these third party employers commit wage theft violations, for example, like the case of Courtyard Marriott workers discussed in the previous chapter, many times they disappear like the “ghost” agencies they are, leaving workers with few options (Balakit 2015). Workers’ Dignity contends that the hotels are beholden to their cleaning staff, no matter the hiring circumstances, because the hotel is responsible for the companies they choose to employ.

To be able to stand firm against powerful opponents, Workers’ Dignity and the workers themselves must compile as much evidence as they can about the wage theft cases from exact days and hours worked, the contracting agency if applicable, and other relevant details to the case. This information is gathered by volunteer *promotor/as* using intake forms during the weekly Thursday night meetings. This may be overlooked as a form of research, but this activity of documenting a workers’ wage theft, and the persons responsible, is the first step to recovering stolen wages. A combination of worker memory and testimony, pay stubs, cell phone pictures, and online searches are data gathering exercises that form the foundation of every case and every campaign.

There are real people behind the names like Hilton, Sheraton, and Marriott: general managers, lawyers, and spokespeople who Workers’ Dignity must know about in order to initiate contact and negotiations. This type of research is more akin to strategic corporate research (see Juravich 2007) and helps to break down giant name brands into real, tangible targets. This type of research is important for building and escalating campaigns because it gives worker centers something to leverage. The messaging of a campaign (a key component of grassroots organizing) is usually built on specific aspects of a target. For example, when a hotel boss was found to also be a professor at a local university (my alma mater Middle Tennessee State University),

Workers' Dignity did not shy away from putting his name on picket signs or highlighting his status to gain more media attention; some students even hung flyers outside of his classrooms.

Worker centers also draw on the collective knowledge of social justice movements by researching other direct action tactics and themes. Historical research on influential social justice campaigns, both past and just nearly-past, is an important exercise in creating collective memory that allows worker centers and labor justice organizations to align themselves and their local efforts to a broader movement for social change. Workers' Dignity draws considerable inspiration from other worker-led groups, such as its sister organization the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida. Worker centers that I spoke with from places like Texas, Illinois, and New Jersey, had either heard of, or had been in contact with, Workers' Dignity, revealing a larger network of labor justice organizations all learning from each other.

These are all the common forms of research that worker centers are participating in on a regular basis, and this valuable knowledge could only be strengthened by supplemental activist research. Workers' Dignity in particular could benefit from more in-depth industry-related research to have better leverage within the hospitality industry in Nashville, to add to their understanding of how to hold a large corporate hotel chain like Sheraton accountable in order to win a wage theft case. This type of research, some of which Workers' Dignity and allies have already undertaken in earnest, could include data on industry growth and future building contracts, which corporations and individuals are backing this growth, and even internal hotel policies and protocol to be able to know what is ahead of them and possible points of leverage to introduce worker protections before grand openings.

Keeping powerful opponents in mind is deeply connected to how worker justice organizations must undertake particular research efforts. Two representatives from larger worker

justice organizations that have both conducted extensive research for internal uses, campaigns, and policy work, stressed to me the importance of methodology and its relationship to the final product and intended audience. Identifying the end goals of a particular research undertaking is key to determining what methods will be used, who will conduct the research, and what the final product will look like. For example, if a worker center wanted to collect information on the opinion of the membership about which direction a new campaign should go in, a simple survey administered by other workers and allies would be adequate; sampling methods, research proposals and IRBs would not enter the equation of this informal type of research. However, recruiting the help of an academic researcher or social justice think tank, and the institutional power associated with them, would be necessary to developing a more in-depth, multi-method project designed to implement policy change like the work done in places such as ROC United, National Domestic Workers Alliance, or Workers Defense Project. Whether research is geared more toward an educational, knowledge building exercise among workers or a tool for influencing policy makers, interviewees expressed a dedication to rigorous methods to build power.

