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Jasmin Cardenas
jasmin.cardenas01@gmail.com

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Theater of the Oppressed and Labor Organizing: A Look at the Possibilities, Limitations, and Challenges

Jasmin Cardenas

A reflective essay to document the use of Theater of the Oppressed (TO) for labor organizing with a workers rights group in the Chicago area. Participants were working people from across Chicago’s Latinx immigrant and southside African American communities, mainly temporary staffing workers who had never performed before. This essay attempts to document the collaboration between an independent artist and an organization and highlight some limitations, possibilities and challenges of using TO for labor organizing.

In the summer of 2017, I approached the Chicago Workers Collaborative (CWC) because I saw a community of regular hardworking moms, dads and grandparents that were being taken advantage of and I wanted to help. Their stories filled me with anger towards factories that were profiting off of workers who were the most vulnerable in our communities: immigrants, older workers, and previously incarcerated

1 Jasmin Cardenas is a 2020-2022 International LAB Fellow recognized for her arts & civic engagement work by The Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics at Georgetown University. Harnessing the power of art in action, she’s working in communities caught at the intersection of poverty and violence. Leaning into her studies with Theater of the Oppressed founder Augusto Boal, she has used this powerful technique for organizing collective action, critical thinking, solution finding and healing. Co-founder of Workers TEATRO she collaborates with working people amplifying voices with theatre and storytelling. Proud daughter of Colombian immigrants Shirley Marie Cardenas and Dario Cardenas, Jasmin is a theater director, deviser, SAG-AFTRA actress, published storyteller, filmmaker and arts activist. For more information www.JasminCardenas.com or workersteatro@gmail.com.

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returning citizens. Companies were taking advantage of people who are very much like my immigrant Colombian family. Wage theft, retaliation for exposing abuse, discrimination were all regular occurrence’s inside of factories. Even though the workers were seeking full time jobs with benefits, they were stuck in a system designed to make them disposable without the power to advance or negotiate. Their condition as disposable workers affects their morale as well as their ability to speak up when abuse occurs.

CWC is a workers’ collaborative that helps temp staffing workers understand and fight for their rights. I offered CWC a Theater of the Oppressed workshop to see if the workers would find it helpful in their organizing. It took off with so much interest and energy that what followed was a surprising ownership of the work and techniques by the workers themselves. As a technique, Theater of the Oppressed (TO) was exactly the right methodology to support the workers and strengthen their organizing. Their stories reminded me of the stories Augusto Boal, founder of TO, shared when I studied with him on the lower east side in NYC at the Brecht Forum. TO helped to develop their leadership skills, provided them an opportunity to critically analyze their situation, allowed them to share information about their terrible treatment in a way that brought connection and unification, and offered a creative structure to explore potential solutions. What followed was a five-year journey using theater to fight for workers’ rights that has shifted my practice, reprioritized my time and made me deeply worried about the erosion of workers’ rights, insatiable corporate greed and the disposability of people.

I viewed my partnership with CWC as based on three guiding principles, respecting the expertise of each of the stakeholders:

2 TEMPORARY STAFFING INDUSTRY | CWC 2020 (chicagoworkerscollaborative.org)
3 Temporary help jobs are increasingly replacing standard full-time, direct hire work. The 2017 Contingent Worker Supplement (CWS) to the Current Population Survey revealed the following facts about how the temporary help industry contributes to poverty and structural racism: *temporary help agency workers earn 41 percent less than do workers in standard work arrangements. * 53.4 percent of workers in standard arrangements receive an employer-provided health insurance benefit, compared to only 12.8 percent of temporary help agency workers * While black workers comprise 12.1 percent of the overall workforce, they comprise 25.9 percent of temporary help agency workers; Latinx workers are 16.6 percent of all workers, but 25.4 percent of temporary help agency workers. The share of temporary help agency workers identifying as non-white increased by 10 percent between 2005 and 2017.
1. The Workers are experts of their lives, and sharing their lived experiences anchors the work in the areas of most immediate need.

2. The partnering organization has the eagle's eye view of what is happening at the state, county and local level, and they can bring labor action strategies to the work. Their historical knowledge, vast labor networks, and various campaigns inform and support the work.

3. The Arts Activists bring a wealth of experience and knowledge in various forms of art and performance. Artists carry unique expertise in effective communication, crafting powerful expressive experiences for all involved, and have the ability to humanize issues.

These three principles represent the key players at the heart of the work: working people who are the reason the work exists, the non-profit organization/collaborative that represents the workers, and the artist who is providing a vehicle for the work (Figure 1). The technique they offer through their creative practice is unique to that artist; in my case it was theater, storytelling, and specifically Theater of the Oppressed. In other projects and practices it might be tile mosaic, jewelry making or podcasting. The roles, needs and actions of these three different players will greatly affect the partnership experience in this kind of work.

