

New Community Organizing of Low-Wage Workers::

A Conversation with Andrew Friedman of Make the Road NY

by Sharryn Kasmir

Make the Road New York is a fast-growing community-based, nonprofit organization with centers in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island. The organization takes its name from a poem by Antonio Machado: “Caminante, no hay camino. Se hace el camino al andar/ Searcher, there is no road. We make the road by walking.” Make the Road began in a church basement in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn in 1997, when a group of community residents met to face the challenges of the 1996 federal welfare reform bill. Since then, its membership and mission have expanded greatly. It now counts well over 3,500 members, and forty-five staff members oversee eleven projects. In 2007, it expanded still further when it merged with the Latin American Integration Center. Make the Road works on with a broad range of economic and social justice issues including workers’ rights and unionization, youth development, housing issues, gay and lesbian rights, and environmental justice.

Regional Labor Review wanted to interview Andrew Friedman, the organization’s co-founder and one of three current Co-Executive Directors, because of his leading role in Make the Road’s innovative and successful drive to organize retail workers along Bushwick’s Knickerboker Avenue. The Despierta Bushwick Campaign is a model of what community-labor coalitions can achieve in low-income, immigrant communities. In July of this year, Sharryn Kasmir spoke with Andrew at his Bushwick office.

Q: You’ve got quite a lot of things going on here.

AF: It’s kind of a large beast at this point. I mean, there are forty-five full-time staff people and 3,650 members, so it’s definitely a different and more complicated organization than when we started.

Q: How does the membership structure work? How do members become active?

AF: We don’t canvas for members. We encourage people to come participate in one of our eleven organizing committees, and only after they participate do we encourage them to become members. The idea is that members exercise democratic control over the organization and we want folks to understand what the organization is and what are our values are before we cede control over the organization to them.

We do outreach mostly focused on our organizing committees and the work they’re doing, on immigrant-worker issues or housing issues or youth issues or education issues, and we invite folks to participate in the committees dedicated to those things. Once folks come in and have been a little active, know other members, understand how decisions get made within the committees, at that point we encourage them to become members of the organization.

Q: I understand you have several different office locations.

AF: We have four offices right now. We have this office here in Bushwick. We have an office in Woodside, Queens, one in Jackson Heights, Queens, and one in Port Richmond in Staten Island.

Q: Do those different offices reflect the different demographics of those neighborhoods or do they focus on different issues?

AF: What we're trying to do is offer a coherent kind of social change approach or methodology in each of our offices that combines leadership development, community organizing, and some provision of services. That said, folks face slightly different issues in different locations.

The housing issues tend to be somewhat different but the workplace-related issues are very similar. In Queens, immigration status is more of an issue, but even though Bushwick is a neighborhood that's move heavily African American and Puerto Rican, many folks in our workers committee find enforcing their workplace rights complicated by immigration status issues. The Workers in Action Committee here in Bushwick and the Workers United Committee in Queens are actually similar.

Q: Are Make the Road members for the most part Central American?

AF: Probably the most common countries of origins of our members, in general, would be Mexico, the Dominican Republic. In the Workers Committees in particular, we also have a fair number of folks from Ecuador and Colombia, particularly in Queens.

Q: As I understand it, you are one of three executive directors?

AF: There are three Co-Executive Directors. It's a slightly unusual leadership model. But, you know, when we started Make the Road by Walking about eleven years ago, there were two of us, and neither of us wanted to just do the executive-director-type work. We both wanted to keep a hand in program work as we continued to grow. Then we merged with another organization, and they had an executive director and it was important to the merger for that person to stay in leadership of the organization. We feel great about it and it's working so far.

Q: How do you divide the work amongst yourselves?

AF: It's almost like a corporate vice-presidency model. We each have areas of responsibility and then we share the responsibilities that traditionally would be the executive director's job. This accounts for about a third of each of our jobs.

It's great in some ways. When things are hard, it's great to have other folks thinking with me on this stuff, and when things are good, it's also great to be part of a team. It's been something that tends to get greeted with skepticism in some circles, but it has been one of the things I feel least ambivalent about in terms of institutional structure. It's been very positive.

