

Friends & Allies of the Jefferson Center Gathering

Reed College in Portland, OR
July 15-16, 2004

Summary Notes

“Looking to the past of the JC to know where we are going”

Purpose of the Gathering

GOAL

*To inform the future work of the Jefferson Center
by looking at its history.*

OBJECTIVES

*To identify what has been learned in the work thus far
by those who have been directly and indirectly involved in the Jefferson Center,
to gain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the work
and to more fully define the niche that the Jefferson Center fills.*

August 16, 2004

Dear Friends,

This is a summary of the notes from the *Friends & Allies of the Jefferson Center Gathering* held on July 15-16, 2004 at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. This report follows the order of discussions at the Gathering and highlights key points, views, and perspectives shared by those who attended. A more complete version of the notes is available upon request.

As many of you already know, the Jefferson Center (JC) is at a critical juncture of its development. The news of Beverly Brown's cancer has prompted us to take a close look at our goals and make some critical decisions over the past year. Losing the founder and Executive Director of the Jefferson Center is the worst of all possible scenarios. Her passion and vision have guided the JC and the work for many years.

Entering this pivotal and transitional moment in the JC's history, we felt the need to take a moment for reflection - to think about how the Center came to be, the different roles it has played throughout time, the strengths and weaknesses of the work and the values and vision behind it. The evolution of the JC has very much been a "people's process," driven by the shared interest, values, and ideals of the many individuals and communities who have participated in the work.

By inviting friends and allies of the JC to reflect on and share their involvement and connection to the JC, we hoped to end up with an "historical mirror" to help us better understand and appreciate the values, ideals, and struggles that have motivated the development of the Center. It is this "mirror" that we will refer back to when making decisions about how to move forward into the future, facing new contexts and challenges, embracing new opportunities.

We cannot separate the JC's history from its future. Thus, we sought "*to inform the future work of the Jefferson Center by looking at its history.*" Thank you for helping us.

JC Board of Directors and Staff

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I. GATHERING PARTICIPANTS' INTRODUCTIONS

Gathering participants come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. The sharing of experiences provided all of us attending the Gathering with a sense of people's struggles, social justice efforts, and values. Participants have been engaged in organizing, advocacy, human rights, economic development, U.S.-Mexico cross-border projects, research, popular education, literacy, forestry, writing, art, agriculture, youth leadership, multiculturalism and relationship building among many other equally important areas.

Moreover, each represented a different perspective with respect to the Jefferson Center: some had participated as worker-leaders in early JC gatherings, others as friends and academics engaged in ongoing conversations with Beverly Brown about issues related to JC work. Several had served as JC Board members, while others worked as Jefferson Center staff, or contributed to the work as allies in related social justice and community-forestry organizations. *(For a complete list of gathering participants, please see Appendix #1: Brief Participant Bios).*

II. JEFFERSON CENTER HISTORY

Following participant introductions, JC Founder and Executive Director, Beverly Brown, gave a brief overview of the history of the Jefferson Center.

Key Elements Leading to the Establishment of the JC

- Growing up in a rural small town, Bev saw that people wanted discussion groups; they were hungry for knowledge.
- Bev's early experiences at Reed College and as part of women's consciousness raising groups in the feminist movement highlighted for her the power of analyzing one's own experiences and using that to act in the world.
- Exposure at Highlander: Bev saw Popular Education process applied in different ways, bringing together low-income people from different communities who shared a common problem.
- Wanted to see something like Highlander start in our region: had lots of support from folks.
- "We knew Popular Education was one of the basis and we knew that multicultural was a basis... We chose forestry issues because they were tearing apart the region and was an area where workers had no voice."

Significant Moments in JC's Work and Development

- First JC gathering in 94, then the land-tenure conference in Madison, WI and one gathering in 1995, and one gathering in 1996... "we were traveling, trying to talk to people, understand what the dynamic is here."
- The Salem gathering in 1996 was an important meeting - a turning point in which Sherlette said "we have to accelerate this. One meeting a year is not enough." So Bev quit her job and began working full-time with the JC.
- By 1998 the JC had become an organization on its own right with 501c(3) status and the addition to JC staff of Agueda Marín-Hernández. Alliance of Forest Workers and Harvesters was created and the mushroom monitoring project was taking off.
- The end of 1999 marked the beginning of a new JC program, Contingent Workers in Natural Resources.

Building on Beverly's overview, Gathering participants contributed to the creation of a "Jefferson Center Timeline" including individuals' recollections, experiences and perceptions of Jefferson Center work. (See Appendix #2: Jefferson Center Timeline.)