After the initial workshop with CWC, the workers asked me to support a street action they were planning on Chicago's south side in Gage Park – a gender violence march spotlighting Domestic Violence

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4 My background includes TO, devising, acting, directing, writing, physical theater, Viewpoints, storytelling, ensemble techniques, voice, arts education. I am ready at any time to employ a technique that can support the work that needs to get done. Uniquely, I am also a Spanish speaking first generation American. Which means that as the daughter of Colombian immigrants I have first-hand experience with racism and discrimination and as a bilingual, college educated US citizen I also carry privilege.
Awareness Month in October. Using Image and Forum Theater\(^5\) it became clear that the continuum of gender violence that women workers were experiencing encompassed more than just home life. It included the commute to work in vans (that were driven by men hired by the Temp Staffing agencies) where women were frequently harassed. That same treatment continued at the job sites by Supervisors and other workers where women were treated as objects and silenced by threats of firing and retaliation.

We created a piece titled *Calladita No Te Ves Mas Bonita/ You are Not Prettier When Quiet*\(^6\). This is a play on words of a very old and famous Latinx saying, used to keep girls and women quiet when they experienced sexual or physical violence, *Calladita Te Ves Mas Bonita/ You Are Prettier When You Are Quiet* (Figure 2). This initial project was so successful in engaging worker participation that in December 2017 CWC held a launch event Building Community Power to announce Theater of the Oppressed as CWC’s newest tool for workers’ rights. At that point I applied for, and we were awarded, The Catalyst Initiative\(^7\) from The Center for Performance and Civic Practice. This offered CWC and me some support & training to begin a more formal partnership as an artist collaborating with a non-arts partner.

When I met CWC in 2016 they were not using theater in any way within their organization. It was a traditional workers rights advocacy organization. In January 2018, I began a six-month focus on Train-the-Trainer in Theater of the Oppressed workshops during which all four CWC worker site leaders gathered monthly in downtown Chicago where I taught them TO. Simultaneously, I began weekly TO Worker Outreach Workshops at the four CWC sites across the Chicagoland area: Englewood, Little Village, Gage Park and the far north suburb of Waukegan, IL\(^8\).

\(^5\) For helpful definitions of these techniques [Theatre of the Oppressed techniques - Center for Applied Theatre](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQVEVyaSvo5oBdcdbn3c6Msp2rY27v0fnyJLyey5C8Nro1CBx2ry8LzbovMl9c2jHeVlrKzrmU0/pub)

\(^6\) [https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQVEVyaSvo5oBdcdbn3c6Msp2rY27v0fnyJLyey5C8Nro1CBx2ry8LzbovMl9c2jHeVlrKzrmU0/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vQVEVyaSvo5oBdcdbn3c6Msp2rY27v0fnyJLyey5C8Nro1CBx2ry8LzbovMl9c2jHeVlrKzrmU0/pub)

\(^7\) [https://issuu.com/centerforperformanceandcivicpractic/docs/cpcp_catalyst_initiative_chicago](https://issuu.com/centerforperformanceandcivicpractic/docs/cpcp_catalyst_initiative_chicago)

\(^8\) A visual presentation of the partnership: [https://vimeo.com/543752577](https://vimeo.com/543752577)
This initial collaboration was so magnetic that we continued to work together. CWC began to include me in labor actions they were making by encouraging their staff and worker members to participate in the weekly theater gatherings I was co-hosting in their four worker centers. We began to see how theater could help them be more effective in developing leadership skills among their staff, as well as develop community amongst their volunteer worker members. (Figure 3)

Theater became an incredible tool in workforce development across their organization. During the next three years, we created powerful TO scenes of worker exploitation and presented performances and interactive workshops across Chicagoland, across the country at conferences, by invitation at private events, in church basements, theaters and out in public spaces. The arsenal of TO is vast and I used

“The Theatre of the Oppressed techniques that Jasmin is sharing are excellent ways to do leadership development, public shaming, community accountability actions, worker outreach, policy advocacy, and visibility: which are major strategies for asserting workers’ rights.” - Tim Bell, Executive Director, CWC

“Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building.” - Paolo Freire

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9 Allegory created during our presentation at PTO Conference, May 2018. Includes worker ensemble members, and conference participants including Julian Boal and Ellie Friedland. https://vimeo.com/500231757
10 For May Day 2019 WRT was invited to perform at a rally where our predominantly Spanish speaking cast would not have translators or microphones. leaning into the universal language of body, sounds and animals we created a piece to speak to the racial discrimination black workers face daily and Latinx workers see daily at the Temp Staffing offices. https://vimeo.com/632108550
play, listening and Image and Forum Theater methodology. Collaboratively, our work lent itself to people power, to conscientización\(^{11}\) and developing the kind of critical thinking that activates and sparks the spirit within each of us that recognizes our own worth. We spent time considering their condition as temporary staffing workers, the roles played by the factories and the Temp Staffing Agencies as well as their identities as immigrants and/or previously incarcerated workers with records. Their everyday lived experience was one traumatic encounter after another. Dwelling on this reality was not productive, so we moved quickly to creative solution seeking. The workers were anxious to bring about a change in their positioning and their wages at work. This fueled their enthusiasm and interest to meet, rehearse, and do outreach or actions.

Because we always combined workshops on local issues with our interactive performances, our work educated other temp workers about their rights and strategies to fight for worker rights. In 2019, some 150 workers at a factory in Waukegan had been mysteriously fired without much explanation. It was later discovered that their names had been on a ‘No Match’ letter from the Trump Administration.\(^{12}\) In a public meeting held at the Waukegan Public library, members from CWC used theater to act out the reality of that

\(^{11}\) Conscientization: the action or process of making others aware of political and social conditions, especially as a precursor to challenging inequalities of treatment or opportunity; the fact of being aware of these conditions. (https://www.lexico.com/definition/conscientization)

\(^{12}\) To see a sample of a SSA No Match letter see page 8 of Arise Chicago’s No Match Toolkit: https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/arisechicago/pages/2531/attachments/original/1608334437/2021_Arise_Chicago_ONLINE_No_Match_Toolkit.pdf?1608334437
firing and how hard it was to get in touch with the factory owner as about 50 of those same workers looked on. It was an information gathering meeting and an attempt to organize these non-union workers who had all been fired into a collective group that could stand together. In addition, we educated the public – creating allies – as well as advocating with representatives who were working on labor policy.

Using a tool I learned from PTO colleague Charles Adams, the workers and I explored our groups challenges and opportunities with The Praxis Forest, a Freirean technique of problematization and action trees to transform real world problems through collective analysis and action planning. (Figure 4.)

We continued to monitor our own activities and plan for the future in Reflection Activities with CWC staff members & theater worker participants. Figure 5 (left below) is a list of major performances/presentations from Fall of 2017 to Fall of 2018. These events were mostly all performances of scenes based on worker experiences that led to an interactive theater workshop with the audience to dig deeper into worker abuses and ongoing worker exploitation. These events were about educating and advocating for workers' rights with individuals in positions of power and influence (Economic Policy Institute, Chicago Foundation for Women, UIC School of Public Health with researchers and public policy stakeholders in attendance). Figure 6 (right below) details what our work had focused on up until that point and identifies what we wanted to focus on moving forward.
A note about our name: the theater activities I offered in 2017 began as exploratory activities, without a long-term plan in mind. As interest grew, in 2018 we began to call the group CWC Workers Theater, Workers Theater Ensemble and other loose names. Then in 2019 as more invitations surfaced, and as the members/participants in the theater work began to self-identify with the theater, we had more formal conversations about our group’s work. The worker-participants (which were also CWC staff members) decided that they wanted to give it an official name: The Workers Resistance Theater/ Teatro de Trabajadores en Resistencia. The workers/members wanted to give us official roles. They said I was the “Maestra & Directora,” main teacher and the Director of the group. I tried to push back on a hierarchical structure of roles, asking other members to step into the “role of Director,” but they insisted. I suggested that there should be multiple leadership roles and they identified a Treasurer, Carmen Cabrera, to be in charge of fundraising because they wanted to find a way to pay me since there were no funds to support the work and they knew that I was volunteering my time. Isaura Martinez was the Theater Leader of the Little Village group and Fredy Amador was the Theater Leader of the Waukegan group. The group discussed possible ways each location could create food fundraisers or partner with churches and local community groups to sell food, shirts, or hats to fundraise for sustainability. The local fundraisers didn’t pan out, but I continued to look for grants to support the work.
We educated other temp workers about their rights, advocating for workers’ rights among policy stakeholders and educating the public about the real working conditions in factories across the Chicagoland area. We also supported labor campaigns via public shaming actions. In one labor case, it was after a well-coordinated, big public shaming campaign on Chicago’s Magnificent Mile that workers finally got the attention of the owners of a factory that would not meet with them, even after months of negotiations. In a last minute rehearsal our ensemble quickly put together a spectacle street action which we performed on the coldest day of 2020 in order to coordinate with Models Alliance #VictoriasSilence on the east and west coasts. Notably, the worker participants in the core ensemble, The Workers Resistance Theater, grew in their leadership skills, confidence in public speaking, and advocating for their own rights.