Q: Which of the programs are your responsibilities?

AF: I oversee about two-thirds of the organizing department, the operation side of the organization, and our services team. Ana Maria Archila, one of the other co-executive directors, oversees the education organizing and the immigration-related organizing, and I oversee the civil-rights organizing, the LGBTQ organizing, the workers organizing, and the environmental-justice and housing organizing. Oona Chatterjee, the third co-executive director, oversees the youth organizing and youth development, as well as our partnerships with two high schools that we helped to found, the Bushwick School for Social Justice and the Pan-American International High School. She also oversees our development work.



Andrew Friedman

Q: How did Make the Road begin?

AF: Both Oona and I had a background in organizing work, campus organizing for her, anti-Apartheid activism and anti-US-involvement-in-Central-America-related work for me.

Both of us found ourselves in law school. She found herself there having been pulled by the ear by her parents. I went feeling like I was interested in larger systemic change. But upon getting to law school both of us were really committed to not speaking for other people and not leaving unquestioned the power that lawyers and judges and legislators have, but rather trying to use the law and legislation to inform regular folks, participating more meaningfully in shaping public policy or litigation as a way to catalyze larger change.

Q: The two of you met in law school and came up with the idea to start the organization together...

AF: We were students and we were very process-focused, and so initially we had a reading group thinking about the relationship between law and organizing. We spent a lot of time thinking in the abstract, at a conceptual level. And then we spent a lot of time thinking about issues of process: questions of decision-making, non-hierarchical workplace.

After about eight months, it felt very heady and very divorced from anything on the ground. So we said, “Well, why don’t we try and do something, and even just as a learning exercise, we’ll learn more getting our hands dirty.” We started meeting people in different neighborhoods around the city and saying, “Would you be interested in a partnership?” Almost everyone we met with said, “Oh great, free lawyers! Like we got a ton of work for you!”

But a pastor right here in Bushwick said, “You know, people need lawyers because they don’t have power. They do need lawyers, but what they really need is power. What would be best is actually if we could find some organizers.” After having had meetings in Bedford Stuyvesant and up in the South Bronx and in Jackson Heights, we were so ecstatic to find a guy who shared our perspective. He was an experienced

organizer himself, so he moved us very quickly from our heads to on-the-ground work. He said, “Why don’t you do a workshop next week on federal welfare reform.”

Q: Was this during the time of Bill Clinton’s Welfare Reform?

AF: Clinton had signed the Welfare Reform Act in August of 1996, and this was the end of February of 1997. Everyone had just gotten their letters saying no more SSI, no more food stamps. Oona and I had prepared some insane, fourteen-page training plan, and we got here, and there were seventy-five Spanish-speakers in the room. We realized that no one cared about the intricacies of the eligibility rules -- all the stuff that you pay a lot of attention to in law school, which just doesn’t affect anyone on the ground because nobody on welfare in New York City owns their home, nobody owns a car.

So we pretty quickly got into trying to do much more basic training, and then we told people that there was a legal-services system for them to go to for help. “Give us your ZIP code. We’ll tell you the office.” And then we said, “Well, come back next week to see how it went.”

Everyone came back. They had gone to the local offices, which either did not have people who spoke Spanish or did not have adequate staff. So there were these original seventy-five people plus thirty of their friends who came back. Notwithstanding our grand vision of law and organizing, we spent two months just doing straight administrative law help. It was easier to figure out how to get someone’s food stamps back than how to confront malevolent policies of the Giuliani administration.

After a couple of months, we said, “All right, this is not going to happen organically. We have to dedicate time and energy to figuring out how we’re going to catalyze some organizing activity.” At that point, we created our membership structure, and we started to evolve into the organization that we are now.

Q: At that time, the initiatives and actions came from what your members saw happening in their neighborhood...

AF: Exactly. We did a pretty in-depth interview process with about the first one hundred people who we had been working with over the past five months. Based on those interviews, we identified five potential areas where there seemed to be some interest, and then we hosted a series of community dinners and threw it out there for a conversation: What are the people who are at this dinner most interested in working on? What do we think that there is the most opportunity to organize around? What started to emerge was the initial set of issues we took on.

Q: What were those issues?