III. GATHERING PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT WITH THE JC

Later in the evening, Gathering participants spoke about their involvement in the context of both their personal connection to Beverly Brown and to the ground-breaking work of the JC when it first began. Some of the most salient points and ideas from the evening's discussion are summarized below:

1. The Popular Education Process

- **Laying the Groundwork.** A crucial piece of Jefferson Center work leading to the success of the Mushroom Monitoring Project and others, was taking the time to build relationships and trust in communities, finding and building on informal leadership, and maintaining consistent communication with folks on the ground.
- **Popular Education Process.** It's a slow process, but it works. The JC has achieved the balance between listening, getting people to talk about their experiences, and introducing new ideas and concepts. People have been franchised through this process to take action and speak for themselves – “in their own language and in the language of bureaucracy.” Also part of the process of popular education has been “changing the way those who are being oppressive [such as the Forest Service] see their role.”
- **Popular Education in Other Arenas.** The JC has spread the concept of popular education among young people by collaborating with students in the university.

2. Working on Multiple Levels

- **On Working at the Ground Level**
 - * JC has been good at providing the supports necessary for people to participate, including reimbursing transportation and lost wages, providing necessary translation, and creating spaces in which workers would feel comfortable.
 - * The incentive for people to come to JC Gatherings has been the focus on “bread and butter” issues. Some gathering participants expressed concerns that recent JC Gatherings may be moving away from those “bread and butter” issues.
- **Moving Conversations at the Mid-level on up**
 - * The Jefferson Center has “brought initiation into underserved issues” within more mainstream community forestry groups and others.
 - * Policy needs to connect back to the ground – and work on the ground can benefit from conversations happening within mid-level and funding organizations around issues that are of importance to worker communities.

3. Challenges and Progress in Multicultural Work

There was some tension among gathering participants around the theme of multicultural work. Some were frustrated that there were not more working people of color (and working people in general) at the gathering itself. Others reflected on the difficulties of overcoming communication barriers. One participant stressed that organizations like the JC “don't need to manufacture multiculturalism,” and that “there is a bond among those who work in the woods that goes beyond color.” Nearly all agreed that working multiculturally is very challenging – but also something that the Jefferson Center has consistently made an effort at, been successful at times, and should continue to pursue.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED

Beverly wrapped up the first day of the Gathering by summarizing some of the lessons learned throughout the JC's history from her perspective.

- 1. It can happen – but we need to be bigger, with more groups working together, on all different levels.** “What we were doing was impossible. Funders thought we were crazy. You can not get a bunch of people in woods to talk to each other, they told us... The fact that we are here where we are now is icebreaking but there aren't enough of us, there aren't enough conversations - it takes every level of everyone who is involved... needs to be project work all over West Coast – needs to be done with lots of organizations with different approaches and they need to talk to each other.
- 2. Look at the bigger picture.** “One thing I've learned from other movements: if it looks too small and you start fighting [over territory and funding with other organizations trying to do similar work], step back, look for the bigger picture, and find where are the niches to work within that.”
- 3. Need to be more explicit about what we are doing.** In order for the information and analysis to get back to the whole community we need to work with community leaders so that they can go back to their communities and facilitate processes of popular education.
- 4. Multicultural work is incredibly difficult – and incredibly important.** “It's easier to deal with one's own group, but with issues like forest work, which is a multicultural community/opportunity it is imperative to keep going with the multicultural conversations. Working multi-culturally is the pioneering thing on planet... we don't know how to do it, but we should give ourselves credit for what we have done.”

V. WHAT ROLE HAVE YOU SEEN THE JC PLAY IN THE PAST?

After opening comments by JC Board members and a brief review of key points from the previous night's discussion, gathering participants identified the multiple roles that they had experienced or seen the Jefferson Center play in the past. Their responses can be synthesized in three main categories: the Jefferson Center as a bridge, as a catalyst, and as a "creator of spaces."