13 https://labornotes.org/2020/02/women-confront-ugly-harassment-beauty-products-plant
In January 2020, our ensemble presented at the national working group on Arts, Culture and Workforce Development\textsuperscript{14} in Chicago, presented by ArtPlace America, NORC at the University of Chicago, and Jobs for the Future. (Figure 7 above) The working group consisted of workforce development representatives from across different sectors, nationally. In reflection our worker participants shared the following:

“A veces en la fábrica te menorizan como persona. Pero usted llega a estos lugares/eventos donde nos presentamos con esas personas, y te hacen sentir tan grande, tan importante como persona. Porque ellos les interesan tu historia, les interesa ayudarte, les interesa lo que estás viviendo en la fábrica. Yo me vengo con un aprendizaje y con una satisfacción tan grande, que digo… alguien le interesa mi vida. (Isaura Martínez, Líder del Teatro y Trabajadora/Actriz del grupo)

Sometimes in the factory they minimize your personhood. But when you arrive at these events where we presented, the people make you feel so big, so important as a person. Because they are interested in your story, they are interested in helping you, they are interested in knowing about your experience in the factory. I return from those events having learned so much and feeling very satisfied. Such a big satisfaction that I say…. someone cared about my life.” (Isaura Martinez)

“Así me sentí yo el día que fuimos al centro. Me sentí importante. Te digo, me sentí importante por un momento. / That’s how I felt the day we went downtown. I felt important. I tell you, I felt important for one moment.” (Angélica Arreguin, Worker Performer)

TO as a Labor Organizing Methodology: Challenges and Lessons Learned

The situation for temporary workers is very nuanced and complicated, and while theater proved to be an incredible tool for their fight for worker rights, it also had its limitations. The labor struggle in this country is really in need of all the support it can get as we are drowning in an era of high consumption, lack of civic engagement and corporate greed with profits in the billions while a large share of the US population falls deeper into hunger, debt, poverty, and the world’s most vulnerable population faces the climate crisis. The following points illustrate how we learned some of the most important lessons about the relationship of theatre to labor struggles.

\textsuperscript{14} Working Group Case Study section https://www.artplaceamerica.org/workforce-development
1. **Scenes created with individuals who understand the various players in the struggle for rights, both workers and organizers, can lead to powerful stories that speak to the heart of current events.**

Sometimes theater groups want to support movement work, but because of their expansive production calendars and programming, their plays are often out of sync with what’s happening to people now. But keeping the pulse of things happening is not difficult when you are working with the people being affected daily. Using rehearsal as an organizing and educational space, we were making scenes about the “No Match” letters from the Trump Administration as letters were going out.\(^{15}\) This educational letter was meant to tell the Employer to check for clerical errors or other discrepancies, but no one explained to the employees what was happening. It sent a shockwave of panic through working immigrant communities, because out of fear companies fired people who were on No Match lists. In the winter, spring, and summer of 2019 no one was talking about it yet in the media. Only workers organizations like CWC and Arise Chicago were addressing this issue. It was not mentioned on the evening news of major networks yet. But it was affecting workers in real time. In our scene, the CWC Executive Director was in rehearsal one day with us when he stepped into the scenes as a job Supervisor at a factory who asked a worker:

**SUPERVISOR:** ¿Cómo va con el asunto de sus papeles? ¿Ya fuiste al seguro social? Tienes 10 días. Si no me trai esa información en 10 días estas corrida.”

**WORKER:** Pues no, no he tenido tiempo. Pero eso es algo personal. Eso no tiene nada que ver con mi trabajo.

**SUPERVISOR** How’s it going with your papers? Did you go to the Social Security office yet? You have 10 days. If you don’t bring me this information in 10 days you’re fired.

**WORKER** Well, no, no I haven’t had time. But that has nothing to do with my work. That’s a personal matter.”

In that moment no one knew how else to respond to the factory Boss. The CWC Executive Director knew exactly what to say to support a worker in this moment:

*Lo que puede decir es, yo entregue mis papeles el primer día que yo empese a trabajar. Ustedes tenian tres días para verificarlo. Si no lo hicieron, no es problema mio, es problema de ustedes.*

\(^{15}\)No Match - Arise Chicago
(What you could say is: ‘I submitted my papers when I started to work here. You had 3 days to verify all my information. If you didn’t verify it, that’s your problem, not mine.