Much like activist research, worker justice organizations are up against critiques from powerful institutions, which often means being more thorough than the research upholding the status quo. “We have to be a lot more careful in our methods because we do have [this group] that is critiquing and attacking our work pretty much at every step. We also have to build power to be able to counteract their message, because their research is not as rigorous as ours, but because of their influence, it gets a much wider [audience].” Charles R. Hale emphasizes that the importance of methodological rigor in activist scholarship is not just that our research is solid for the sake of validity, but that we do not end up hindering movement efforts. “Given the

collaborative character of activist research projects, getting it wrong means not only unfavorable reviews from academic peers... but much more seriously, data and analysis that could harm or mislead our allies” (Hale 2008: 12). Conducting research in the interest of organized low-wage workers’ campaigns requires that methodology take a central role in design so that the end goals are not obscured by outside attacks.

Activist researchers are able to assist in the development of rigorous methodologies that can withstand the critiques of policy makers and oppositional groups alike, and have the capacity to access resources in order to conduct the research, and even train workers to do so as well. The potential for activist research in partnership with labor justice organizations in the development of strategies to understand the most effective ways to convince employers and the public alike of the plight of low-wage workers is significant; what methodologies activist researchers bring to the table are enhanced by workers’ industry expertise and vision for organizing goals.

### **Building Power: Worker-to-Worker Connections**

About halfway through our conversation, I asked one interviewee, a senior researcher at a university-affiliated worker center that often facilitates projects that both students and workers participate in, what methods, in her experience, had worked best to incorporate workers in the research process and foster worker-to-worker connections. Put very plainly, she said, “Planning a research project that actually has the worker center or worker rights organization’s agenda as part of its mission is key to make it really successful.” She continued on, though, recounting as others had this worker center’s success with surveys in particular, making it clear that workers cannot just be part of the data collection, but must be central to developing the project from start to finish – from survey instrument, piloting and revisions, and analysis. There must a “strong commitment and investment in the process... figuring out ways that people can learn about an

issue and become the agents of the research and the key actors and stakeholders in that research.” Workers essentially must have ownership of the project, so that “they become the experts in training others about their experiences, and that’s when you see the worker-to-worker organizing.”

Surveys were the methodological tool of choice among worker justice organization interviewees. Collaborative documents created by researchers and worker justice organizations such as the “Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers” and “Build a Better Texas” reports relied heavily on surveys (4,387 and 1,194 respectively) among low-wage workers to uncover the widespread abuses and wage theft that workers are experiencing (Workers Defense Project 2013; Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore, et al. 2009). Even localized, smaller-scale surveys like those used by Workers’ Dignity provide quantitative data about workers’ lived experiences and reveal points of leverage; importantly, they are also tools that can be used to effectively build and create new knowledge between workers about their situations and foster movement growth. When workers conduct surveys with other workers in similar situations, it facilitates an exchange of experiential knowledge and an important realization that unaffiliated workers (potential members) are not alone. This holds true for surveys conducted among members, too, as workers create a clearer picture of where their organization is, and where they want it to go. As one interviewee put it, surveys for internal and educational use may follow the more “quick and dirty” method, as opposed to the hyper-rigorous and extensive surveys used for policy work, but these still hold value for organizing and fostering worker-to-worker connections.

My summer with Workers’ Dignity was not the first time the worker center had undertaken research with the help of a university graduate student. One year prior, a Vanderbilt University IRB-approved exploratory study about the health consequences of low-wage cleaning

work was initiated by a Workers' Dignity ally putting their access to university resources to dual use for both research experience and organizing leverage. The survey of thirty mostly closed-ended questions was meant to have ease of use so that not only the researcher or organizers could conduct them, but workers as well. They were short enough to be completed on a bus ride to or from work, and provided quantitative data on the health and safety issues low-wage cleaning workers were experiencing which could be used to justify more in-depth projects in the future.

This study has now been published as the *Hotels Shouldn't Hurt* report, a powerful summary of both the survey portion of the study discussed above and a second phase that also included focus group discussions that lent ethnographic texture in the form of workers' own words (Workers' Dignity 2016). The goal of this preliminary study and subsequent report is to ground a much larger project in the coming year that will provide an even more comprehensive look at the Nashville hospitality industry. Tools like this report, based on participatory research that includes workers, have been used at other worker justice organizations such as Workers Defense Project/Proyecto Laboral in Texas and ARISE Chicago to influence policy change in their local arenas.