As a BRIDGE between:

- People and groups of different cultures
- Grassroots leaders and "mid-level" organizations
- Theory and practice
- Disciplines of thought
- Local or specific knowledge and the "bigger picture"
- Different mid-level social justice groups
- Issues once seen as separate
- Workers in different communities
- Funders and grassroots groups
- People and on-the-ground practices to regional/national policy-making
- "Eggheads" and "workers in the dirt"

As a CATALYST for:

- New ways of thinking
- New conversations and dialogues
- People changing policy
- The empowerment of people
- Communication and relationships between diverse groups and cultures
- Worker participation in mid-level organizations and policy dialogues

As a CREATOR of SPACES for:

- People telling and sharing their stories
- Leadership development & empowerment
- Analysis
- Building relationships
- Learning among peers
- Multicultural cooperation

Also emphasized was the way in which the Jefferson Center has not only worked on multiple levels (cooperating with people at the grassroots, pushing forward ideas and conversations at a mid-level, etc...) but has also successfully and strategically "passed on the baton", in a "relay" where many different groups and individuals (workers, academics, the forest service, other NGOs, policy makers etc...) all have a critical role to play in achieving something.

VI. WHAT ROLE DOES THE JC FILL NOW THAT OTHER ORGANIZATIONS DO NOT?

In many ways, the Jefferson Center continues to play similar roles to those it did in the past – building bridges between the grassroots and mid-level organizations, stimulating new thinking on issues of concern to working people in rural communities, creating opportunities for building relationships and analysis among workers, etc...

Nonetheless, limited organizational capacity (just one employee), and challenges of entering the very uncharted territory of our new program (contingent workers in natural-resource based industries) means that the work moves more slowly – and strategies for moving forward are constantly being experimented with and re-imagined within the scope of the possible.

Below are gathering participant's perspectives and questions regarding the current work and role of the Jefferson Center.

What is the JC doing?

- **Creating spaces for analysis among different organizations.** Co-sponsoring the Contingent Labor Forum with the Evergreen State College Labor Center - Challenging hierarchical education and organizing (within the unions), and creating a space for analysis of new challenges facing organizations trying to organize contingent and immigrant workers.
- **“Googling” with your feet (i.e, finding new networks by building them).** Establishing relationships with new organizations in the immigrant rights and contingent labor sector. Getting out in the field and making new contacts in new rural communities with low-income, contingent and immigrant workers, making the landscape of natural resource-based workers in the region more legible, in a way that academics cannot or do not do.
- **Eyes and ears on the ground.** Listening to workers. Dedicating the time, resources and strategies to build trust and figure out connections in local communities – laying the groundwork for future conversations and dialogues.
- **Acting as a bridge.** Networking among organizations. Communication between community members, lawyers and worker advocates, governmental agencies, etc.
- **Promoting the use of popular education** in the region (through the Popular Education Conference planned for this fall, and through the use of pop. ed. methodologies in collaborations with other groups/organizations).

Questions raised:

- Is the Jefferson Center a grassroots organization?
- How can the JC do regional work, and catalyze analysis and connections between communities when there is so little project work and so few existing community organizations on the local level?
- How does the JC describe to workers what they are doing, without creating the expectation that the Center will come in to help them do a project?
- What role does timing play in entering a community and beginning to make connections? When do you go in and get involved in a particular place or area and when is it right to do that?
- Are themes beginning to emerge among the people the JC is talking to in communities?
- Is research part of the Jefferson Center's role currently or for the future?

VII. HOW DO YOU SEE THE ROLE OF THE JC IN THE FUTURE?

After lunch, Beverly Brown gave a presentation outlining some of the broad, structural issues and questions that provide a thematic and intellectual backdrop for the Jefferson Center's current program: Contingent Workers in Natural Resources. (For key points from her presentation, see Appendix #2). Following her talk, gathering participants closed the gathering by sharing ideas and hopes for the future of the Jefferson Center. Several themes emerged:

1. Continue the "HOW" of the JC.

Facilitating popular education at the grassroots level:

- "The most prominent is giving people (grassroots workers) an opportunity to share."
- "Keep listening to people on the ground, getting their voice heard at other tables."
- "Need to remember grassroots, JC as a hub to keep things going at the ground level."
- "Maintain that unique space of listening and creating spaces where people can analyze what is happening in their own experiences."

And serving as a bridge-builder/catalyst in other circles:

- "Continuing the Contingent Labor Forum."
- "Providing opportunity for things to happen... to stimulate a conversation."
- "Networking amongst community groups to bring resources and ideas, keeping communication flowing, challenging funders in the Community Forestry movement, and pushing people to think about issues they haven't been thinking about."

2. Transition takes time and commitment. Stick with it.

Both the transition from the JC's founding director to new leadership, and the on-going transition from the JC's old program focus to work in a new and seemingly overwhelming arena of contingent labor will be difficult. Nonetheless, participants expressed faith that the Center *will* eventually find its niche within that larger framework, figuring out the "one small arena" where the JC can "ignite that dialogue." There was also a clear and strong desire that Beverly's core vision of the work transcend any transition process.

