

# Small Business United

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An oddity in US immigration law allow immigrants who cannot yet legally work on the payrolls of established organizations to open their own businesses, a legal situation which has led to a rich fabric of Mom-and-Pop immigrant-owned businesses in Bushwick. As one interviewee noted:

*You can't legally work but you can open a business, so a lot of people say this is how I'm going to provide a livelihood for myself (MTRNY, SBU Organizer).*

Entrepreneurs among millennials can pay higher rents than traditional immigrants to Bushwick and so, as part of the process of gentrification, establish new small businesses: bars, restaurants and clothing stores, for example. As a result, newly-arrived millennials do not spend money in the Latino businesses. Thus, the rent increases in Bushwick have not only affected residents but also the neighbourhood's many small businesses.

Small businesses in Bushwick reflect both the vulnerability of Bushwick's immigrant communities and their potential for economic development. Currently, there is no rent-stabilization for small businesses in Brooklyn.

*Landlords are doubling or tripling our rents. Most of us have short lease agreements: one, two, or five years; and when the lease ends, if you are paying \$1,000 now they then say 'You are gonna pay \$2,000'. And then 'los blanquitos' [white people] come, and they pay these high rents (SBU, Community Leader).*

In addition to facing unaffordable rent increases, immigrant-owned small businesses in Bushwick face a language barrier when dealing with city institutions and are usually unfamiliar with business rights. Small Business United (SBU) is an innovative project launched in 2008 by MTRNY which aims to collectively organize Bushwick's small businesses to address their difficulties.

MTRNY is a huge nonprofit aiming to *'build the power of Latino and working class communities to achieve dignity and justice through organizing, policy innovation, transformative education, and survival services.'* It was created in the fall of 2007 through the merger of Make the Road by Walking and the Latin American Integration Center, two of NYC's most innovative and effective grassroots organizations. The merger was a natural partnership that built on proven successes and created a new state-level organization that combines democratic accountability to low-income people and an innovative mix of strategies to confront inequality and economic injustice, while fostering deep and active community roots. The Latin American Integration Center was founded in 1992 by a group of Colombian immigrants who had recently escaped the political violence that ravaged their home country; they arrived in Jackson Heights and founded LAIC to promote and protect the human and civil rights of Latino immigrants and encourage their civic participation in NYC. Make the Road by Walking was founded in 1997 in Bushwick to help immigrant welfare recipients who suffered illegal disruptions to their receipt of public benefits in the wake of welfare reform. MTRNY now has more than 16 000 members and organizes civil society action around a range of issues such as immigration, affordable housing, the use of commercial space, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay,

Bisexual, Trans and Queer) issues, youth issues and policy changes. It carries out its work in several neighbourhoods in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and Long Island. Bushwick is one of the areas where it is more visible and active.

*We deal with harassment and displacement, housing discrimination and higher rents. But real estate owners, brokers happy to rent to this new people, some landowners have told our tenants that they don't want Latinos, Latinos with kids [families], they prefer young white people with dogs. That's what's happening (MTRNY, Housing Organizer).*

SBU is a specific MTRNY project focused on organizing immigrants' small businesses. As well as in Bushwick, SBU is also being implemented in Jackson Heights, though they are separate projects. It is socially innovative because a) it has emerged to address the effects of recession, b) it fosters new social relationships among a vulnerable group, and c) it offers an alternative response to the problems of small businesses in a neighbourhood where there is no Business Improvement District.

One of SBU's first activities was to create a guide to workplace safety and to advocate for healthcare reform that works for small businesses. Since its inception, it has been involved in various campaigns to aid small businesses in Bushwick. For example: successfully opposing the opening of a giant Walmart superstore in Brooklyn and the nearby neighbourhood of East New York; eliminating the sub-minimum wage for tipped workers; supporting legislation for paid sick days (aiding the economic situation of low-income communities and thereby improving the customer base for small businesses in Bushwick); and joining the state-wide fight against tax-abatement legislation that would subsidize big developers. Beyond its advocacy for policies favourable to the low-income residents of Bushwick, SBU is particularly focused on advocating commercial rent stabilization as a long-term goal. To improve affordability, SBU responds to the vulnerability of Bushwick's immigrant-owned small businesses by collectively organizing small businesses and strengthening their network with information and training. The core of SBU's work is organizing the small businesses of Bushwick, tapping the informal networks among these businesses and their stakeholders, strengthening these relationships, and bringing the business owners into a cohesive, coordinated network. Monthly meetings are staffed by an organizer who works full-time for SBU. Beyond sharing information and identifying shared objectives, SBU provides training sessions that build the skills of members to enable them to talk with and recruit other small businesses as well as teach them how to talk with policy-makers.

Collective organization among immigrant small-business owners responds innovatively to the problem of stabilizing the employment of Bushwick's Hispanic community's in the face of gentrification and the post-2008 economic downturn. There are few precedents for group organizing among immigrant small business owners. This organizing leads to the development of an advocacy program aimed at both city and state policy-making bodies. SBU has also sent members to Washington D.C. to lobby the national legislature.

