Two million dollars.

Oregon farmworkers have paid $2,000,000 to support their organization, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN).

This September, PCUN completes the first quarter-century of its system of membership dues, a fitting occasion to recount and analyze some of its essential ingredients, as well as experiences, ideas, and lessons that shaped it.

Anatomy of a Hybrid Model

Although PCUN is a union, only a very small percentage of our dues income comes from members working under a collective bargaining agreement. In Oregon, there is not (yet) a legal framework for collective bargaining in agriculture. Since 1988, PCUN has made huge progress in our iconic struggle to institute just such a system on a mass scale. Along the way, a few small growers have stepped forward to voluntarily negotiate and sign collective bargaining agreements recognizing PCUN as their workers’ union, affording seniority and grievance rights and better wages and benefits. At these farms, the workers (PCUN members) pay as dues 1.5 percent of their gross wages earned on farms under PCUN contract.

However, 97 percent of PCUN’s membership income has come from “associate” members, farmworkers not under PCUN collective bargaining agreements. They live or work in the Mid-Willamette Valley. Marion County generates more than half a billion dollars annually in farm products and is home to 40,000 farmworkers, the Oregon state capitol city of Salem, and Woodburn, PCUN’s home and Oregon’s largest city with a Latino majority.

Here’s how the membership fees work. PCUN associate members pay a one-time initiation fee of $15 and quarterly dues of $36 ($21 if the member is a retired or permanently disabled farmworker). Members in good standing are covered under a group insurance policy that pays $5,000 in the event that a member, spouse, or minor child dies. Members in good standing are also eligible for services, principally help with immigration applications.

When PCUN members, gathered at the organization’s second annual convention in 1986, first approved the associate member dues system, they set the rate at $9 per quarter and provided that it could be increased only by secret ballot vote of the membership. During
these 25 years, the membership has voted to raise dues on six occasions, never by a margin of less than four-to-one. Along the way, members agreed to assess themselves one-time contributions to major initiatives, including the 1995 “Tenth Anniversary Organizing Campaign,” which won a crop-wide wage increase in the strawberry harvest and the establishment of PCUN’s low-power FM radio station, Radio Movimiento, in 2006.

The basic methods for assessing and collecting dues have remained essentially unchanged since 1986. Members are sent a simple news bulletin and dues reminder quarterly. Some members pay as much as a year’s dues in advance. We use fixed quarters and we have a simple formula for re-aligning lapsed members to that rhythm by collecting two, three, or four months’ dues from them. Members can send payment by mail, but most pour into PCUN headquarters during the three business days on either side of the first of April, July, October, and January. Not unintentionally, this contact provides ongoing and valuable opportunities to engage members about PCUN’s campaigns and programs.

**Services and Benefits: Our Foundational Capital**

The “flagship” services PCUN provides its members are immigration counseling and legal representation, both offered by PCUN’s service arm, the Centro de Servicios para Campesinos (Farmworker Service Center). The Centro pre-dates PCUN by eight years. It was founded as the Willamette Valley Immigration Project (WVIP) in 1977 and promptly gained recognition from the Board of Immigration Appeals, allowing it to provide representation in immigration matters at the administrative level (including family visa petitions and consular applications, naturalization (citizenship) applications, renewal of permanent resident and work authorization cards, and the like).

Legal workers and Chicano community activists started WVIP with little more than our anger—and our determination to do something—about the reign of terror in the Mexican community created by the INS’s roving dragnets, workplace and residential raids. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, INS arrested and deported a few thousand workers from Oregon annually. WVIP’s immigration defense complemented our strategy of community resistance (“know and exercise your rights”) and it established our reputation as serious, effective, and honest. From 1977 to 1986, WVIP handled nearly a thousand cases, all on a donation basis. WVIP’s small staff scraped by financially, first with “CETA” (federal job training) funding. When that ran out, we moonlighted as interpreters, legal investigators, process servers. We taught school, did consulting, occasionally field work. In those days, “sustainability” was synonymous with “survival.”

Immigration defense and visa help cemented our credibility. That trust prompted workers to bring us all manner of other problems, from workplace exploitation to collections for covering funeral expenses. The need for broader organizing and support impelled us to form PCUN. We appended WVIP to PCUN as its service arm and changed its name. The
indignity of funeral “colectas” spurred us to offer an insurance benefit as part of PCUN membership. Though initially only $1,500, the benefit proved its utility and symbolism. More than $200,000 has been paid out through union-based American Income Life Company. For some members, the notion of keeping up insurance coverage reinforced the habit of dues payment.

**Good Timing**

A few months after we founded PCUN, UFW co-founder César Chávez visited Woodburn and met with our first board. “Don’t give away services,” he admonished. His advice re-affirmed the conclusion we’d already reached: link services (and benefits) to dues. Although 95 percent of WVIP “clients” were eligible for membership, moving them from “donations” to “dues” represented a cultural shift. We (mostly) patiently answered concerns like “Why can’t I just pay for this [service]?” For the most part, our base went along. Over time, membership grew on them. They owned something.