... Looking Towards the Future...

The work of the JC is far from being done. The Jefferson Center staff and board's mandate remains clear: to guide the JC through a difficult transition exacerbated by the premature loss of the founder and executive director; and to develop plans to ensure the long-term continuation and sustenance of the JC as a popular education-based organization.

In response to this need, the board and staff have adopted a strategy to guide us through this phase, including:

- The search for a new Executive Director (the position announcement is being widely disseminated),
- A plan to ensure the fulfillment of grants awarded to the JC, and
- A plan to ensure the successful implementation of new and ongoing programmatic commitments such as the Popular Education Conference and the Contingent Labor Forum.

Also, additional resources are needed to strengthen the capacities of the JC and to implement its mission. We were delighted to receive news from the Ford Foundation regarding their commitment to renew the current grant with a new two-year grant. We continue fundraising efforts with other donors and foundations.

Finally, we are thinking very seriously about all you shared at the Gathering. If you have any corrections or amendments to make to these notes, or other insights or recommendations, please contact us. Board and staff both share the conviction that the work of the JC is a large collaborative endeavor in which we are honored to share with participants like you. We look forward to building on the foundation you have helped to lay out.

Sincerely,

JC Board of Directors

APPENDICES

JEFFERSON CENTER TIMELINE

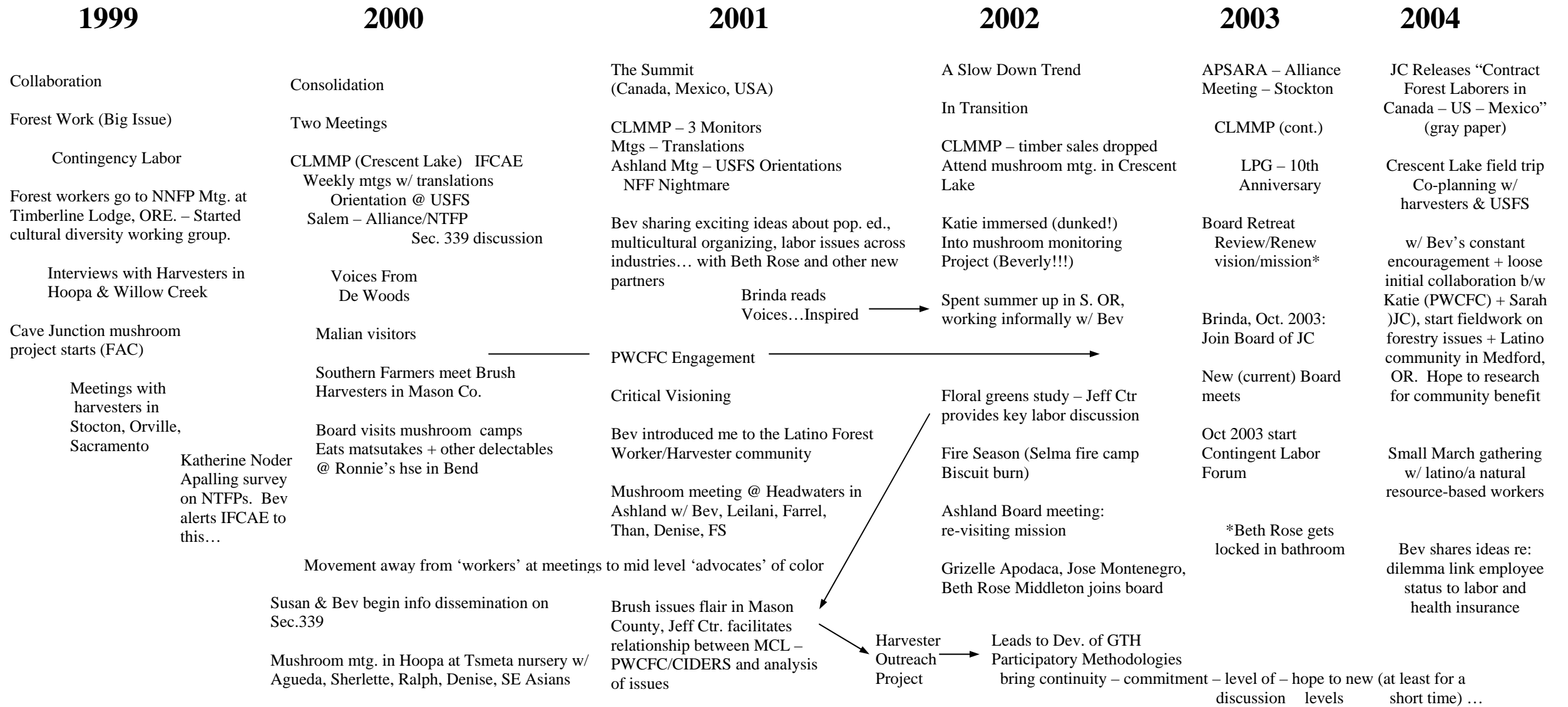
1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Highlander Inspired	The 2 nd Gathering	Another Gathering	Acceleration	Forest Workers & Harvesters Alliance
The 1 st Gathering Ann Hawkin Juan Mendoza Kiko	Madison, WI – Land Tenure	Salem	SE Asian/USDA Gathering	Ford Foundation Funding
Popular Education	Multi-Cultural Driven	Good Rep	Chantrelle dinner in Mason Co w/ Jeff Center Support	(Agueda Appears) The Gibbs Too “Passport, Please” Victoria, BC
	Shuttle Lake (Near Sisters, OR)	PT Orchard	96-99: USDA FS Policy and Land Managers Attitude toward forest worker “slowly” changing – thanks to JC efforts (collaborative) (Ronnie)	Susan Chapp & Vern – Project Work Involved
	Multilingual Meeting	WA Harvesters Mason County Connection – ES		Imported Idea & Concept from Africa (Rebecca)
	*A new process, “collaborative” began (Ronnie)	Seventh American Forest Congress		Harvesters Ed Project MCL – Agueda/Bev in Mason Co
I (José) met Bev	Lead Partnership Group (LPG) Funding (Introducing “Underserved”/Multicultural Issues into Mainstream Comm. Forestry)	Victor, Juan, Christina to Washington Testimony		Canadian Reforestation Worker’s Summit – CREWS
	Teaching Jonathan		Still introducing	6 or 7 workers & Bev interview Agueda in Arcata, CA
				Traction w/ mainstream groups