This caused a great amount of laughter and response from all of us listening. This is a perfectly legitimate answer and none of the workers nor I knew about this three-day clause. While it was a start, we continued to develop the scene and found that the workers had several different strategies they could employ to respond to this question from management. One strategy involved asking for their “archivo personal/personnel file” which would show the worker that the government had, in fact, sent a No Match letter and their name was on it. This was an essential step in understanding what was happening because the employers at several different factories were not even telling the workers that their names were on a letter from the federal government. In addition, the workers could see that this letter mentioned nothing about immigration status or actions the company was threatening them with. The letter is purely clerical and educational in tone but was being wielded to strike fear in workers’ lives.

While I am a good theater artist and the workers are capable working people, we knew the problem that was being faced by workers and we were exploring it but we did not have any idea how to properly respond to this new attack that workers were facing. Having a well experienced & knowledgeable organizer participating at the rehearsals offered us the necessary information to respond to a direct request by a supervisor. Knowing labor strategy creates more actionable experiences in rehearsal and performance.

2. **Artistic vision cannot outweigh Labor struggle.**

Working together with a workers’ rights organization allowed me to see what we were working towards, and I came alongside to support that vision with theater techniques as a tool.

I first met CWC in 2016 when I was the Assistant Director workshopping *Beyond Caring*, a new play exploring America’s shadow economy of temp staffing workers who have no safety net, no benefits, and no worker protections, at Lookingglass Theatre. CWC workers came and shared their stories of temp worker abuse. This is when I met them for the first time. That was an awakening experience for me. I didn’t
know what went on in factories here in the US, right inside of Chicago. One of the workers, Isaura Martinez, was describing her experience of boarding an overcrowded van, squished between men, some women were forced to sit on men’s laps because of the overcrowding in the vehicles. Others laid across the floor while driven to a job site an hour outside of Chicago.

“Pues ya que uno no tiene transporte se tiene que ir en el raite. Y ya pasa y está medio apretado y tienes que ir apretado ahí. El camino es una hora. Y nos cobran $8 por el ride. / Since we don’t have a car, we have to take the van ride. When the van comes even if its really tight you have to squish in the van. The drive is 1 hour. They charge us $8 for the ride.”

Isaura and the other workers reminded me of my aunt, my mom, my cousins whose humanity was invisible to their employers and who were at the mercy of systems designed to treat them as disposable. This problem was so big and I wanted to offer another possible tool in their fight. I think that’s why I never forgot my role as a helper in a larger labor struggle.

Even as we prepared to perform, I was reminded of what mattered. In preparation for several outreach events in a row we rehearsed quite a bit to be ready. In July 2018, The Chicago Foundation for Women invited us to perform at The Harold Washington Library and that same week we also participated in a Fight for 15 Campaign march that began in Union Park and walked to the Thompson Illinois State building in downtown Chicago. Upon finishing there, we raced to the McCormick expo center and presented at the national EARN Economic Policy Institute where we performed and facilitated an interactive workshop for policy heads and researchers from around the country. While we did add extra rehearsals for this kind of work, there were participants who couldn’t make it or had to bring their children. (Figure 8) Having a flexible attitude knowing that everyone was doing their best was important for our group. While I would have liked to rehearse more to help us get down the timing and transitions, I knew that the campaigns we were working on were more important than the need for artistic and aesthetic excellence. Many situations called

16 Lawsuits allege staffing agencies, currency exchanges scheme against factory workers - Chicago Tribune
for immediate action which didn’t leave time for more rehearsal, and we’d often perform something that in my professional mind wasn’t quite ready for public consumption.

3. **Theater alone will not create change for workers.**

Building empathy, growing compassion, building relationships, and hearing each other’s stories can bring us closer to seeing each other’s humanity, which is an important step in humane treatment and moving towards equity. But real change must be strategically done in connection with policy change at the state and federal levels. Real change will happen through laws made to protect workers’ safety over production. Enforcement of those laws will bring about real changes on the factory floors. The labor unions and workers fighting for rights are speaking to the choir, but theater can help to amplify their voices and help reach new audiences.

In 2018, a Chicago theater company invited us to perform in their PeaceBOOK theater festival in Chicago parks. Although there was never a moment in the 4-year partnership where I felt that theater alone would bring about the change needed or solve all the problems for workers, the idea of touring to different parks across the city of Chicago supported our need to do outreach, educate the public and potentially support worker recruitment. But in working with a professional theater company, it became clear that we
needed to rehearse more so that our performances were closer to script, rather than the very fluid improvisation that usually characterized our performances. Rehearsing for coordination with lights and sound required more time from our worker ensemble. More thought needed to be given to costuming and casting. Normally our work is fluid enough for anyone to step in who shows up on the day/week of the performance. But if there are set pieces or chairs to move, or crates to walk around, levels to consider for sight lines – well, all of these theatrical components require more precision in our ensemble’s delivery and execution. It was a new level of work effort for the group. Our group consisted of non-professional performers (actually low wage working moms and dads with kids at home). Requiring extra time for rehearsal, I felt, was too much to ask. There wasn’t enough of a payoff for them.