Seven weeks after PCUN members approved creation of the quarterly dues structure and made membership in good standing a condition of eligibility for services, President Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Six months later, IRCA would open the path to legal immigration status for more than three million undocumented immigrants, including thousands in Oregon. PCUN membership exploded, increasing from about 150 in September 1986 to more than 2,000 in May, 1988. The Centro had simultaneously instituted a nominal fee for immigration cases, payable in addition to dues. Even so, the total cost represented only about 10 percent of what a private attorney would charge.

The flood of new members, willing to pay quarterly dues as a part of the legalization assistance process, swept away the “donations” mentality. Though many members fell (or moved) away after gaining legal status, we had the momentum we needed to sustain the dues system.

**“Says Who?!”**

At the height of the legalization “crush” in 1987, a member arrived at the PCUN office anxious to move his case forward. “Your dues are expired,” the receptionist informed him. “Why do I have to pay my dues?” the member protested. “Because Larry said so,” she replied.

Technically, I did say so. “All members are required to have their dues payments current in order to be eligible for service,” I had told her. Her answer to the member underscored both a shortcoming in my explanation and a key dimension of our organization’s governance: the members decide. Though I’m sure that, over twenty-five years, we’ve cut explanatory corners, the answer we can give to dues or membership-only “protesters” is, in my view, both powerful and elegant: “The membership imposed this requirement
and you, as a member, have the right under our bylaws to attend the annual convention and propose an amendment to change it.” None of the countless recipients of that advisory has ever followed through. Apparently they weren’t very motivated and/or they actually visualized how they would fare—or feel—attempting to sway a hall-ful of dues-paying members.

What’s the Big Idea?

In 2003, PCUN co-led creation of the “CAPACES,” uniting in joint capacity building what had become nine sister organizations serving and organizing in the Latino immigrant community in the Mid-Willamette Valley. With a combined staff of 60, the CAPACES network engages workplace organizing, immigrants’ rights, farmworker housing development and management, education reform, voter organizing, economic micro-enterprise, young leadership, and ally solidarity, among other areas. CAPACES’ trainings prompted us to more clearly articulate the principles underlying our work:

1. *Money does not drive our work, nor our organizational strategy; it only affects the speed of our work.*

2. *We raise and spend the organization’s money in the name of the people we serve and we must do it in a manner that meets the interests of our community.*

3. *The process of raising funds is also organizing work.*

4. *Raising funds must be part of all educational, service, and organizational activities as much as possible and should not be seen as separate work.*

5. *Even though the people we serve generally live in poverty, the workers and community members must be invited to contribute financially to the activities and organizational programs.*

PCUN’s dues system bespeaks the last two principles and they are engrained in our organizational woodwork.

In 2005, CAPACES inspired me to synthesize a list of twelve ideas that have guided our work over the decades, whether we realized it or not. The PCUN dues and services model stand at the intersection of two of them:

[#3] “Do work which people in the base value and can concretely measure in their own lives, not just work which most immediately or directly advances demands for change.” …

[#7] “Expect and ask those who derive tangible and intangible benefit from our movement to contribute.”
The services of PCUN and the Centro have generated huge political capital over the years. We only know of a fraction of the occasions where growers, labor contractors, union busting consultants, their minions, and others discomforted by our campaigns for institutional change have attempted to drive wedges dividing workers from PCUN. “PCUN is a bunch of worthless trouble-makers,” is the G-rated version of their message. A few workers felt secure or bold enough to defend us head on. Others, no doubt, nodded, feigning approval; most probably said nothing. The growers’ rhetoric, however, changed few minds. Workers either knew first hand, or credited reports from their peers, about what PCUN has done.

By charging for services and by tying services to dues, we are more vulnerable to our critics’ favorite slander: “PCUN is only in it for the money.” This accusation is undercut by the fact that we have not actively recruited members; members recruit other members. Many of PCUN’s organizing drives have involved workers who were not and did not become members. Only a fraction of PCUN’s 5,600 registered members consistently keep up their dues payment. Both of these facts suggest that we have opportunities to expand our financial base.

Finally, the gravitational pull of dues-paying members’ collective example inspires solidarity from our base of allies in organized labor, in religious, community, and student groups, academics, educators, and lawyers. Since PCUN’s founding, nearly 1,500 individuals and groups have contributed a total of $1,500,000 to support our work. The PCUN annual appeal to supporters in December 2009 opened with these two paragraphs:

“The nurseries have scaled back. There’s a glut of Christmas trees. Residential construction and landscaping jobs—even part-time ones—are scarce. Like farmworkers and immigrant workers most everywhere, PCUN members are dealing with high unemployment. Some, no doubt, ask themselves: ‘can we afford to support PCUN?’”

On May 3rd, members set forth a clear answer: “we can’t afford not to.” That day, at PCUN’s annual convention, they voted by secret ballot to increase dues 20% to $12 a month. Only one vote was cast in opposition.”

Though many of our allies no doubt faced hard economic decisions as well, donations remained steady.

The Bottom Line

“Effectively offer people what they need and value, keep the administrative system basic and consistent.” Those fifteen words make it all sound easy and simple. After nearly a hundred thousand payments, a hundred mailings, four database programs, and more than enough hours to fill someone’s entire work-life, we still think the work of maintaining
PCUN’s membership dues system is well worth it. And we see that value every time a minimum-wage-earning farmworker comes to our office with $36 in hand.