

Study Circles in Spanish help Latino workers exercise their rights and responsibilities in the workplace

Latino workers are critical to the Wisconsin workforce. Yet poor English skills and limited knowledge of employment rights and responsibilities make it difficult for many to have a voice in the workplace. A UW-Extension School for Workers program used monthly study circles, taught in Spanish, to help Milwaukee area workers learn about immigration law, family and medical leave, workplace safety and other issues in a supportive environment. As a result, they are better able to advocate for themselves and other Latinos in the factories, industries or businesses in which they work.

Situation:

As the number of Latinos in the Wisconsin workforce who speak very little English continues to climb, there is a critical need for Spanish language training in basic labor law and employment rights. Labor unions seeking to represent these workers are often unable to communicate with this growing segment of the workforce. This two-way communication gap can best be bridged by specialized training in the worker's own language in a supportive setting.

Response:

Monthly study circle meetings taught completely in Spanish were conducted by the UW-Extension School for Workers in partnership with the Milwaukee chapter of the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA). These meetings, about 2.5 hours long, were held at the Esperanza Unida building in Milwaukee, a location frequented by many Latinos. In order to maximize participation, child care was provided and refreshments were offered. Labor and employment law materials were translated into Spanish by the School for Workers instructor and LCLAA members. Each month, the informal theatre group *The Esperanza Players* prepared and presented a brief skit that dramatized the subject matter of the monthly meeting, such as immigration problems, minimum wage, family and medical leave, workers compensation, workplace safety and other issues. Each session included a brief lecture on the subject area and a review of written materials. The rest of the class focused on questions and answers.

Study Circles are designed to provide opportunities to learn through discussion among fellow participants and from the learners' perspective, rather than the instructor being the only source of expertise. This was well-received by the Latino participants as they were able to examine issues drawing on their own experiences and needs. With the assistance of a Diversity Program Development Initiative grant from UW-Extension, LCLAA recruited a large number of Latino workers from the Milwaukee area. Nine to 28 persons attended each of the 12 sessions for a total participation of 185 persons. Very few of these participants were currently union members. Despite efforts to encourage participants to attend all the meetings, few were actually able to do so, due in part to

economic pressures such as multiple jobs or lack of transportation or child care.

Impacts:

During the training, participants were able to translate a number of labor and employment law materials into Spanish, including the constitution and by-laws of UFCW Local 1444, a union to which several participants belonged. They also translated a small card to which union members can refer: it describes their right to be represented by a labor organization in situations where they reasonably believe disciplinary action may be discussed.

As a result of the year-long discussions, participants developed a working knowledge of key labor and employment laws, regulations, and how they apply in their respective workplaces. They are better able to communicate with their fellow Latino workers and union members concerning their rights and responsibilities under these laws. By assisting in translating materials, they have extensive understanding and ready-to-use resources for use by LCLAA and other labor advocacy groups in Wisconsin.

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