

LRR FOCUS: WORKER EXCHANGES – A POWERFUL WAY TO BUILD SOLIDARITY ACROSS BORDERS

A worker exchange – workers meeting with one another in each other's communities – challenges both liberal "guilt" and self-centered nationalism as motivations for local organizing around trade issues. Instead, an exchange identifies what the workers have in common: problems with employers, worries about trade's social impact, and a desire to make mutual and sustainable economic development the foundation for a fair trade program.

Your exchange should build bridges that lead to more effective grassroots organizing after everyone has returned home. There are four parts to any worker exchange:

I. Preparing for the exchange

- Recruit participants:
 1. Find out how many people your host organization can accommodate.
 2. Choose participants that best represent the diversity of interests and concerns in your community.
 3. Identify the companies or industries that are common to both your community and the area you will visit.
 4. Educate everyone on what to expect. If possible, have someone with foreign travel experience talk to your group about what they wish they had prepared for and what is dramatic, exciting, beautiful and interesting. Finally, be up front about what may be seen as inconveniences: heat, public transportation, etc.
- Bring photos, slides, newsletters, health and safety sheets, or videos of your group's work to share with your hosts. Try to have these translated into the host country's language.
- Plan the logistics well in advance. Your host organization can probably help you find inexpensive hotels. Also find out about car rentals and public transportation.
- Prepare for translation: Make arrangements to have translation available for those who need it.

II. Going abroad

- Make sure your trip includes culture as well as factory and village visits, since for many this will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.
- Take lots of photos, videos, and slides. Encourage everyone to keep a diary. These will be valuable when you share your experiences back home.
- Make contacts with activists and work to build ties.

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- If your trip is the first half of a two-way exchange, sit down with the delegation coming to the U.S. and help them plan their trip.

III. Hosting visitors in your town:

- Visit workers' communities and sites that embody working class culture.
- Show visitors the diversity of your home town. Give them an honest view of the U.S. and working class peoples' place in it. Site visits should include: neighborhood organizations, factories, economic justice groups, and visits to people's homes.
- Use the guests presence to foster dialogue, do some organizing, and build cross-border solidarity.
- Make sure translation services are available for those who need it.

IV. Follow-up:

- Try to build a cross-border organizing commitment linking work in your community and industries with similar work abroad.
- Use the momentum generated by the visits to build future work. For example, a speakers bureau could be formed to do outreach to unions, religious groups, business groups, and governmental agencies about the importance of justice in all aspects of trade policy and business abroad.
- Use the contacts and resources you have acquired to build a local coalition that demands workers' rights, environmental protections, and justice for working people around the world.

For further information on planning a worker exchange, finding resources, and making contacts, call the Federation for Industrial Retention and Renewal (312) 252-7676. ■



TIRN delegation meeting with Mexican workers, Summer 1991.