While SBU's advocacy aims to improve the policy environment in which small businesses operate, the organization also provides immediate assistance to Bushwick's small businesses by training owners in skills needed in their immediate neighbourhood environment. For example, SBU offers workshops on business skills tailored to immigrant business owners,



such as how to negotiate with the police, how to comply with New York City and New York State labour laws, and how to implement the newly legislated paid sick leave. Thanks to SBU, small business owners know when they do and do not have to buy certifications for public notice of various business specifications. One SBU member made this point quite clearly:

*We learn about new regulations, they tell us which new regulations have been passed, we are always informed there and we feel that they [MTRNY] helps us, they support us (SBU, Community Leader).*

SBU bridges with the public sphere, enjoying good relations with the neighbourhood's Community Board, the members of the City Council and the Housing Preservation Commission. However, characteristic of Bushwick's 'silos' of civic capacity, SBU exhibits little in the way of collaboration with other major nonprofits in Bushwick and shows some distrust of and disagreement with Vito Lopez and the RBSCC world.

To date, SBU has fought several successful campaigns (for example, preventing Walmart from opening in Brooklyn and campaigning for paid sick leave), while other policy advocacy efforts remain incomplete and therefore difficult to evaluate (for example, legislation to stabilize commercial rents). The initiative has, however, quickly grown in Bushwick, now encompassing most of the neighbourhood's immigrant businesses.

The leadership practices exhibited by SBU can be characterized as typical of initiatives of collective organization. A great deal of the initiative's ways of operating - such as convening meetings and distributing tasks and roles - depend on the efforts of a paid organizer. However, the initiative falls somewhere between command-and-control and collective leadership since the SBU members shape the organization's agenda through deliberation and by voicing concerns at monthly meetings.

*My role [SBU organizer] is primarily organizing non service provision, listen to people who are saying 'I can't pay my rent, my landlord doesn't want to renew the lease and wants to charge double, I'm about to be kicked out'... We say that's big problem, and then say that if you and enough neighbours care about that then we are going to fight on that, then build collective power to win broad systemic solutions (...) Those who are affected [by difficulties] are engaged and can explain to others a real problem in the first person (MTRNY, SBU organizer).*

SBU exhibits several salient aspects of collective leadership we often find in social innovations that engage multiple stakeholders. SBU consciously reframes the discourse surrounding Hispanic employment. It fights against an image of immigrants who create difficulties for Americans seeking employment and foster an alternative view which highlights the Hispanic contribution to the local economy. They clearly articulate the idea that migrants are not guilty as a result of being migrants but rather that they are a vulnerable group that are victims of tenant harassment and other injustices. At the same time, SBU sustains that they could be self-organized and empowered. As one SBU member explained:

*Some people believe that we don't contribute, that we come to take employment or opportunities from others... Sometimes we are not well seen... There are those who try to take*



*advantage of our vulnerability... And we say: No, we are organized, we can be prepared small business owners (SBU, Community Leader).*

Through SBU's activities, Hispanic small businesses emerge as a visible employment network, as a sector in its own right in Bushwick. The 'for-profit' sector need not be large corporations. In Bushwick's case, the for-profit sector is comprised of hundreds of immigrants, many without legal status, providing employment and products for the community and from within the community. SBU works to re-frame these immigrant businesses as contributing much to the social fabric of the family-centred and long-term residents.

By giving voice to previously marginalized immigrant business owners, and by strengthening their collective identity, SBU unleashes their human energy. As one SBU member conveyed:

*We know that our voice could be heard there... We can make politicians listen to us. We can make changes happen. That's what I tell to other small business owners when I want to engage them in SBU... We have learned to speak, to defend ourselves when somebody wants to harass us, to know our rights and duties (MTRNY, SBU Organizer).*

The organizing endeavour itself can be understood as making use of human energy, as it brings together previously isolated actors, provides training in outreach and advocacy, and then supports residents in articulating their individual stories with a unified voice.

In empowering immigrants through collective organization, SBU is carrying out a power-based strategy. Even though SBU is run by a MTRNY professional organizer, it is focused on developing community leaders among the neighbourhood's residents. Each small business owner can become a community leader through SBU. Thus, it is a community-based initiative aiming to build community power and which assumes a conflictive relationship between haves and have-nots. It is focused on organizing residents, empowering them to confront elites and demand changes in the distribution of power. From this perspective, neighbourhood problems stem from the community's lack of power within the political decision-making process. The solution is to build the community's weight so that its interests are better represented in the public sphere.

To sum up, SBU is an innovative response in Bushwick to cope with gentrification effects and harassment in the Latino community's small business. It was launched by a large, traditional nonprofit (MTRNY) and takes advantage of professional staff. At the same time, though, this nonprofit has traditionally had a proactive and power-based approach, assuming a conflictive relationship between haves (landlords and gentrifiers) and have-nots (immigrants). They are focused on empowering immigrants and they utilize various leadership practices to achieve that. However, they have little capacity to network with other neighbourhood actors, a fact that constrains their effectiveness in solving the tough problems faced by small businesses in Bushwick.

## References

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