In Timber Country

watching – listening
Bev as educator

→ evergreen contributor } challenger
(Timber, Voices) student ‘Bev-groupies’

JEFFERSON CENTER TIMELINE cont.



THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE JC CENTER: CONTINGENT LABOR

Notes from Beverly's Presentation on the Contingent Labor Program

- Three groups of workers were identified through past JC work: independent harvesters, self-employed micro-contractors, and employees. Of these three, the “employees” group is the largest and also the least likely to participate in JC activities or more generally in public and civic life.
- In Europe and Canada, there is still a system of checks and balances between Labor – the State – and Capital (Business). In the US, Labor has become so weak that there is essentially no check on employer power. Union density is down significantly, weak labor law with virtually no enforcement favors employers, and the prevalence of contingent labor arrangements (subcontracting, outsourcing, etc.) further undercuts workers’ ability to organize.
- Whereas in other developed countries health care, adequate pensions, civic participation, freedom of assembly and association, education, etc. are all considered basic social rights and available to all citizens regardless of employment status, in the United States many of these social “benefits” are dependent upon the specific relationship between a specific employee and a specific employer. If you have a good job, you might have good health care. If you have a union, you can civically participate even though you don’t agree with your employer. But the default is no health insurance and only minimal social security. Anything beyond that the employer either grants or the employee has to fight for.
- Key to understanding the extent of employer power over employees is the practice of “Fire at Will.” Though it is illegal to fire an employee for organizing, an employer can fire a worker for virtually any reason as long as the employee can’t prove it was on the basis of discrimination.
- Given the relatively unchecked power of employers and the links between social benefits and the specific employer-employee nexus, there are serious risks associated with participation in civic society for employees. Participation or organization that is seen as threatening to business or the status quo could mean being fired and consequently losing these benefits. If folks speak up, they risk losing their job and their livelihood.
- In rural areas, the connections between community well-being, immigration, employees, freedom of association and basic social welfare “pop out”. Unions are particularly weak in rural communities, drastic budget cuts force counties to slash public services such as education and health care at the same time workers are losing these benefits, and in small towns where everyone knows everyone, civic participation is even more risky.
- In the past, funders of rural development have focused almost exclusively on an entrepreneurship model – small contracts, job training, job access. Employees, contract workers comprise a huge segment of rural populations that is virtually overlooked in this approach. Unless these bigger, structural questions are addressed, rural development work will always be limited and the possibility of lasting social change for rural communities, stifled. We need to challenge funders to look at the bigger picture and begin to fund work addressing these issues.