One of the reasons we accepted the invitation to perform in this theater festival was to use it as a recruitment tool in addition to spreading awareness of workplace abuse for low wage workers in the Chicagoland area. While our contribution to the festival was VERY well received, the labor exchange was unequal. In part, this was because we didn’t have an extra team of people to do outreach and follow up. The workers themselves, tired from their workday, came to the early call time to do a sound check on stage, run through the scene quickly with sound and lights, sit around and wait for when we performed – and then by the end of an evening full of other performances as well, there was no more time in their life to stick around and do outreach and recruitment. Not having a team of people to support that specific need made this investment of time and energy worth very little.

Additionally, the theater company that produced the festival and invited us to perform had offered each of our 6 performers in our ensemble $25 for their participation. But instead of just handing them the $25 they wanted vulnerable immigrant workers to fill out tax forms. This left a bad taste in our mouths because no one was going to fill out risky tax forms for $25. In the end it was clear that performing in a traditional theater event/festival was not valuable in ultimately supporting the fight for workers’ rights.
4. **Theater of the Oppressed is a useful tool but it is not the only tool in the toolbox.**

If the purpose of taking on a world social issue is to advocate for a collective win with a new outcome – a different reality that will affect many people – then limiting ourselves to one tool doesn’t help the cause. Our love for this technique cannot blind us to its limitations or limit our reach and scope of activity.

While I am mainly a theater practitioner, I realize there are other labor strategies that exist that need to be used to properly advocate for workers. For this reason, it is key to partner with a workers rights organization to lead labor actions and directly connect our work to labor strategy. The toolbox of artistic expression is vast, and while I am not a visual artist, visual artistic expression was generative for our collaboration. Our Theater Leaders, Isaura and Fredy, led drawing activities around identity, for example, using our countries’ flags to help with team building. Another time we did a drawing activity on seeking sanctuary spaces for calm and repair, sharing our individual drawings and discussing how and why these places were special to us. These activities had nothing to do with TO, but they fed the group's need to connect, to slow down our rhythm, to counter the stress that was vividly present.

Since the participants were not professional performers, dancers, or pantomimes, I also led them in activities based on the Jaques Lecoq methodology to work on stage presence, group awareness and movement quality. This gave us an opportunity to raise our skill level, strengthen our ensemble sensitivities, and bring more polish to our stage presence and stage work. Similarly, I regularly leaned into Viewpoints as my choice methodology to develop a heightened sense of the performers’ spatial awareness on stage and in relationship to each other. As Ann Bogart notes, “Through Viewpoints we learn to listen with our entire bodies and see with a sixth sense.”

Working with non-performers meant helping to activate within them that same self-awareness, self-care, and group care/awareness that the factory line beats out of them. Using soft focus, tempo, gestures we could slow down the rush of time and be present. Playing in the architecture of a room aware of the topography developing our group we were able to be present with each other and build our ensemble.
wanted to help them to get out of their heads where the stories they were told about their lives were ones about disposability and get into their bodies where they could reconnect with themselves, each other, their core and find their strength. Then our conversations and critical inquiry into workplace abuse came from an experience of physical mastery. Using a mix of activities on different days or in different seasons, depending on our groups’ needs, allowed us to stretch and grow in different styles, methods, and strategies.

5. **Theater of the Oppressed is an excellent tool to build solidarity and leadership and therefore could be instrumental in coalition building between black and brown workers.**

Having used T.O. across communities of difference in the past I knew the power that could come from using Image Theater to strengthen one’s ability to communicate, to unpack the ugliest of beliefs and thereby support the growth of a supportive relationship between participants. Communicating what is hard to say in words through bodies, sound, and movement provides an opportunity to deal directly with divisive misinformed beliefs, lies, and assumptions. Boal’s games exercise our ability to observe, to analyze, and to “listen” to each other verbally and non-verbally. Tim Bell, reflecting at the close of TO training session said.

> I think it (theater activity) brings everyone’s energy, makes our team stronger, cuz we build trust with each other, cuz we’re being very vulnerable in these moments. We have to open ourselves up and that’s not very easy to do. But when we do open ourselves up and we are supporting each other then we are building trust which is something that is important.