AF: They were mostly around language access-- civil rights for limited English-proficient folks in New York City. At that time, everyone was very focused on what was changing about the welfare system, both at the federal level and at the city level with Giuliani’s Workfare program. That was where our heads went, as folks looking at the landscape. And it turned out, ironically, that for the folks in Bushwick, the problems predated all of these changes. They couldn’t talk to people at the city’s welfare centers in the 1970s and the 80s, and so it was a preexisting problem that folks identified.

Q: So Workfare was just one more problem on top of the more basic language problems?

AF: Exactly. No one felt good about Workfare. Everyone hated it. But the thing that people saw as their primary and insurmountable obstacle was that they couldn’t even communicate with their case worker about Workfare, about the application process, about requesting a fair hearing.

Q: New York City has just recently announced a new language access order for public services.

AF: Which is great! That's something that we have been working on for a long time. So that was the first issue that we started to work on, and pretty quickly new things started springing up.

At that point in time, Bushwick High School was at about 220% capacity and so they were doing this insane thing called "split shift," where half the kids go from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and the other kids go from 1:00 p.m. on. Every single adult we saw said, "Hey, can my kid do an internship?" We said: "Sure."

One day we looked around. We had one room on the third floor of a rectory, and we had something like nine or ten teenagers there. We had no phone system. I would show up in the morning with my cordless phone from home. There was no work for these kids to do. And we said, "This is really a bad use of these kids' time. We should get in touch with some educators. We should figure out a way to help them use this time so they're learning and also potentially doing organizing work themselves." Our youth power project emerged in that way.

And one day someone came in because their building had flooded because the sewage infrastructure for the neighborhood was the same as it had been when about one-sixth as many people lived here. So whenever it rained there were these huge backups, and literally cars would end up floating, would get lifted off the ground about two blocks from where the church was! Out of that we had a community meeting and eventually that grew into our environmental justice project.

Similarly, with increasing frequency folks came in who were working at sweatshops or doing light contracting or other work who hadn't gotten paid minimum wage, or who hadn't gotten paid wages at all, or were sleeping in the basements of bodegas. That's how we decided to work on immigrant workers' issues.

Q: That work takes place in the Workers in Action Committee?

AF: Exactly. In Brooklyn, it's called the Workers in Action Committee, and in Queens it's called the Workers United Committee. Together they form the Workplace Justice Project.

Q: What was the trajectory of the Workplace Justice Project? How did you get started on the Despierta Bushwick Campaign.

AF: We found that there were widespread labor-law violations that were affecting thousands of folks in many sectors: in restaurants, light manufacturing, the garment industry, general contractors not paying workers or folks doing landscaping work. There were violations everywhere. They're very common, and folks by and large feel too vulnerable to stand up for themselves when they're employed. In a lot of the industries that folks are working in, organized labor is not actively trying to organize for strategic reasons. So we spent a lot of time initially just helping challenge the impunity that employers had. So someone would come in. We would then work with the worker to draft a demand letter.

First it would be a confrontation supported by the members of our Workers in Action Committee or Workers United Committee in Queens. If it's a small amount of money, sometimes a boss will just pay the \$3,000 they had stolen from someone, depending on the employer, how scared they are. Oftentimes they won't, and then it will require some direct action and maybe some legal work, in collaboration with our legal team.

We found that we were pretty effective at winning millions of dollars over time, at different workplaces. But we were struggling with changing the institutional balance, building institutional power for immigrant workers. We wanted to find innovative ways to actually help workers organize.

It felt very challenging, given the fact that at this time, about five years ago, we only had one Workplace Justice Project organizer. We were not capable. We didn't have the staff to do it. We were winning money for folks, but it was almost like we were a multi-trade association of fired workers because people wouldn't come forward until they had lost their jobs. And then they would have lots of information and be better situated to stand up for

themselves in the future, but we were not building any institutional power in the workplace. We were very interested in thinking about how to do that.

A group of workers came to us from a retailer in the neighborhood. One of them was mad because she got fired for being pregnant. All of them were mad because they hadn't gotten any overtime pay. So we did a demand letter. We initiated litigation, but we also initiated a community boycott of this store.

A friend of mine who had done a lot of work with United Farm Workers was in town, and he was on the picket line with us. I was feeling sad because we were turning away probably only one out of four customers. And I was feeling like, "Huh, there are three out of four walking right by us." My friend pulled me aside and said, "You know, you're crazy. You can put any business out of business if you can turn away one in ten customers. We've done tons of research on this at the United Farm Workers. Profit margins are just not 25%. You should be feeling good. This is a higher percentage than any picket line I've ever seen."

United Farm Workers uses the boycott strategy a lot, so that information helped our thinking about strategy. The other thing that informed our thinking was that almost everyone who came by and was supportive said, "You know, my cousin works down the street and she's also not getting paid minimum wage. Why are you only targeting this store? Everyone in the block is not paying minimum wage or overtime."

It felt like we had some strategic strength with respect to the retail sector because we were able to get consumers to show solidarity. Also these folks were locked into long-term leases in the neighborhood, which is different from a lot of the light garment manufacturing, where they can just pick up and overnight go to a warehouse based in Corona or another neighborhood. So we felt we could effectively use public pressure to get the employers to do something.

At that point, we started thinking about trying to establish some sort of floor for working conditions and then steering consumers to those stores that respected those standards. We were also interested in trying to help the workers organize into a union, but we felt like we couldn't do it. So we started to look around for folks in the labor movement who were interested in partnering with us. We came into contact with folks at the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union [RWDSU] who were simultaneously looking for community partners to try to organize some kind of community-based efforts. So it was actually very fortuitous.

Our members, I think, had a strong commitment to the importance of organizing themselves and workers in general into unions. But they also had some deep skepticism from their experience with labor unions being either non-responsive to their concerns in this country or in their home countries. Mexico has a very corrupt labor movement. So there was a lot of work that had to be done to build trust with RWDSU. I think RWDSU was very open to doing that work. They had a very explicit commitment to work differently with the community and said: "We'll organize folks, but we'll organize them into a new local, not an existing local. So the workers that you helped to organize will actually control this local." They created Local 2006, which is all workers organized through the Despierta Bushwick Campaign.

Q: When you say that the union was open to doing the work that it takes to build trust, concretely what did that mean?

AF: They were willing to spend time with our members, not just with our staff. They were willing to go to the meetings, hear people's concerns. They were not defensive when people raised concerns about the labor movement. I think they were interested in a new kind of partnership also. In some ways they had a good track record doing work with community and Latino workers in particular, because a bunch of the folks at the RWDSU had done some greengrocer organizing.

Q: In the Lower East Side?

AF: In the Lower East Side for many years. So our members knew them because they had come and been supportive to some of the smaller, specific workplace campaigns that we had done over the years. People had some degree of familiarity. Mostly, it was just spending time, hearing people out, and taking seriously their concerns and not becoming defensive and thinking about concrete things we could do as we structured this agreement to work together to respond to those concerns.

Q: How many members does Local 2006 have now?

AF: One hundred or so. A decent size. It's certainly not big, but it's nine or ten shops and I think there is a real opportunity. Six employers are also in the process of talking with our organizers and have actually signed a neutrality agreement saying that workers can decide for themselves whether or not to organize.

Q: So that will be six additional shops also along Knickerbocker Avenue in Bushwick?

AF: Yes. They're very small, between 3 and 11 employees.

Q: In the nine or ten shops already organized what percentage of the workers are union members.

AF: All of them.

Q: That's good. And how are the wages and benefits?

AF: You know, the strategy has really been about doing organizing work with the workers, but also using consumer pressure to increase or leverage the worker's power in the workplace so that the employer will not retaliate. And we've also partnered with the state-- either Department of Labor or the State Attorney General-- to crack down on some of the bad practices.

The stores that we targeted for organizing were stores that were breaking minimum wage and overtime laws. So we filed complaints with the State Attorney General who investigated the complaints and told the stores "We will take into consideration future working conditions as we assess penalties for past malpractices."

Q: So they had an incentive to raise wages.

AF: If they're going to be spending the money anyway, it's better for the workers to get it as an ongoing benefit as opposed to a one-time, cash-out payment. It's better for the Attorney General because they're improving labor practices and better obviously for us in terms of what we're trying to do. So that's been the strategy: to combine state regulatory pressure with the consumer pressure with the worker organizing.

Q: Do they have a contract yet?

AF: They do.

SK. And what are their hourly wages?

AF: In the neighborhood of \$8.45 or \$8.65 an hour. That's a significant increase over what they were getting. These folks were getting in the neighborhood of four dollars an hour. Now they get overtime. They get vacation days. Health benefits are the biggest benefit. And part-time workers get health benefits also.

Some of the new shops are so small that they might not be able to sustain the health benefits, so that's a little bit on a case-by-case basis. But every single shop that's organized now is paying health benefits to part-time and full-time workers. And then there are vacation days, sick days, and just-cause firing, that is a big one.

Q: To what do you attribute the community response, given that that 25% rate of respecting the boycott was very high?

AF: It's interesting. I think that the folks who work at these stores and the folks who shop at them are neighbors. So I think folks feel more connected and probably some higher degree of solidarity with the concerns of the workers of the stores. I think it's not charity for the poor immigrant workers. It's really: "This matters to all of us. This is about our dignity. This is about being treated with respect by all employers." I think it's an easier case to make. It's certainly more self-interested.

Q: Are you thinking about bringing this campaign to Queens?

AF: Yeah. We're really interested in trying to replicate the campaign along a commercial strip in Queens like Junction Boulevard or 37th Avenue or Roosevelt Avenue. We're also very interested in tweaking the model a little bit and looking at some massive employers, like the Queens Mall, which has 175 employers and 3,000 employees. They are the beneficiaries of huge tax subsidies. So we have multiple leverage points: the employers, the parent corporation that owns the mall, city or state governments that are giving the subsidies. So it feels like there are some exciting possibilities. It's a little bit more challenging to steer consumers in the same way. It's a much more heterogenous shopping and working population.

Q: Would you use the same union partner there?

AF: I think we would. It's been an effective partnership. We have talked about doing partnerships with other unions like Teamsters for Democratic Union. We're also talking to folks at Unite Here to try to use this model of bringing consumers and community organizations together with labor unions when there are issues of shared concern.

Q: We've heard a lot about how the labor movement is in crisis: historically low rates of labor union participation, unions don't have effective organizing strategies... From your perspective of having organized workers in new ways and bringing new people into the union movement, what do you think about this crisis in labor?

AF: I think the crisis is real. I think workers are very vulnerable and unions are also very vulnerable. At the same time, unions are the most dynamic and powerful force on the left that we've had the opportunity to work with. They're significantly stronger and richer than any community-based organization we've ever worked with. So in some ways, the partnership has been about the strengths that they can bring to the table.

There are all these folks at the union who have been doing this work for twenty-five or more years. Sadly, I'm the person who has been doing a kind of community organizing work the longest among most of our coalitions. People tend to stop after about ten years. So in terms of a brain trust and experience, in terms of research departments that are well situated to look at complicated questions like the ownership of the Queens Mall and the subsidies they're receiving, who can actually look at this stuff – seeing that kind of power being brought to the table as we do this organizing work has been inspiring. And then the fact that the unions can actually make an investment in doing some of this challenging organizing work that takes years.

Not all unions are willing to make real investments in new organizing that takes a long time in small shops. I think the Knickerbocker Avenue campaign is a strategic experiment in many ways for folks at RWDSU.

Q: If you were talking to an audience of labor leaders or organizers and you had to tell them, "This is what you need to do to organize low-wage, immigrant workers. From our perspective..."

AF: From our perspective, we get some of this institutional power, experience, and resources. I think from their perspective, they get a level of dynamism on the ground, trustworthiness. They lost some of that dynamism, that connection to folks over the past decades through union corruption, or involvement with organized crime, or alienation in terms of demographics from newer workers, or racism. They certainly have lost the connection in the communities where their members live.

That's what we're bringing to the table and trying to get folks in the labor movement to see as valuable: that trust, that real understanding, not just about how to run a sophisticated corporate campaign against Wal-Mart, but also how to understand, how to elicit the opinions and the participation of their members, how to build trust so that folks are willing to take real risks to change their lives and build an institution like a labor union. Those are some of the things that Make the Road brings to the equation and that are valuable and needed almost across the board.