### **Legislation and Policy Change**

As mentioned in Chapter 4, state negligence plays a huge part in maintaining unfair and unsafe working conditions for low-wage workers across the United States. So to what ends are so many labor justice organizations, grassroots and otherwise, organizing for policy change at local, state, and national levels? Like wage theft, the legal aspect of policies implemented to protect workers give worker centers and others the power to hold up something against labor violations and the employers that try to ignore them. Organized workers and their allies have shown that they have the power to enforce labor laws on their own, with or without the help of the state.

Still, local and state policies that are the result of worker-driven efforts can foster significant changes in the low-wage work environment.

The national campaign for domestic workers' rights is one example of a movement that has generated significant policy work that has made an impact in many workers' lives. One such project that has supported their policy and legislative victories is the *The Home Economics* report, facilitated in collaboration with the University of Illinois Chicago and social justice think-tank Data Center, which is a national survey of over 2,000 domestic workers in over 14 metropolitan areas (Burnham and Theodore 2012). Even more powerful than the breadth and scope of this project was its deep dedication to worker participation: conducted in nine languages, "190 domestic workers and organizers from 34 community organizations collaborated in survey design, the fielding of the survey, and the preliminary analysis of the data" (Burnham and Theodore 2012: x). Research efforts like those behind the *Home Economics* report not only bring to light the unjust labor violations and working conditions experienced by workers, but are also invaluable sources of data when pushing forward legislation.

After six years of struggle, the National Domestic Workers Alliance helped to pass the New York Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, which recognized domestic workers as fully under labor laws, with access to the same protections as other workers, let alone effectively granting hundreds of domestic workers the right to overtime – essentially and end to years of wage theft (NDWA 2014). Since New York, six other states have passed similar legislation. When it went through in California, worker allies were ready. One interviewee put it this way: legislation is only as good as workers' ability to hold it up in practice. "Laws like that are great on the books, but unless they are enforced, unless people know their rights, [as in], 'Hey, I have the right to overtime. How do I ask for overtime when I am working?' We did a whole popular education

curriculum in Spanish about that new bill, and how [workers can] exercise [their] rights with employers about overtime protections.” The Defend Your Rights education that is taking place at the grassroots level at Workers’ Dignity thus becomes even more important in light of the possibility of future policy work.

Larger scale, collaborative research projects like those carried out by the National Domestic Workers Alliance and academic partners have the power to produce data that is useful in the creation of white paper documents and reports that are catered toward policy makers and local leadership bodies such as city councils and state legislatures. Activist researchers have access to the academic privilege, the presumed legitimacy that comes with it, and the methodological skills to help create research products that get attention from those in power. One Workers’ Dignity ally that I interviewed pressed on this issue of presumed academic legitimacy and compared it to other privileges that can be wielded as tools for worker power:

“The kind of research that brings legitimacy is like any other weapon in the social war. It’s like having white skin, it’s like the clothes you wear, it’s like having money behind you ... It’s a way of getting power. And I think that’s one helpful tool as people are fighting unbalanced struggles. I’m not saying in any way that it’s undeserved; I think it is. It’s just that most of the data that’s already being produced by organizers is not legitimized, so finding ways of weaponizing it a little bit more, legitimizing it more, can be helpful.”

In July 2015, I interviewed a researcher from one worker center in a major metropolitan city about their experiences, and found that they were able to take the local data from their participation in a nationwide study on wage theft and use it to reorient the problem toward their particular city council. In this case, this smaller worker center extrapolated data to force city council members to recognize wage theft as a real problem and not an isolated event perpetuated by “bad apples.” “We turned [our data] into a spatial analysis for [the city] based on our experience. We were able to bring that to city council members and say, ‘You say wage theft is

not an issue for you, but we actually have sixty workers who live in your district who have experienced wage theft, and we've also negotiated with fourteen employers in your district over wage theft issues.' We could force them reckon with the problem." The secondary research that this worker center carried out did two things. First, it utilized legitimized data gained from a larger study and turned in inward on local leadership so that they could not deny the problem of wage theft looking back at them. Second, they used this momentum to lay groundwork for a campaign that eventually resulted in the passage of a citywide anti-wage theft ordinance. "Data speaks to elected officials. Being able to walk into a room and say, *this* is how much is being stolen in this city. That was a really important thing that gave us credibility and power."

Having the right kind of data can go a long way in some cases, even if the story it tells is already familiar to low-wage workers. Workers understand their exploited position and experience of labor violations, but in particular situations, activist scholar-researchers can help legitimize their knowledge by packaging it in a way that gains more attention from elected leadership. Workers Defense Project, a worker center based in Austin, Texas, has a long standing relationship with the University of Texas at Austin, and has a strong research arm to their organizing that supports their policy work. Because of efforts like the *Build a Better Texas* report, the construction industry in Austin and Texas, which workers knew very well to be dangerous before, is safer and more accountable to workers (Workers Defense Project 2013). The workers who have participated in the above research projects can all claim more legitimacy and more power, and have more tools to create lasting changes in their workplaces. While it is important for workers to have ownership of the knowledge that is being created from their organizing, academic researchers, too, have a place to support these efforts and contribute to social change on the ground.

## **Conclusion and Reflection on Activist Research**

Worker centers and labor justice organizations across the United States are participating in research everyday, to support membership and build campaigns, build power through worker-to-worker connections, and work toward creating change at the policy level. Activist researchers who are aligned with the labor justice movement are well suited to support organized low-wage workers through collaborative and participatory research projects geared toward reaching particular organizational goals. Methodological rigor, a cornerstone of activist research already, is an important aspect of collaborative research projects that seek to upset the status quo of worker exploitation and stand up against powerful opponents to low-wage worker's growing political power because it ensures that research can stand up to the scrutiny of bosses or political opponents alike.

Still, because an activist researcher aligns with a worker justice organization does not guarantee useful research products or organizational success. Stretching a worker center thin in order to pursue a research goal does have the potential to backfire, despite an activist scholar's best efforts. A fellow activist and researcher shared my doubts when it came to their own research efforts, weighing the costs and benefits of diverting worker center energies toward research efforts:

“I think [research is] rarely helpful, to be honest. I think it's helpful in pretty specific situations. Right now I'm trying to figure that out: when is it useful? It's entirely possible that I'll look back on the work that I've been doing ...[with this organization] and say, 'Man, I really should have spent those 300 hours organizing instead.' ... If it helps us get two hundred grand in grants because we just did something that brings us a lot of legitimacy, we did the right thing. If it doesn't, if we end up getting no grants, and no additional resources based on it, probably then we made a mistake. It's hard to say, but I think that's primarily where research is helpful.”

For academic researchers with access to university affiliation and the legitimacy that brings, funding, and considerable research skills, their efforts are relative to the capacity they bring,

versus take away, from the worker or social justice organization they are aligned with. The old anthropological adage of “do no harm” is still relevant. In my efforts at Workers’ Dignity I strove to only add, and not take away from the organizing efforts happening there, which resulted in the types of products expected from a small-scale study. Yet, hopefully, products that will support future efforts in the form of data that can be recycled for internal and external uses, as well as this insight into how other worker centers are approaching research and resource allocation. One ally who participated in the health consequences pilot study offered particular insight into both of our projects with Workers’ Dignity and one way to see activist research as a way to tip the sociopolitical scales back in the direction of low-wage workers:

“So, we had spare time, we had institutional resources, and we were able to do connecting work basically by pretending to do school stuff. Which is where my entire theory of research comes from, basically. Was from that experience, of realizing that there are disproportionate resources that are allocated for specific people to better themselves educationally, and that those resources can sometimes be grabbed and used for [workers]. For me, the most primary engagement between social movements and educational and research work is a material one, not an ideological one. It’s not, ‘Here’s information that will be useful,’ [but] here are material conditions, material resources that can be siphoned and redirected.”

Activist research builds capacity, which can be as simple as an extra set of hands to work, and as useful as strong methodology, access to funding, and policy reports. What is important to all three of the ways research is utilized by worker justice organizations and allied activist scholars discussed here is that workers remain central, their voices prioritized over any other.

## **CHAPTER SIX:**

### **CONCLUSION: APPLIED SIGNIFICANCE AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES**

At the heart of this thesis, and the driving force behind my three main research questions, are low-wage workers, their experiences of wage theft and labor violations, the strategies they employ to build power and organize for change, and the various forms of research that have the potential to support their efforts. In response to question 1, I have argued that the widespread persistence of wage theft in low-wage industries is hurting workers personally. Wage theft and abusive working conditions are commonplace symptoms of an exploitative system and state mechanisms that are inadequate in addressing labor violations for all workers, as evidenced by the people I spoke with in Nashville's hospitality cleaning industry. These labor violations work to compound workers' vulnerability and are direct affronts to their dignity and wellbeing. Relatedly, the investigation into question 2 has shown that wage theft is also a catalyst for grassroots labor organizing at Workers' Dignity and labor justice organizations across the United States, as seen in Chapter 4. Participants in the grassroots labor movement utilize research in many different forms to support organizing strategy at the local and national levels, and, to answer question 3, activist research has the potential to benefit and participate in this social change making. Organized low-wage workers are changing the face of labor in the United States, and it is the analysis of their experiences of, and reactions to, an exploitative system that lend significance to this research and implications for future projects.

## **Significance of Research**

The significance of this research is best related to its engagement with the discipline of anthropology, as well as the sub-disciplines of activist anthropology and the study of labor; the non-academic public; and worker justice organizations in the United States. In reference to anthropology and labor, this thesis offers applied implications for activist research, a broader critique of capitalism and the state as they relate to low-wage workers, and alternative approaches to participation in social justice movements through research efforts. Through the discussion of Workers' Dignity's strategies for addressing labor violations such as wage theft, the thesis offers the general public a fuller story of public actions, what they represent beyond surface aesthetics and disruption, as well as ways to get involved. Relatedly, this thesis strives to be relevant to the worker justice movement in the United States by sharing the experiences of low-wage hotel cleaning workers in Nashville and their approach to organizing, my own insight as an activist researcher with significant, yet limited, resources, and reasons why these organizations may seek out partnerships with activist researchers or incorporate academic methodologies into their own organizing models. I will also offer up possibilities for future research based on the outcomes of this project in relation to the three major groups envisioned herein.

### Activist Anthropology

As an example of a project grounded in activist anthropology, this thesis adds to our understanding of activist anthropology methods, the importance of aligning with communities in struggle, and the challenges that can arise during a politically engaged research project. In particular, this thesis supports the activist anthropological literature that embraces and engages with these difficulties and contradictions, and stands firmly with the understanding that activist

methodologies and research designs are unique and valuable approaches within the discipline of anthropology.

The challenges to an activist research approach are well known, as they are evidenced in the collective works that constitute the volume *Engaging Contradictions* (Hale 2008). One such incongruous aspect of my research that I have constantly struggled with is the inconsistency of creating a project that is simultaneously working to advance the knowledge of an academic discipline, while also attempting to build decolonized forms of knowledge useful in the realm of working class-led social justice movements. It is as if some activist scholars have one foot in the ivory tower and another stuck in the dirt at the grassroots, and must remain so indefinitely.

Collaborating with Workers' Dignity, an organization that I had an existing relationship with, posed specific challenges to my autonomy in creating the research design, which highlights different aspects of what activist researchers forego in the name of collaboration, and all the things we gain. My experiences are not unique in the realm of activist research, although they are not always so obvious in our final products. It is in good faith that we limit, or grow, our initial visions, to align them more solidly with our partners in struggle. My own research questions and methods were significantly altered over the course of my pre-research negotiations with Workers' Dignity representatives, and have thus affected this final product. For example, my instinct as a critically thinking scholar was to look into the effectiveness of grassroots organizing efforts (to retrieve stolen wages, to protect the dignity of workers, etc.). To be honest, my experience as an activist clouded my vision to some extent; because it was my intention to *show* the effectiveness of these efforts I believed in, not to outright question their integrity. Workers' Dignity flatly refused this aspect of my proposed research in defense of their work. The

methodology of my research was edited in kind, this with a strict eye to protecting workers and making them feel comfortable at the worker center, not studied.

There is much to be gained, however, in the midst of these concessions. Beyond access, I was able to gain a better understanding of what is at stake for organizations like Workers' Dignity, why it is so important to protect them, and all the while I have produced a thesis that, in turn, looks outward from Workers' Dignity and not inward. This thesis foregoes the scrutiny of vulnerable populations and instead lays a tenuous groundwork for studying up and out in solidarity with movement building.

### Marxist Anthropology

This thesis is grounded in a Marxist political economy perspective of grassroots labor organizing as much as it is an example of activist anthropology research. The significance of this project for the discipline of anthropology is bound up in these two foundational aspects. A Marxist understanding of capitalism and the systematic exploitation of workers, together with an activist approach to scholarship, offer unique insight into the social problem of wage theft and create opportunities to put theory to work in praxis.

To move beyond a worker rights issue and engage with concepts that do not legitimize a state system that is in place to protect capital, a Marxist approach is useful not only for grassroots labor organizing, but for anthropological inquiry into these movements as well. As this thesis has shown, in the interdisciplinary literature on the topic of wage theft and worker centers, the state framework that creates labor violations is not only taken for granted, but looked to for solutions as well. The Department of Labor has the power to define labor violations, and who is eligible to seek redress and when, while an uncritical reformist stance by those who believe an improvement to the existing system will be enough to protect workers is taken. Wage theft is a

product of national labor laws, yet it need not be fought against through legal mechanisms. It would prove beneficial to anthropology to embrace a more critical approach to the topic of wages. Anthropological research, which holistically looks at lived experiences as well as the systems in which they take place, as opposed to the other disciplines that dominate discussion of wage theft, has a unique opportunity. An anthropological approach that utilizes critical Marxist theory in addition to other anthropological methods of research has the potential to create a more complete depiction of this social problem reaching an epidemic scale.

Workers who are organizing around wage theft are manipulating a system that otherwise undervalues their lives and labor, thus addressing the global processes contributing to their current situation. Low-wage immigrant workers and workers of color recognize the way society and national discourse in the United States actively discriminates against them, and activist anthropologists can analyze the social reproduction of their marginalization and work alongside them to improve conditions at the local level. Anthropologists conducting research within grassroots labor movements who are open to a critical Marxist influence may be able to find more sufficient resolutions to workers problems, or at least potential paths that take into consideration the desperation of now, and the violence of the past.

The workers I spoke with during my time at Workers' Dignity wanted to feel safe, secure, and respected at work just as much, if not more, than they desired a significant increase in their wages. By addressing this issue of wage theft, workers were really addressing the larger processes at work in their lives that exploited their labor, and undervalued their lives. Being critical of the construct of wages – to say that, like property, they are theft in the first place – does not mean anthropologists of labor should take a dramatic leap of causality and begin to only consider viable the solutions that abolish the wage system. This would only work to alienate

grassroots organizing efforts from the benefits of anthropological theory and inquiry. Wages are a reality of life for laborers in all classes in the United States and elsewhere; we are all subject to a dependency on money to survive, and therefore most of us must sell our labor, whether intellectual or physical, for wages. However, a more keen analysis of wages and wage theft, including how they function to oppress and control workers, in combination with a historical approach to the development of social relations and workers' relationship to the means of production, can work to make anthropological research more relevant to workers and better informed to develop possible interventions. On the surface, worker centers such as Workers' Dignity may be fighting for the return of stolen wages that were meager to begin with, but through the processes of public actions and social-moral pressure, they are addressing larger processes that affect all workers and condemning a capitalist system that facilitates our exploitation. They are fighting for dignity. Solutions to the problems of labor violations such as wage theft cannot be found only in stricter enforcement of labor laws or improved public policy; while these are necessary steps toward a more just future for workers, the ultimate solutions must deconstruct and recreate the state system that facilitated the problems in the first place.

Calls-to-action within the discipline are what start dialogue, and politically engaged projects start the change. Anthropologists such as Karen Brodtkin, E. Paul Durrenberger, Charles R. Hale, Steve Striffler, and Angela Stuesse (among others) have conducted research with workers and other marginalized folks in politically engaged, collaborative ways, and have provided the insight that ground checks our goals and theoretical discourses. These researchers "lay bare" the world system Sidney Mintz spoke of when he identified the benefits of connecting local histories and activities to a larger framework (Mintz 1977:255). The future of anthropology would do well to align with the future of the working class. Labor movements are requesting

solidarity from academics (Durrenberger 2007:81), and activist anthropologists have every incentive to support the struggles that liberate us all.

### Public Engagement

Beyond generating knowledge relevant to the theory and practice of anthropology, this thesis also aims to have applied significance for society. For the broader public in Nashville, Tennessee, for example, interaction with grassroots labor organizing may be minimal. Limited to interactions with the most visible manifestations of organizing – parades, marches, picket lines, and news spots – members of the larger Nashville community may dismiss the efforts of Workers’ Dignity or other social justice groups as disruptive or combative. I have heard the racial and ethnic slurs and denigrating remarks from the occasional passerby during several social justice direct actions in Nashville and elsewhere. Then there are the condescending statements sometimes heard at Workers’ Dignity actions, typically flung from the window of a moving vehicle, of “get a job!” These are particularly ironic, given that jobs, albeit low-wage and undervalued, were precisely why we were all outside in the first place. Yet still, I, too, have felt the more tangible threat of angry drivers, out of their vehicles and screaming, blocked by police, who did not comprehend that #BlackLivesMatter went far beyond a four-and-one-half-minute pause in traffic.

When it is understood that you have justice on your side, it can be easy to dismiss these mini-confrontations and micro-aggressions, but dismissal does not build stronger communities or more effective movements. An important goal of social justice organizing is to build across the cultural and political boundaries that often pit communities in opposition and instead build relationships of solidarity. It can be argued that highlighting the humanity of the individual

people who make up organized groups is one way to break down barriers to understanding, and one effort that is particularly well-suited for activist anthropologists.

By focusing on the lived experiences of low-wage workers, and the power dynamics at play in the lives of all workers, activist research like that presented here may be effective in changing public perception of social justice organizing. The pain of wage theft and abusive working conditions, as well as the hard work and strategic efforts that lie below the visible surface of actions, are details that humanize the new labor movement that Workers' Dignity is a part of. Of course, the formatting of a thesis is not ideal for engaging a broader public audience, but the knowledge generated through politically engaged activist research projects is capable of taking many forms. For example, the worker interviews, which were conceptualized as my participation in a Workers' Dignity effort, are available to Workers' Dignity for reference and use in the future in products such as internal membership newsletters or even hospitality industry reports. The emphasis of centering the voices of low-wage workers is just as relevant for Workers' Dignity as it is for activist anthropology and has significant applied implications.

### Worker Justice Organizations

My personal engagement as a volunteer and researcher at Workers' Dignity was shaped by the internal organizing goals of its leadership. The details of this research project, from my participation in everyday tasks and worker interviews to the outward-radiating study of other worker justice organizations, are all examples of what an activist research collaboration at a worker center can look like. The research I conducted closely with Workers' Dignity did not often look like research, and similar to Stuesse's account of her own experience as an activist researcher, my observant participation often took many shapes (2015: 226): childcare, amateur graphic design, cleaning and organizing (spray paints, not people), transportation to and from

workshops, and other volunteer tasks. The interviews I conducted with Cristina were the most overt form of research I participated in at the worker center, and those also functioned as internal organizing efforts. This presence, and ability to pitch in where needed, was one of the most valuable contributions of this project to Workers' Dignity. For an organization with limited capacity and a constant need for solidarity-minded volunteers, the 20 hours a week I spent there, including collecting worker stories with Cristina, contributed more directly to their efforts than this particular product will.

Far from exhaustive, and limited in scope, this research may still provide significant insight for worker justice organizations that, like Workers' Dignity, are interested in the strategies being employed elsewhere in the informal national labor movement. The more that worker justice organizations can share in their experiences and tactics for creating positive change, the fewer barriers there will be to developing effective organizing models, as well as coalition and movement building. Relatedly, for smaller worker centers with minimal experience in research collaborations, insight into a small-scale study like ours can open up the possibilities for seeking academic partnerships to bolster organizing goals.

### **Possibilities for Future Research**

The implications for future research based on the initial findings of this thesis are significant, and offer ways to build on research solely at the grassroots level to include other elements of the social and structural environment in which low-wage worker organizing is taking place. I recommend two distinct foci for future inquiry, "studying up" by turning the focus on corporate decision-making and power structures, including traditional labor unions, and a gendered approach to experiences of labor violations in the hospitality and cleaning industry, both of which I discuss below. More in-depth research concerning these two suggestions could

produce a more complete and holistic picture of what low-wage workers are up against, and possibly reveal additional points of leverage for creating social change.

Many decision-makers, aside from identifiable elected public officials, affect the lives of low-wage workers in the United States; they are corporate leaders and boards of trustees, investors and lobbyists. Even the tired business model of traditional trade unions has the potential to alienate workers that could otherwise be unionized, although these decision-making bodies have significant potential to create a more inclusive movement. More research directed toward the top of the food chain is necessary for workers to effectively change working conditions in the United States. This is research to know what workers are “up against” on a different level. Strategic corporate research, the “who owns Nashville?” question posed in an ally interview, requires a particular skill set that academic researchers can gain access to and share with labor justice organizations through collaborative projects.

Anthropologists often speak of power, and arguably confront and attempt to dismantle power imbalances; Eric Wolf argues that we “actually know a great deal about power, but have been timid in building upon what we know” (1990:586). The problem is that it is “one of the most loaded and polymorphous words in our repertoire,” but if we can approach power as something that takes different forms when working within different types of relationships, and delineate the separate kinds of power – such as structural power – we can have a useful place in bolstering labor movements and offering critical insight into ways that changes can be substantial and long-lasting (Wolf 1990:586-587). Power mapping by studying up has significant applied implications.

Further research on the gendered experiences of labor violations, particularly among women in the hospitality and cleaning industry, would provide better insight on possible tactics

to combat wage theft and abusive working conditions. The various social constructions used to marginalize and oppress people – race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, citizenship – do not work exclusive of the others, but compound and intersect. Anthropology, adept at identifying points of tension and intersection, has the ability to include these dynamic social constructions such as race and gender with a critical approach to class, which brings depth to theoretical contributions by confronting the overlapping forms of structural violence against the poor. The justification for future research with a prominent focus on gender stems from the fact that women make up the vast majority of cleaning workers in the hospitality industry and that this reality does not happen within a vacuum. While the majority of cleaning workers I interviewed for this project were women, aside from their roles as caregivers and mothers, a strategic focus on their gendered experience of wage theft and other labor violations was not present. Future research that delves into this aspect of cleaning workers' lives is recommended.

## **Conclusion**

As the result of a politically engaged research project, this thesis has been consistently aligned in the interest of low-wage and immigrant workers in the United States who are experiencing labor violations at a tremendous rate. Situated around a worker center in the South, it attempts to uncover, in a holistic way, the effects of wage theft on low-wage cleaning workers and the various ways that these workers fight back. Workers' Dignity is one of hundreds of worker justice organizations operating in the United States, changing the face of the labor movement to reflect the realities of low-wage workers in the era of intensified global capitalism and flexible service labor.

This thesis has argued that wage theft and other labor violations contribute to an exploitative system that undervalues low-wage workers' jobs and lives, and yet also provide

leverage to effect social change. Grassroots labor organizing efforts build worker power and strong ally communities that function to hold businesses accountable to labor laws despite an ineffective state. The changes that are happening in this new labor movement are being generated in communities and among low-wage workers, not through expressly formal mechanisms.

The knowledge that is being created in this labor justice movement comes from many different types of research and inquiry and is positioned to accept the help of activist scholars to boost these efforts and increase effectiveness. This thesis has attempted to draw connections out from individual lived experience to local organizing efforts to inclusive, broad-based movement building efforts nationwide. It is the goal of this thesis to support the grassroots labor justice movement in the United States by offering insight into what wage theft looks like, how workers can oppose and eradicate it, and the ways that activist scholars can contribute their skills as well.

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