When we brought together all four CWC sites there was a mix of workers from across Chicago’s diverse communities. A majority were monolingual, Spanish-speaking immigrant Latino workers and about a third of the participants were monolingual English speaking African American workers. Image theater became a way for workers to have difficult “conversations” about topics like the different forms of discrimination towards Latinx workers verses black workers. Many of these tensions came through in our scenes but
certainly worker unity grew when experiences of discrimination surfaced. For example, Latinx workers heard black workers say, “I’ve gotten to the temp office early, seven AM and they make me wait and wait. I’ve waited all day and not gotten sent out to the factories. I sit there and watch all day long as the Hispanics get sent out to work.” Latino workers also shared equally revealing experiences of discrimination. Hearing their peers’ experiences made them realize the different ways temp agencies manipulate and control workers. (Figure 9)

Two strong negative opinions that each group had of the other that were not shared outright but came out in small ways thru side comments or asides were about immigrants taking/stealing American jobs and the disparaging stereotype that black workers are not hard workers. With some deep-seated negative beliefs towards the other group just under the surface it was necessary to take those beliefs head on and unpack them. Part of this happened through education and part of this happened by asking difficult questions, having difficult conversations and playing games that allowed us to highlight their shared experiences of oppression and shared struggle.

Being able to read body language better and to be able to understand whatever the concern issue is that they may be dealing with. But I like it because it helps me to identify with body language cuz
people don’t always have the words to describe whatever. I like it (Image Theater) it’s a good exercise. … We’re talking about building an alliance between brown and black workers. I think it’s important to be able to help our brown and black brothers and sisters that are out here struggling and working. That we have a dialogue and be a strong core with us as organizers and leaders. – Gregory Mann, African American CWC Staff Member reflecting after a theater session.

We created a scene we called **WORKING: The Intersection of Race & Discrimination**\(^{17}\) based on personal experiences of discriminatory treatment in the temp office. African American workers are regularly passed over for job opportunities and immigrant Latinx workers are not given enough information about their job placement or training and even lack of transport security from job sites. In it, an African American worker encourages the Latina character to work at a more manageable pace. During a performance we used a technique that Boal offers where we spotlight a character and everyone else freezes and we just hear that characters inner monologue. The immigrant worker spoke about their fear of being fired. A few Black workers audibly gasped when the Latina said they were afraid they’d get deported if they pissed off the supervisor. (Figure 10)

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\(^{17}\) The script is available at  [https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vT7sObi-KQWxjzIeFftUlqVgUptk4K9y8Jg6Kg5vWALzz1P8KFCstPM0HIWXyD6oNIXS1JH48Kum9/pub](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vT7sObi-KQWxjzIeFftUlqVgUptk4K9y8Jg6Kg5vWALzz1P8KFCstPM0HIWXyD6oNIXS1JH48Kum9/pub)

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Fig. 10: The moment of public interventions in a Forum Theater scene titled, **WORKING: The Intersection of Race & Discrimination** performed at a Chicago Women Foundation event The Harold Washington Library, 2018
Once they learned each other’s truths they were able to empathize. Once they learned how their beliefs about each other were being manipulated by false narratives they were ready to go to bat for each other. Story sharing and critical analysis exposed how both of their communities are the victims of similar strategies by temp agencies and corporations profiting off their labor.  

One challenging question remains: How can arts-based activist work be done in a way that is life-giving, respectful, inclusive, and equitable to all the people involved? 

Honestly, I don’t think an easy answer can be found in a society whose engine is capitalism, but the work must continue as we redefine structures seeking an ecosystem that values the many voices doing important work. Corporate non-profit structures may not be the best containers for collaborative efforts to exist. When non-profit theatres and other organizations rely on structures not rooted in communal ethos, individuals can get lost in the fray. My experience as an independent artist collaborating with a non-profit had its challenges. While I gained the trust and favor of the actual workers who were being represented by this organization, tensions arose between me and upper leadership as our work became more established. The collaboration which grew very organically began to require much more labor, a clarification of roles, and more formal structures.