Obviously, there are sectors within organized labor that are really dynamic and really democratic and really responsive, but I think that overall they're good on institutional strength but have also evolved bureaucracies that are not always accessible to or responsive to the needs of the workers who are organized or the workers who they're trying to organize.

The dynamism that I think happens here comes by opening up a space for workers to actually come together and think strategically together and share their experiences. It takes an enormous amount of work. We have eleven committee meetings every single week!

Q: I saw the schedule. It's unbelievable.

AF: Right. It's totally nuts. And we have childcare and food and we're helping people with MetroCards. So it's expensive staff-wise and resource-wise. But I think that the benefits are incalculable in terms of helping people find community. It's transformative in terms of how much less alienated and isolated people are, regardless of whether or not they win anything.

But I think actually when folks come together and they feel safe and supported, issues emerge. And that is very valuable. It's a thing that if you're trying to run a sophisticated, hard-hitting campaign, you don't think like, "Hey, let's create a space that's open for people to feel comfortable in and see what emerges over the next three years." Obviously, we're not just creating that space. We're also trying to do other things. But I think that there is an enormous value in both personally and collectively having that space for people to come share information and also have access to the organizers who can help them think through that information. And I think that that's something that just never happens in the labor movement.

You know, not just within the labor movement, but in a lot of community organizing work, folks just don't have that much face time with each other. I think that's something that's special about what happens here.

Q: Can you think of any other nonprofit or community-based organizations in the country that you see doing that same kind of bridge-building for unions?

AF: I think that in New York City the folks at the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition are doing this work around the Kingsbridge armory development in partnership with RWDSU. ACORN and the UFT [United Federation of Teachers] partnered to organize childcare workers here in New York City.

There is historically some distrust between community organizations and unions, on both sides. I think a lot of the union folks think that the community-organizing groups are less serious or less effective. I think that the community-organizing folks see unions, notwithstanding a core democratic structure of elections, as not being very receptive to member input and participation, and much more in bed with the powerful.

But around the country – through Jobs with Justice and organizing janitors in Los Angeles, some of the big-ticket stuff that's now happening around the port of Los Angeles and the folks at LAANE [Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy] – there's an interesting partnership among unions and some community organizations to try and find areas of common concern.

Q: What do you see as the major issues on the horizon for Bushwick, and how are you seeing the current economic crisis play out in the neighborhood?

AF: In general, folks are also just having a harder time piecing together jobs. There is some immigration backlash happening, so it's harder for day laborers to find work. And then they often feel more vulnerable seeking help after they've encountered problems on a job where they get picked up along Woodside Avenue in Queens. You know, oftentimes they don't feel comfortable going to the NYPD now, because of the poisonous tone of the immigration debate, whereas a couple of years ago they maybe would have gone to the police.

The other thing in this neighborhood is that a lot of the light-manufacturing buildings are being replaced by gentrifying housing. Initially the buildings that became lofts were light manufacturing or abandoned, and so that's also affecting the number of work opportunities.

In Bushwick there is an increasingly corporate employment structure. There are fewer and fewer mom-and-pop employers and more firms that are run by private equity, like Dunkin' Donuts through the Carlyle Group, as opposed to locally-owned bodegas. Along Knickerbocker Avenue when we started there were maybe three stores with recognizable names to folks who don't live in a similar community. There were some low-income neighborhood chains, like Fat Albert or something like that. Now if you go there is a Subway, a Radio Shack.

This cuts both ways. In some ways, there are some real organizing opportunities when there is consolidation; these employers are less likely to have totally marginal practices. The 99-cent stores often will pay people \$25 for a twelve-hour day stacking things outside in the street for their displays, but McDonald's will tend to pay the minimum wage. They will sometimes have overtime violations. Even the companies that are complying with labor laws are not paying health benefits, and they're much more sophisticated in some ways with their exploitation. So we don't have the same foothold. It's better that the floor goes up a little bit, but obviously our challenge is getting the floor significantly higher than where the law sets it.

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