It was my job to craft stories, curate experiences and create theater with workers out of their painful reality for the purpose of liberation and change. The workers called me their “maestra/teacher” and “directora/ director” even as I explained that they were the experts of their experience, and I was there to help and support. They continue to be my maestros. I saw us as a team. At first, Workers Resistance Theater was just a part of Chicago Workers Collaborative but not formally or officially. I was leading the

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18 As low wage temp workers they have many shared struggles, but as members of different communities they have uniquely different struggles. For more information, listen to The Infinite Room, A Podcast by Lookingglass Theater, Host Andy White interviews, Isaura Martinez, Tim Bell and Jasmin Cardenas. https://anchor.fm/lookingglass-theatre-company/episodes/Theatre-as-A-Change-Agent-Part-II-Breaking-Down-the-Walls-e2ly3

19 https://www.chicagoworkerscollaborative.org/action
work but not on staff. The workers who came to meetings, rehearsals and performed were volunteering their time, a part of the collaborative but also not paid staff. CWC did provide paid staff members and pursued grants\textsuperscript{20} to support the work. As an independent artist, I wrote grants to support our work and pursued payment from institutions where we performed. It was a very piecemeal effort supported by much unpaid labor.

As we toured, sponsoring institutions were asking for more formalized titles and roles to describe us and our work. At one point the Workers Resistance Theater ensemble members wanted to label me Artistic Director. What would that mean? I knew that the work we created was completely collaborative and highly dependent on all the members involved. Might a title like Artistic Director allow me to better pursue funding opportunities to support this work? Would I be credited for my labor as an individual artist working as part of a collective and within a broader organizational structure? Do titles produce hierarchy in a collective model, and does AD favor the artistic labor, especially in our current gig economy?

Might an institution be resistant to this idea, this title? While CWC is a not-for-profit collaborative, it is also an institution with a mandated structure, many job titles, and salaried individuals. How does a collaborative theater group exist within this frame? What does it mean to share our stories, our skills, our time and talent in a community centered effort, rooted in wellness and communal growth, while conforming to structural and legal obligations?

For workers, sharing their stories is about fighting for their rights. Their stories are their voice and belong to them. For the organization, the curated stories and performance work are useful in developing campaigns to support the larger labor movement. The organization is connected to a larger network that can put the stories in front of policy and decision makers. For artists, collaborating offers an opportunity to use their skills and techniques to craft scripts and performances that will help shift hearts and amplify

\textsuperscript{20} Begin playing \url{video link} at 01:30 to see 1min of our workers theater in rehearsal in Little Village at Amor de Dios Church. CWC was awarded a 2018 Catholic Campaign for Human Development grant to support our work.
stories that need to be heard. For the artist, those scripts or filmed materials are living samples of their work. How do we hold the work so that it honors and serves all the people involved?

Collaborations aren’t neutral. They are structures that organize how people and institutions work together. Theater creation requires labor, and all labor should be compensated and credited. Arts labor is real labor. In the context of a workers’ collaborative, then, artists must also be considered workers whose labor efforts use a different set of tools (art) and machinery (the human body) to deliver valuable outputs and products. To undervalue activist artmaking labor would not be consistent with the values driving the work. The mutual desire to develop a supportive, humane, just, and activist working relationship between workers/storytellers, the collaborating artist, and the non-profit representing the workers in a corporate system remains challenging. (Figures 11-12)
CLOSING THOUGHTS

Even as we struggle to create healthy collaborations the work remains powerful and must be recognized and celebrated. (Figure 13) It is clear to me that because we respected the expertise of the stakeholders doing the work and moved forward with intention, focused on a new reality for workers, The Workers Resistance Theater experiment accomplished a great deal. The work was groundbreaking for the unification of black and brown workers in Chicago. Leaders rose up within and outside of CWC developing skills that continue to benefit the organization and the broader movement for workers’ rights. It was transformative for members of the group who felt seen and valued for the first time. It was healing for members of the group who were able to process traumas. It was life-giving to myself as an arts activist who wants to have a REAL impact on social issues in our community. Overall, it was a powerful collaboration that continues to grow new possibilities for working people in the Chicagoland area.

Ahora soy una mujer más segura … El Teatro me ayudó a sanar por medio de mi cuerpo - un imagen congelada podía sacar y sanar lo que mi corazón callaba en ese momento. Y es una experiencia la mas bonita que tengo. Y ahora gracias al teatro sigo de pie porque aprendí a crecer emocionalmente como persona y sé el valor que tengo. Y sé mis derechos como trabajadora temporal y como mujer me siento – impactó mucho a mi vida y le dio un cambio total a mi vida, el teatro.

Now I am a more confident woman…. The Theater helped me heal through my body – thru a frozen image I was able to get out and heal what my heart was silencing in that moment. It is one of the most beautiful experiences I’ve had. Now thanks to theater I’m standing up because I learned to grow emotionally as a person and I know my worth. And I know my rights as a temp worker and as a woman I feel – it really impacted my life. Theater completely changed my life.

- Isaura Martinez, Worker, Theater Ensemble member/Actor and CWC Staff Member
Fig 13: 2019 PTO Conference post-performance gathering. Indiana University, PA

References: