Mutual Aid Networks: Informal Shop Floor Organizing among Mexican Migrant Construction Workers in San Diego

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Abstract
Labor scholarship overwhelmingly continues to frame the value of migrants' social network ties by successful or unsuccessful incorporation into formal sectors of the host economy. Within this context, migrant social network ties are commonly viewed as positive only when they lead to union-building efforts. The current study extends the social network analysis to include informal resistance and struggle. Based on ethnographic research among Mexican migrant drywallers in the San Diego construction industry, I argue that migrant workers draw on social network ties to craft less obvious and complex alternative organizing strategies to resist labor flexibility and casualization. Groups of drywallers, which I term collective cuadrillas, use social network ties not only as an impetus to improve workplace conditions but also to convene collectively on the shop floor to alleviate fierce competition among workmates and rid the production process of hierarchal work structures for more democratically managed job practices.

Keywords
labor organizing, informal economy, social networks, immigration, labor and work

Introduction
In recent years, labor scholarship reflects a growing awareness that migrant workers’ social network ties have been a key resource for occupational mobility (Berntsen 2016; Hagan, Lowe, and Quingle 2011; Lowe, Hagan, and Iskander 2010; Smith 2006) and union campaigns to successfully mobilize migrant workers (Cranford 2005; Delgado 1993; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000; Roca-Servat 2010). Social networks are commonly understood as the primary form of social capital for migrants with low or unrecognized human capital and economic capital to gain assistance for migration, settlement, job entry, and routes for upward mobility (Boyd 1989; Light 1972; Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1987; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). There is a long-standing debate about the role of social networks on migrant integration and assimilation into host economies and society. Immigration and labor scholars alike argue social networks can become exploitative and change under various contexts (Boyd 1989; Cranford 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Light 1972; Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1987; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Labor scholarship documents the exploitative features of social networks by both employers that use social networks to restructure workplaces and industries and seasoned workers (e.g., labor brokers, labor barons, encargados, padrones) that use social network ties to exploit newcomers breaking into the industry as self-employed workers or petty entrepreneurs (Cranford 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000). Despite the negative aspects of migrant social networks, some pioneering work—for example, “Networks of Exploitation: Immigration Labor and the Restructuring of the Los Angeles Janitorial Industry” (Cranford 2005) and LA Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement (Milkman 2006)—documents the ability of unions to transform networks of exploitation into networks of solidarity as a key factor for successful organization. Somewhat paradoxically, to recruit migrant workers in order to unionize them, labor unions have capitalized on the same social network ties that employers have used to restructure workplaces and industries (Cranford 2005; Milkman 2006). Within this context, social networks are interpreted as inherently exploitative when operating within the informal economy and overtly positive.

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when leading to union organization. Several labor scholars have also identified social network building as a strategy for workers’ labor market mobility (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011; Lowe et al. 2010; Smith 2006). These networking strategies are interpreted as neither positive nor negative but rather resilience strategies: subtle forms of resistance that do not disrupt existing employment structures.

Other than unionization and occupational mobility, labor scholarship has largely neglected the ways workers mount network building to alter existing workplace power structures. Some scholars have declared these acts of resistance harder to find due to the constraints of labor market flexibility (Berntsen 2016; Nelson, Trautman, and Nelson 2015; Torres et al. 2013). But the lack of this research also raises questions about the methodological approach and theoretical departures used to study collective organizing among a growing precarious labor force (see Allen and Henry 1996; Nelson et al. 2015; Sassen 1996; Theodore 2003; Torres et al. 2013). Scholarship studying precarious workers has proposed an important radical change in labor-organizing perspectives that begin from workers’ self-activity and self-organization instead of unions and institutions (see Atzeni 2016; Berntsen 2016; Smith 2006; Swider 2015). And although precarious labor scholarship informs this study, discussions about theoretical departure points for workers’ collective organizing efforts and “precarious labor regimes” (see Berntsen 2016; Nelson et al. 2015; Torres et al. 2013) in the construction industry are beyond the scope this article. Rather, the study is intended to challenge and extend the conceptual and empirical framework about social network literature and workers’ informal struggle. To fill this research gap, I examine how migrant workers draw on social networking ties to develop informal yet complex alternative organizing strategies to resist capitalist organization. In doing so, I draw from multiple theories on labor organizing, social capital, and migrant networks from transdisciplinary literature and rich ethnographic data on Mexican migrant1 drywallers in San Diego, California, to ask new questions about social networks and labor-organizing literature. Specifically, how do drywallers make careers out of occupations considered to be dead-end jobs? What are the structural factors that influence collective organizing among coworkers at the worksite? And most importantly, what role do social networks play in workers’ collective organizing efforts?

Using a social network analysis of migrant workers network ties, I demonstrate how San Diego drywallers use social networking to come together in what I term collective cuadrillas, or work crews, in the workplace as a distinctive networking strategy to navigate across and between trade sectors (e.g., formal, informal, union, nonunion, commercial, residential) to combat casualization and flexibility brought by industry restructuring. For many drywallers across San Diego, California, social networks are how workers are meeting the challenges of incorporation into a new global economy. Regional and political trends associated with migration, urban growth, and industry and occupational restructuring have created an internalized labor market for an unregulated flow of low-wage migrant workers into the construction industry (Berntsen 2016; Nelson et al. 2015; Torres et al. 2013). By examining migrant workers’ own organizing strategies using social network ties, I am building on the existing literature that examines social networks connection to labor organizing and the different characteristics of dense social network ties among workers that spark organizing efforts at the jobsite level.

The article is organized into four parts. First, I begin by presenting a thorough overview of the migrant social network literature within the context of the labor scholarship, followed by a brief description of the contemporary organizational context of the construction industry. Second, I elaborate on my research design and methods. Third, I present the study’s key findings by providing a vivid description of how workers construct alternative organizing spaces via social network ties to meet their distinct needs as construction workers within the new global economy. Lastly, I connect the findings from this study to larger theories by emphasizing the alternative organizing strategies of migrant workers in informal sectors and discuss practical implications and suggestions for future research.

**Background**

**Migrant Workers’ Social Networks**

Migrant social networks play a key role in all processes of immigration and in the daily lives of migrants as enmeshed by social ties rooted in extended kin and kin (Light 1972; Milkman 2006; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). These social ties are predominately understood as the main mechanism for incorporating migrants into social networks that provide important socioeconomic and psychological resources used to navigate new and hostile social contexts and organize their incorporation into host economies (Boyd 1989; Light 1972; Massey 1990; Massey et al. 1987; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Migrant social networks are not only important for premigration motivation and the migration process but are also central to migrants’ postmigration experiences in the

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1In San Diego, California, drywallers come from variable U.S. citizenship status comprised of both cross-border workers from Tijuana and migrants residing in San Diego. Drywallers are typically Mexican, male, and undocumented. The trade employs some of the largest percentages of Latino workers, undocumented and documented, of any occupation across the country (Passel and Cohn 2015). In 2015, 61 percent of the total workforce was comprised of Latino workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). Of those job-holders in 2012, 34 percent were estimated to be undocumented (Passel and Cohn 2015). Hereafter, migrant, unless specified, reflects these trends: a workforce that is primarily Mexican, male, and undocumented.
United States (Massey 1990). Most studies based on low-wage migrant occupations interpret social networks as critical ties and relationships that migrant workers use to find work, achieve upward social mobility (Coleman 1988; Light 1972), and enter into and maintain migrant-dominant occupational niches (Waldinger and Lichter 2003).

The majority of studies contextualizing social networks as a form of social capital have largely stressed the positive consequences of social ties among disadvantaged groups who must compensate for deficits in economic capital and human capital (Coleman 1988; Light 1972; Massey et al. 1987). Some labor scholars have challenged the overly positive interpretations of social networks arising from the social capital concept (Portes 1998; Portes and Landolt 1996), calling for the decoupling of the social capital and social network concept (Cranford 2005) and the reexamination of their transformation over time (Boyd 1989; Morales 2016) to better decipher the positive and negative effects of social networks. These authors argue the concept of social capital has a downside that does not adequately explain the consequence of social networks in many contexts. The simplistic underlying assumption that all social networks lead to jobs or eventual upward mobility is problematic (Portes and Landolt 1996; Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Arguably, not all migrants experience upward mobility; many may be piling up at the bottom or at best moving horizontally into equally bad jobs (Cranford 2005). Additionally, social networks’ context-specific nature and fluctuations with job changes have been given little consideration in the literature (Cranford 2005). Many of these social network models are too static, emphasizing their existence while ignoring their transformation over time (Boyd 1989; Morales 2016). For example, in a study conducted about Guatemalan Mayan long-term and short-term settlement in Houston, Hagan (1998) found that social networks are also gender scripted to fit gendered occupations of the host economy. Mayan women who were primarily integrated as live-in domestics experienced isolated and limited work structures that constricted women’s social network ties over time (Hagan 1998).

At the jobsite level, several authors have argued that a hierarchy exists within migrant social networks and that social networks have exploitative features (Cranford 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). For instance, Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) noted that the success of domestic work is contingent on workers’ ability to use and expand on their social network resources. Well-established domestics are in an advantageous position to exploit newcomers breaking into the industry by providing apprenticeship positions as “helpers” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Apprenticeship positions are important for entry into the occupation but come under highly exploitative conditions with little pay (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

Acknowledging the hierarchical positions within the jobsite, other labor scholars have described seasoned employees that exploit newcomers as padrones (Peck 2000), middlemen (Cranford 2005), labor barons (Milkman and Wong 2000), encargados (Hagan 1998), or labor brokers (Morales 2016), all of which are common in industries that are organizationally decentralized by elaborate contracting arrangements. Firms seek to control the flow of labor by recruiting workers through the leverage of current employees’ social networks to potential workers (Cranford 2005; Milkman and Wong 2000). This recruitment strategy is considered a negative use of social networks because it aids employers’ efforts to enhance control by replacing the union’s source of labor supply with cheaper and more vulnerable nonunion labor, such as migrant workers (Cranford 2005; Milkman and Wong 2000).

Migrant Workers’ Union Organizing and Occupational Mobility

Moving beyond investigating the role of social networks for migrant workers’ entry into jobs, the literature on labor organizing has examined migrants’ social networks as a mechanism for facilitating the union-building process (Cranford 2005; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000; Roca-Servat 2010). Social networks have been identified as a key tool for union building: It interconnects workers throughout low-wage industries, thereby easing the communication and recruitment process among workers (Roca-Servat 2010). For example, Milkman and Wong (2000) suggested that a key ingredient to the success of the 1992 Justice for Drywallers campaign was workers’ bottom-up organizing based on preexisting migrant social networks. In addition, several labor scholars have noted that social networks are an important source of solidarity among migrant workers for labor organizing in many low-wage occupations (Delgado 1993; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000; Roca-Servat 2010). Organizers of the Justice for Roofers campaign in Phoenix, Arizona, noted the significance of workers’ kin and kith ties to two towns in Guatemala: “If a worker from a crew of five convinced themselves of the need to organize, it was easy for them to communicate this information and recruit others” (Roca-Servat 2010:354). Scholars who documented the 1992 Justice for Drywallers campaign expressed similar insights when describing how hundreds of workers from the small Mexican village of El Maguey became the core organizing source of solidarity among workers (Milkman and Wong 2000). Studies about labor organizing have commonly interpreted migrant social networks as explicitly positive only when used for union-building efforts in the formal economy (Bronfenbrenner 1998; Cranford 2005; Delgado 1993; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000). Cranford’s (2005) study of the janitorial industry noted the transition from networks of exploitation (i.e., networks leveraged to funnel labor into the informal economy) to networks of solidarity when unions capitalize on migrant social networks to reorganize workers into unions.

Recent studies suggest that the union-organizing scholarship has largely neglected the ways migrant workers build
network resources to create alternative mobility pathways within existing job structures (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011; Lowe et al. 2010; Smith 2006). For example, research conducted about Latino construction workers in North Carolina found that despite stagnant mobility, migrant workers mobilized skills brought from point of origin and reskilled at destination to brincar (job jump), or negotiate higher wages, as a strategy to advance their occupational careers (Hagan et al. 2011). Job jumping, or brincando, as migrant workers describe it, “is a strategy developed to escape bad jobs or those with limited advancement opportunities and to demonstrate newly acquired skills to prospective employers, ultimately improving work conditions and augmenting wages” (Hagan et al. 2011:151–52). Migrant workers primarily locate new employers through personal and work networks (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011). For workers, network building is a form of mobility power that includes “the resources used at work for the planning of job moves, and the use of mobility threats to create strategic rewards” (Smith 2006:391). Within this context, mobility is a source of leverage for construction workers caught in precarious labor structures (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011). This form of labor market mobility is interpreted as a subtle form of unorganized resistance that does not disrupt existing power relations (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011).

Not all workers job jump individually but primarily rely on coworkers’ social network resources to employers and supervisors for mobility. As migrant workers establish themselves in the labor market, workers forge new relationships with nonethnic employers, coworkers, and supervisors that become critical for migrants’ labor market mobility (Blue and Drever 2011). These connections form the basis for alternative, localized, and temporary mobility pathways for groups of workers that share network resources. Later in the article, I describe how network sharing is changing the conditions for workers’ labor power, an organized strategy that often rearranges the rules of capital production on the shop floor.

The Drywall Sector: Occupational Organization and Transformation

The construction industry is organized around elaborate contracting arrangements that involve highly specialized trades (i.e., subcontractors) employing workers who become experts in specified tasks of the building process. Contracts are negotiated among several craft practitioners on a project-by-project basis that secures the performance of various building tasks (Milkman and Wong 2000). Subcontractors in equivalent trade specialties compete with one another to win bids from developers and general construction firms. Within this contracting arrangement, workers toil at the bottom of a pyramid of exploitation and profit generation that results in massive indirect and direct wage cuts on the one end and huge profit accumulation on the other. Developers and large construction firms sit at the top of the pyramid, shielded by a series of subcontractors who become directly responsible for labor laws and working conditions on the shop floor. Workers’ immediate bosses are typically labor barons (i.e., second-tier subcontractors: the subcontractor of subcontractors) whose profit is directly tied to the amount of labor they can exploit from their workers through wage restructuring (e.g., piecework, paid by the day), nonexistent benefits, excessive hours, and unsafe conditions. Like subcontractors, labor baron work crews are part of the industry’s subcontracting arrangement that competes with other subcontractors and labor barons across the industry for job projects. The contracting system of labor is the main structural organization that sustains labor barons (Morales 2016; Morales and Saucedo 2015) and helps firms capitalize on migrant social network resources to reduce labor costs and enhance flexibility (Zolniski 2006). Considerable research on labor has scrutinized labor barons for exploiting their own kind (Cranford 2005; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000) with little consideration of the contracting arrangements that sustain a capitalist system of exploitation that disperses economic and political risks of production.

In the drywall trade, labor barons are seasoned workers who use network resources, knotted with transnational kith and kin ties to both Mexico and the United States, to form subcontracting crews. The inability to send construction projects overseas for enhanced flexibility and cheaper labor has sparked many firms to draw in labor from Latin America to suppress labor costs and labor’s power (De Genova 2005; Sassen 1999; Torres et al. 2013). Construction firms “rely on immigrant networks for hiring new workers, asking existing employees to identify and recommend a family member or friend in need of work. But they also use these networks to develop additional organizational layers within the firm” (Lowe et al. 2010:211), outsourcing capitalist production to labor barons to exploit the incorporation of an unregulated transnational labor force into local host economies. The labor baron acts as an intermediary of larger contracting arrangements that incorporate a transnational migrant labor force into the local drywall economy. This aids employers’ efforts to enhance control by replacing the union’s source of labor supply with a cheaper, more vulnerable, nonunion labor force (Cranford 2005; Milkman and Wong 2000), able to benefit from undocumented labor without incurring legal penalties set out by the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) (De Genova 2005; Zolniski 2006).²

The subcontracting system constrains construction workers’ opportunities. It is the structural process by which employers find employees and how employees find work (Blue and Drever 2011; Lowe et al. 2010). Drywallers have

²The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 liberated employers from any legal liability to hire undocumented workers by setting precedent legislation that does not hold employers responsible for the verification of documents presented by employees (De Genova 2005).
little choice but enter the industry through the labor baron given the established (sub)contractor–labor baron relationship that has monopolized job entry. Once in the trade, migrant drywallers have limited occupational mobility, which is characteristic of the “occupational ghettos” (Glenn 1981) and ethnic-mobility entrapment (Morales 2016) that stagnate social mobility (Cranford 2005). Hence, similar to other migrant-dominant jobs (i.e., domestics, gardeners), occupational mobility is limited to petty entrepreneurship in the informal economy (Morales 2016; Ramirez and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2009) or horizontal labor market moves (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011; Lowe et al. 2010; Smith 2006) that do little to change existing employment conditions. Thus, for drywallers, workers must either become a labor baron and build their own labor crew or enter more lucrative unionized jobs in the commercial sector (Morales 2016). However, given the structural barriers (Paap 2006; Rabourn 2008) and depreciating union density (Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000), unionization is a precipitously less viable option.

Data and Methods

Between 2013 and 2015, there were two stages of data collection. During the first stage of the data collection (2013), I gathered observational data as a drywaller across various construction sites throughout the San Diego local construction economy. Using social network ties to former coworkers and employers, established during my former 13-year experience in the drywall trade in San Diego, where the study was conducted, eased my entry into the occupation for this study. During participant observations, I documented interactions and informal conversations, paying close attention to how workers strategize against the everyday mechanisms of casualization and flexibility at the workplace.

Ten semi-structured, in-depth, interviews with former coworkers in the trade supplemented field observations. All interview participants are previous coworkers with whom I had built rapport and trust after many years of employment together. Nine of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, with one interview conducted predominately in English. All the interviewees are Mexican male journeymen drywallers with trade experience ranging between 10 and 35 years; immigration status varied. Interview participants ranged from 20 to 65 years of age. The summary of interviewees’ basic demographic characteristics is summarized in Table 1.

Participant-observation and interview data were detailed and transcribed in their original language to maintain data integrity. Despite workers operating predominately in Spanish, the jobsite exhibited bilingual narratives, conveying the language of the border. For example, despite one interview being predominately conducted in English, the interviewee occasionally transitioned into Spanish. At the jobsite, bilingual narratives included communication across monolingual speakers—English and Spanish—for cooperation in the building process. Many Spanish language–dominant drywallers had picked up phrases, idioms, or words from the English language to communicate with English-only speakers at the jobsite. Being fluent in both Spanish and English while also understanding the cultural sensibilities of the trade in San Diego allowed me to transition smoothly between both languages throughout the study. All interviews were audio recorded and conducted in person at the participant’s place of residence, with the exception of one interview that took place at a public park. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length guided by general questions about survival that became more specific with the progression of the interview. For example, questions about strategies used to find consistent employment and resistance to labor flexibility were central to the discussion. Finally, to protect participants’ identities, I use pseudonyms for all participants and firms named throughout this article.

In the second stage of the data collection (summer of 2015), I worked an additional three months for a San Diego–based commercial nonunion drywall firm, Dudley Company (pseudonym), and performed side jobs in the informal economy as part of an informal drywall work crew. Many employees from Dudley Company performed side jobs after their regular eight-hour workday and over the weekends, which made my integration into informal work crews relatively easy. The social ties formed among coworkers at Dudley Company afforded me entrée among other employees in the industry, leading to other informal job opportunities. For a large portion of the three months in the field, I worked alongside Dudley Company employees in the informal economy performing side jobs (e.g., residential remodels, commercial remodels, and new residential construction) throughout the San Diego local construction economy while maintaining sporadic formal employment at Dudley Company. During this phase of the data collection, only observational data were collected. Many of the themes that emerged during the first phase of data collection were discussed among workers at the jobsite throughout the workday. Notes from those informal conversations were jotted down in the field that served as reminders for more detailed descriptions written at the end of the workday.

Open coding techniques were used to analyze all interviews and field notes. Observations and interviews were analyzed to uncover themes about informal shop floor organizing techniques and strategies to resist casualization. The data were also analyzed to identify any emerging meta-themes; however, the focus largely remained at the intersections of labor-organizing techniques to resist casualization and everyday struggles at the workplace. Three themes emerged from this research: (1) arbitrary firing and wage-cutting strategies as motivations for organizing, (2) social networks as a tool for migrant workers’ employment and organizing, and (3) an alternative organizing strategy among drywallers, that I title collective cuadrillas. A more detailed description of those themes is presented in the next section.
Results

Motivation for Organizing: Arbitrary Firings and Wage-cutting Strategies

Hiring contracts offer two causes for removal: (1) progressive discipline that leads to firing related to poor work performance and (2) removal through layoff (Paap 2006). Paap (2006) described layoffs and firings as distinct in theory and contract but the same in practice. Firings are formal dismissals that sever employment between firms and their employees. Arbitrary firings remove workers indefinitely through layoffs, positioning workers in an infinite standby status, often under the promise of future employment. Both firings and layoffs lead to unemployment, but an important distinction remains. Layoffs maintain open channels of employment between firms and their employees, creating large unemployed labor pools from which firms can draw. This enhances labor flexibility and control by creating an internal labor-regulating process that maintains workers readily flexible to the labor needs of drywall firms.

Drywallers refer to layoffs as descanso—meaning rest. Me descansaron is the workplace expression workers use to describe being laid off indefinitely. Layoffs not only generate a readily available unemployed workforce but also are powerful mechanisms to leverage direct control over employees. For example, in the following excerpt, Isaias, an undocumented drywaller that entered the trade at the age of 16, describes how layoffs are structured power moves made by employers and supervisors to discipline and control workers.

There was a foreman that made us work on Saturdays. And if you refused he would rest you. . . . He would tell us, you are going to work. No but I can't. And the next day we would not go to work. He would rest us, like, two days. And would call workers to return to work if he felt like it. It was like he was punishing you, so the next time he told you to work [Saturdays] you had to do it. Because it was not about whether you wanted to, but you were obligated to.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees.

| Interviewee | Town/City/State of Origin | U.S. Citizenship Status | Previous Occupation(s) in United States | Recruitment into the Trade |
|-------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Ignacio     | Tenancingo, State of Mexico | Previously undocumented, currently a permanent resident | Day laborer and agricultural worker harvesting avocados in Fallbrook, San Diego | Entered the drywall trade at the age of 17 Uncle connected him to a drywall labor baron |
| Beltran     | Tenancingo, State of Mexico | Undocumented            | Day laborer and agricultural worker employed throughout the northwestern region of the United States (Oregon, Washington, and northern California) | Entered the trade at the age of 24 Recruited from a day labor site by a labor baron |
| Isaias      | Tenancingo, State of Mexico | Undocumented            | Day laborer                            | Entered the trade at the age of 16 Recruited from a day labor site by labor baron |
| Salvador    | Oaxaca, Mexico            | Undocumented            | Day laborer                            | Recruited from day labor site by labor baron |
| Eduardo     | Oaxaca, Mexico            | Previously undocumented, currently a permanent resident | Day laborer                            | Entered trade via distant relative |
| Teo Manuel  | Oaxaca, Mexico            | Undocumented            | Flower nursery                         | Recruited by younger brother |
| Valentin    | Juchitlan, Jalisco        | Permanent resident      | Agricultural worker throughout the northwestern region of the United States (Oregon, Washington, and northern California) | Entered the construction industry via friend from town of origin |
| Roberto     | Juchitlan, Jalisco        | Permanent resident      | N/A                                    | Entered directly into the trade via an uncle, who is a drywall labor baron |
| Jacobo      | Tecate, Baja California   | Entered the United States to work via tourist visa, currently a permanent resident | Recruited directly from Mexico into the trade | Recruited via word of mouth by a labor baron working at a job project in Tecate, California |

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Descanso (arbitrary firing) is an informal practice used across multiple drywall sectors and industries (e.g., informal, formal, union, nonunion, commercial, and residential). The practice is
I understand I have the right to terminate my employment at any time, with or without cause or notice. Conversely Dudley Company has the right to terminate my employment at any time, with or without cause. This is the entire understanding regarding the at-will nature of the employment relationship. My status as an “at-will” employee may not be changed except in writing and signed by the President of Dudley Company and me.

Whether made explicit or not in the hiring packet, at-will employment is widespread: Employees can be dismissed or laid off without cause or warning. Descanso as a labor control strategy that regulates and generates large unemployed labor reserves allows firms to structure temporary employment and unemployment into standard operating procedures to further enhance labor flexibility. Both the contracting system of labor and labor control practices such as descanso maintain migrant drywallers readily flexible to construction firms’ capital production needs. It is one of the many ways firms are able to capitalize on capitalist growth through heightened market risk and uncertainty. For example, descanso and subcontracting shield firms from the many risks and expenses commonly associated with the industry’s instability concerns (e.g., mobility of job projects, changing job assignments, unpredictability of machine breakdowns, materials arriving late, failed inspections, and weather uncertainties) by maintaining pools of workers readily flexible to the industry’s precarious labor demands. Because workers shoulder the burden and cost of steady employment and unemployment (layoffs), they have to consistently search for employment opportunities across several sectors and among multiple firms. This exhausts workers’ financial savings and resources while exerting incredible pressure on workers to maintain stable employment in the face of stern competition.

Descanso is not the exclusive feature of the informal sector. Unions also practice arbitrary firings along with wage-cutting practices, such as percentage wage techniques to undercut employees’ wages and enhance flexibility. According to participants, percentage wages are a strategy for unions to entice nonunion firms to take advantage of the benefits of employing a unionized workforce by lowering the cost of labor. Roberto, a union drywaller with 25 years of experience in the trade, explains what it means to earn a percentage of his union wage scale:

I mean, this is how it is even coming down to the union. Even they [the union] ask you to work for 60 percent of your wages. That is how they try to get companies to go work union. . . . They [union] say ok, if we can get some work for our guys and the firm to pay for all their fees and everything, they can get them some workers. The firm will get the job done by a union company, but at 60/70 percent of a union scale. . . . It is good for the union because they keep their doors open and that means they can keep their guys working. For the union, it doesn’t matter that the worker is making less because they keep making their money and the company that gets the job is still from a union company.

I asked Roberto, as a union worker, for his sentiments about being paid a percentage of his wage scale. He continued,

Nobody likes it. Nobody likes to make less. Especially if you are on a union job that is paying full scale and they [the union] send you to another job and tell you it is only 60 percent [paying workers only 60 percent of their union wage]. They don’t give you a choice. If you do not go, you cannot return to the full-scale union job they got because they will interpret it as you are not being a team player. They do not tell you that, but that is what is going to happen. . . . If you do not go, you do not get put at the bottom of list or anything. They pretty much feel you are not a team player. They say, ok you do not want to go? I will get someone else. And, if they [the hiring firm] get another union job, the first guys they will pull are the guys that they got working. Those workers are the ones that will continue with the company. So pretty much, by not going, you got out of the loop. And it is going to be hard to get back in unless they get real busy. The [hiring firm] will stay loyal to the guys that have been there. So if work slows, you are laid off again.

When asked how the union would react to working nonunion, Roberto declared,

I am working nonunion, and I belong to the union. But there is no work for me in the union right now. Right now, the union is more lenient [with union workers working nonunion] because they have a lot of people on the nonworking list. They have 400/500 workers just sitting at home. They say you are [number] 429. There is not even a job that can hire all those people. Even if you get two stadiums going, like the ones they want to build in LA [Los Angeles], it would not be enough for everyone. . . . Right now we are on survival mode. You have people that are union workers that are working [nonunion] for 10 dollars an hour just to make ends meet. Whatever comes up is what they are going to do. It is not about I am worth this much. It is about survival.

When this project began in 2013, the construction industry was still hemorrhaging from the great job losses of the previous six years. Total employment in the industry had yet to recover from its 11.8 million mark of late 2007 (Kochhar 2014). By the end of 2013, total employment was still at 9.4 million (Kochhar 2014). The commercial office building boom that unions had long relied on had waned (Milikman and Wong 2000). Roberto described the decline of union jobs:

Three or four years ago, you had high-rises going up everywhere. Right now, there is none. Before there were a lot of schools being built, but all those grants are over. We are working on old grants. We have actually built schools but the money is not there
to start those schools. The building is there, but there are no students there because the money is not there to hire teachers.

Facing the loss of construction projects to nonunion firms while still recovering from the housing slump of late 2007, unions struggled to maintain steady employment for their entire workforce. In an effort to compete with nonunion firms, unions resorted to wage undercutting and labor control strategies to cut costs. According to several drywallers, “unions looked the other way” when workers branched off to perform nonunion work during slump periods. Consequently, drywallers were left with little to no choice but to search for employment in the extralegal and nonunion sectors for survival. Therefore, the demarcation between nonunion/informal and union/nonunion employment as presented by some labor researchers are not either/or realities for drywallers. As workers confront shades of casualization, deregulation, layoffs, unemployment, flexibility, and precarity across multiple job sectors and industries, workers began to use social network ties to mount informal labor market mobility strategies.

**Social Networks as a Tool for Migrant Workers’ Employment and Organizing**

In San Diego, California, drywallers’ social networks are not merely the means for facilitating integration into host socioeconomic structures. For many migrant drywallers, networking is a way to meet the unique challenges of incorporation into the new global economy. Economic globalization is not just about the transnationalization of capital but also involves the creation of an internalized labor market for low-wage migrant workers (Sassen 1999). The structural inability to send drywall jobs abroad to reduce labor costs and enhance flexibility has led to the creation of an internalized low-wage labor market for migrant workers in San Diego’s local economy. The San Diego–Tijuana region has some of the highest earnings for Mexicans on both sides of the international boundary (Chávez 2016; Orraca-Romano 2017). Tijuana’s proximity to San Diego enables the occurrence of cross-border workers: individuals that reside in Mexico but cross the international border to work in the United States (Orraca-Romano 2017). The result of job opportunities north of the Tijuana border (Chávez and Chande 2016; Cota 2017) and construction firms drawing in labor through current employees’ social network ties (Cranford 2005; Milkman and Wong 2000; Saucedo and Morales 2010; Torres et al. 2013) has brought San Diego a comparatively younger and growing population of Mexican workers to satisfy its downgraded labor market demands. Moreover, the majority of migrant drywallers are confined to San Diego’s local construction economy due to a “100-mile border zone” that encloses the entire metropolitan area with permanent interior state border checkpoints, temporary tactical checkpoints, and roving patrols that block all major highways and freeways leaving San Diego County. This creates a transnational region comprised of both cross-border workers from Tijuana and undocumented Mexican workers residing in San Diego that are limited in mobility and access to local construction economies outside San Diego County.

Yet the creation of an internalized labor market has come with its own contradictions, which has opened new economic opportunities for many migrant workers. In this case, migrant workers leveraged the same social ties in their social networks used to exploit their labor power to create new possibilities for organization. Construction workers use social network resources to locate well-paid employment and acceptable work conditions (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011; Lowe et al. 2010; Smith 2006) and circumvent the most exploitative features of the contracting “middlemen” employment structure. Network resources are not static; drywallers actively expand and capitalize on personal and work networks by cultivating relationships with employers (e.g., developers, homeowners, contractors, subcontractors, and real estate agents) and the managerial class (e.g., supervisors and foremen) that serve as the basis for their labor market movement. For example, Manuel, with over 15 years of drywall experience, explained how he finds consistent employment opportunities:

> Almost all the jobs that I get are due to individual recommendations. . . . Thanks to Greg [current employer], he recommends me to his friends and other contractors that he knows that need people for drywall. . . . The majority of the jobs that I get are through recommendations. When I get a job, sometimes the owner of the house recommends me. You know what, I got a friend that wants this done. Can you do it? Yes, of course. I go to that person to perform the work. They like it, and they say, you know what, my

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1Many Mexicans migrate internally to Tijuana with the intention of “jumping” to the other side (Chávez 2016; Orraca-Romano 2017). Others are lured to Tijuana’s employment opportunities with the promise of higher pay—comparably to other regions in Mexico (Chávez 2016; Orraca-Romano 2017).

2Revision to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1946 granted U.S. Customs and Border Protection extra-constitutional authority to set up checkpoints and search vehicles for “aliens” within a “reasonable distance” from any external boundary of the United States. In 1953, the Justice Department determined “reasonable distance” to mean 100 miles from all external U.S. boundaries.

3Rather than risk deportation, undocumented drywallers regularly refuse to cross interior checkpoints to work at construction projects outside San Diego County. Consequently, drywall companies must either confine their job projects to the San Diego metropolitan area or create separate offices with a separate workforce on the other side of San Diego’s interior checkpoints. Cross-border workers with temporary visas (e.g., tourist and visitor visas, or border crossing cards) are also confined to the “100-mile border zone” because they risk deportation and their visas revoked if caught entering the United States to work.
dad just bought a house and needs this done. Can you do it? Yes, of course. And that is how I get work. That is, if you do good work. If you do not do good work, even if you have a friend of a friend that needs work done, you are not going to get recommended because they do not like your work. How am I going to recommend you if you do not do good work, right?

The incorporation of nonethnic employers and supervisors into work and personal network ties has long been a central technique for construction workers’ labor market mobility and steady employment (Applebaum 1999; Berntsen 2016; Blue and Drever 2011; Hagan et al. 2011; Lowe et al. 2010). Referrals from employers also make for the assurance of “good” employees (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). However, social networks are context-specific, fluctuating with job changes and transforming over time (Boyd 1989; Cranford 2005; Hagan et al. 2011; Morales 2016). Consequently, Manuel explained how his strategies have changed from point of entry.

That is how I move around [the construction industry]. Don’t think that I go out to look for work. Before I did. If I saw a house being framed, I would ask: Hey, who is the foreman here? Do you have hangers or tapers? I would say, I do this kind of work [drywall] and I have worked for these companies. [The foreman would reply] Oh really, how much do you charge? Well let me see the house. I always calculate the bidding of a project by how many days I think it will take me to finish the house. I calculate my days so I do not make less than 150 [dollars] a day. I would figure out the days, add a day or two. You know how sometimes you have to come back to do patchwork. And that is how I would go about calculating bids. I do not know that much about numbers, so I just figure out how many days it will take me to do the work.

Through experience, workers learn how to best move between jobs projects and employers (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011). Workers actively cultivate personal and work network ties, which serve as the basis to “job jump” (Hagan et al. 2011), “rework” (see Berntsen 2016), and bypass subcontractors and labor barons for direct employment opportunities with firms, general contractors, homeowners, and developers. This practice facilitates workers’ movement across formal and informal labor markets and across multiple employers—from labor barons to subcontractors to firm owners (Hagan et al. 2011). Ultimately, this improves work conditions, augments wages, and changes the occupational context for workers’ mobility. Not reliant on one employer for employment, workers leverage and actively share connections to employers to move out of less satisfactory jobs and stabilize employment opportunities. For example, Ignacio described how he finds consistent employment during layoff periods:

I search [for] work through friends. Well with friends. I look for them, and sometimes some painters have given me work. Painters who are friends have called me or other friends. People that you meet at work also. They want you to fix a room in their home, a bathroom or kitchen—that is what it comes down to.

Searching for employment via camaradas (friends) was a recurring theme among migrant workers when I asked how they maintain consistent employment in the face of arbitrary firings and layoffs. Drywallers with well-established networks are less susceptible to structural unemployment and blocked mobility. The sharing and pooling of network resources among coworkers is common and often necessary to survive rampant unemployment and market instability. Beltran, who at the age of 24 was first recruited into the drywall trade from a day labor corner site, explained the importance of comradeship in the workplace as a distinctive form of collective resistance to address the pressing workplace issue of descanso.

In the company, sometimes we do not get our 40 hours. So what I do is call people I know, or other contractors. And, if another day of work comes out of it then that is good for me. Or even with the same friends [other drywallers]. There are times when they need help and call me for help. We help each other out—at least a Saturday, or something

Previous research has recognized reciprocity, a sense of trust, patronage, and community as known characteristics of Mexican workers penetrating alien commercial markets (Alvarez 2005; Lomnitz 1982; Vélez-Ibáñez 1983). According to Alvarez (2005), the social organization of transnational Mexican long-haul truckers is based on cultural network resources of kinship, reciprocity, patronage, and trust as a distinctive style of doing business. Similarly, drywallers use networking as an organizational strategy for managing market risk and uncertainty downloaded to them through the contracting system of labor. Within this context, social network ties serve as reciprocal relationships of collective sharing and action among associated coworkers; where the incorporation of employers and supervisors into personal and work networks not only benefit individual workers but also a group of associated coworkers that rely on each other for labor market mobility.

Yet despite drywallers experiencing augmented wages and improved work conditions, many drywallers continued to complain about severe workplace competition that sparked infighting and workplace sabotage among coworkers. In the following section, I describe a network of interconnected drywallers, whom I term collective cuadrillas, that began to use networking not only as an organizational strategy for

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6The drywall trade is separated into two specialized crafts: (1) hanging drywall: the installation of wallboard on the interior sections of structures and (2) taping drywall: the taping and application of compound joint material over wallboard joints and fastener screw heads to create an even and smooth or textured surface over installed wallboard.
labor market mobility but also to convene collaboratively on the shop floor. This alleviated fierce competition among workmates while also breaking the rules of capitalist production that changed how labor was being reproduced and valued among workmates across job projects.

**Mutual-aid Networks: From Transnational Labor to Collective Cuadrillas**

Workers would express, “hay mucha política” (literal translation, too many politics) in the industry, especially when employed through a subcontractor—including the labor baron. By política, drywallers meant the undercutting strategies used by drywallers to compromise fellow workmates’ employment. Practices of employee infighting, backstabbing, rumors, and sabotage to expel workmates from the jobsite were widespread shop floor practices. For example, Teo, previously employed at a flower nursery, after several negative experiences that expelled him from several drywall companies (e.g., coworkers accused him of stealing company tools), decided to never again work for another drywall firm (specialty subcontractor).

In the following narrative, Teo explains the disadvantages of workplace política within drywall firms:

> The thing is, among the employees, we are like 30, 40, employees [in a drywall company] and there is always someone that is ratting other workers out [to the boss], just to annoy you. They say: I don’t want that fucker here because the fucker is too close to the company. And if they descansen [lay off] workers, I can be the one kicked out because that worker is too close to the boss. There are people like that. There is always someone in the company that is, like, applauding for your exit [from the company]. . . .

> Many workers often say: I want the work for me. I don’t want anyone else to get work. In my opinion, [workplace] política has to do with who gets fired.

Teo continues: “We cannot be causing política because that is a waste of time. It doesn’t work because it is wrong. Engaging in política is like jealousy, that thing is a disease.”

For Teo, the material, social, and even emotional consequences (e.g., unemployment, casualization, toxic workplace relationships among workmates, emotional stress) brought on by workplace competition carried over to other areas of everyday life like an enfermedad (disease) affecting his relationship with his wife and brothers and even his mental well-being. Teo extensively described feelings of depression and emotional stress due to instable employment. Economic hardships propelled conflicts in the home with his wife and because he is drawn to money, he does not want to teach the other because [he] would have to pay him more. I had that experience: my brother and I, he didn’t want to teach me.

As an ayudante, eager to learn the trade, Manuel felt his brother Martin thwart the learning process to keep his wages low and prevent him from becoming a competitor. Among drywallers, it is well known that seasoned drywallers or labor barons refuse or delay teaching ayudantes to keep their wages low and prevent employees from becoming competitors. Unfortunately, these negative jobsite experiences fractured Manuel’s relationship with his brother. For example, employers and supervisors, having prior knowledge of Manuel and Martin’s broken relationship, would commonly place them in separate job projects to keep them isolated.

Política at the jobsite is an extreme form of workplace competition exacerbated by neoliberal restructuring that has suppressed labor costs and enhanced labor flexibility in an industry that shifts unpredictably on a weekly basis. Workers are employed “as and when needed” (Gall 2012) (i.e., “at-will” employees) and assigned to project-based contracts that provide workers with limited job security (Berntsen 2016; Milkman and Wong 2000; Nelson et al. 2015). This fosters a severely competitive work environment in which workers regularly sabotage and spread rumors about workmates to expel them as competitors from construction firms.

Groups of drywallers began to refuse the engagement of política by responding with collaborative agreements in the division of labor and wages. Across several jobsites, I found

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1*Ayudantes,* or helpers, are entry-level positions tasked with the performance of the less desired, less paid, job tasks (e.g., mixing compound joint, cleaning tools, stocking drywall, sanding).

2Seasoned drywallers commonly break off from labor barons to create their own work crew as competing labor barons.

3For example, coworkers would spread rumors about coworkers’ incompetence, lethargy, arriving late, taking long breaks, and the stealing of company tools to management to expel them as
several drywall work crews use social networking to navigate the industry as collective cuadrillas: coethnic drywallers that move across the industry as a work team under agreements to a collaborative process in the division of labor and wages at the jobsite (e.g., splitting wages evenly, job rotation, and cooperative performance of less desired tasks). For example, Salvador, with over 25 years of experience, first recruited into the trade by a distant relative, in the following narrative explains how workers often split piecework wages evenly regardless of operations performed:

When it is a large job, the supervisor sends a work crew, and we decide amongst ourselves [the division of labor and wages]. I have never had problems with any of the workers. We split [the earnings] in half no matter what the job pays. I don’t know how other workers work it out.

Labor research about migrant construction workers in the Netherlands determined that it is a common technique for acquainted workers to move between job projects as a work team to resist the power imbalances of employment relations (Berntsen 2016). As a team, workers increase their bargaining power “as it is more difficult to fire a group of workers than an individual worker” (Berntsen 2016:484). This strategy increases workers’ mobility power without directly challenging existing employment structures (Berntsen 2016; Smith 2006). Yet, unlike the Netherlands work teams, collective cuadrillas are work teams that alter jobsite employment power structures without recapitulating some of the most exploitative employment features associated with network building for occupational mobility (Berntsen 2016; Hagan et al. 2011; Lowe et al. 2010) and petty entrepreneurship as labor barons (Cranford 2005; Milkmam 2006; Milkmam and Wong 2000; Morales 2016). Collective cuadrillas members include coethnic drywallers that are relatives and/or friends (camaradas)—relationships that often predate migration but are also actively cultivated at the jobsite. These work teams are comprised of 2 to 10, or even more, workers that use their social network resources to connect to multiple employers—from subcontractors to firm owners to developers to homeowners—moving across formal and informal labor markets. Employment is found and sustained through the group’s personal and work social networks. In other words, these collective work crews share network resources to facilitate the collective movement of the group. Members do not job jump individually (Hagan et al. 2011) but are invested in the collective mobility of the group. Labor baron work crews and collective cuadrillas are formed similarly, made up of actual and fictive kin. Both exist alongside each other across the industry, often employed under the same construction firms, competing for the same jobs. The difference between labor baron work crews and collective cuadrillas is that collective cuadrillas complete job projects under horizontal employment structures. And despite primarily operating under piecework wage structures, these work teams split piecework wages evenly among its members and practice job rotation and cooperative performance of less desired job tasks. It is an organizational strategy to eradicate hierarchal employment arrangements that promote fierce competition and unequal pay scales among coworkers on the shop floor. Labor baron work crews, on the other hand, like (sub)contractors, mirror the industry’s hierarchal employment structure that pits workers against each other to compete for the best paying craft operations and whose profits are directly tied to the amount of labor they can exploit from their employees. Labor barons are paid directly by subcontractors, who then decide the division of labor and wages among its members.

When agreements for collaborative cooperation are broken, workers use networking to connect with workmates willing to engage in the collaborative process. For example, Eduardo and Javier, seasoned drywallers from the same Mexican town of origin, agreed to form a work crew at Torrance Drywall Company (pseudonym) but split after Javier broke their agreement for equal distribution of labor and wages. Eduardo explains:

We agreed to work equally and split the wages evenly. But no, I saw his checks were always bigger than mine. Later I told him, you know what? That is it!

Interviewer: Did you confront him about it?

Yes. I knew the rates for the houses. I knew what I should be earning. But no, [my checks always] came out to 600 or 700 [dollars] less. It did not seem just to me. He would do what Ronaldo did: he would get the work and leave. I would stay [at the jobsite] and do the all work on my own. . . . From there [I moved on], right there in Torrance Drywall Company, I got together with Angel. And from there on, yes, we would work in equal parts.

Fed up with strict competition and the uneven distribution of labor and wages, groups of drywallers began to decide the
division of labor and wages among themselves at the jobsite. As collective *cuadrillas*, workers carve out a mutually convened space within a capitalist context that renegotiates the hierarchal divisions of wage and labor among workmates for more democratically managed job practices (e.g., splitting wages more evenly, performing craft operations based on particular skill sets, job rotation, and cooperative performance of less desired job tasks). The complexity of their organization is that collective *cuadrillas* are fluid and informal, drifting intermittently between market sectors that develop alternatives to capitalist organization of work. These work teams often spontaneously break off into smaller work crews, adapting to changing labor market demands and job projects. The disintegration of work teams into smaller work crews allows workers as a group to maintain concurrent employment across multiple labor markets and firms. This practice enhances the groups’ flexibility and steady employment opportunities that interconnect these workers across multiple labor markets, shaping to the flexible and precarious labor standards of the industry while wresting control over work.

Collective *cuadrillas* often go unnoticed. Their existence is only apparent at the jobsite, the point of encounter, drifting fluidly along and across labor market sectors (i.e., informal, formal, residential, commercial)—groups of workers coming together and disintegrating as the demand for their labor power fluctuates. These work teams are distinct from union-organizing strategies in that they actively renegotiate power differences among drywallers, drawing on social network resources as a political tactic to develop alternatives to capitalist organization of work. Paralleling subaltern organizing models (Peña 1997), collective *cuadrillas* do not fit into the “standard” liberal model that celebrates a single leader who models (Peña 1997), collective decisions about the group’s direction and organization are not necessarily determined by the group’s leader, the point of encounter, drifting fluidly along and across labor market sectors (i.e., informal, formal, residential, commercial)—groups of workers coming together and disintegrating as the demand for their labor power fluctuates. These work teams are distinct from union-organizing strategies in that they actively renegotiate power differences among drywallers, drawing on social network resources as a political tactic to develop alternatives to capitalist organization of work. Paralleling subaltern organizing models (Peña 1997), collective *cuadrillas* do not fit into the “standard” liberal model that celebrates a single leader who is considered the brightest of the group and expected to state the group’s issues, strategies, and goals (Callahan 2005). Decisions about the group’s direction and organization are made collaboratively, actively ridding the production process of hierarchal occupational structures that rely on a crew leader (e.g., labor broker, labor baron, *encargado*, *padrone*, foreman) who takes a portion of workers’ wages.

As an informal organizing strategy among migrant workers, collective *cuadrillas* seek to disrupt the exploitative connections of their labor power to capital. Collective *cuadrillas* highlights the collaborative harnessing of a community’s own methodological tools to confront myriad capitalist control practices that seek to impose a particular class composition. This method of organizing is not crafted in street rallies or picket lines but is instead mobilized in the everyday toil of the job. Drywallers who would otherwise have been unemployed are no longer so because workers’ collective efforts are successful in resisting the consequences of neoliberal models that enhance casualization and flexibility. To the casual observer, collective *cuadrillas* are not an alternative to capitalism. However, workers’ collective organizing efforts do build a broader vision of collective anti-capitalism by developing new forms of social relations. Workers challenge the capitalist value relations system and forge something new in the process: new workplace relationships based on mutual aid and cooperation that break the rules of capitalist reproduction and lead the way to recreating and reorganizing a vision of the production process for individual workspaces and society as a whole.

**Conclusion**

Despite the growing interest in the role of migrant workers’ social networks in successful union campaigns to mobilize migrant workers (Cranford 2005; Delgado 1993; Milkman 2006; Milkman and Wong 2000; Roca-Servat 2010), there has been little consideration for how social network ties with existing value systems based on friendship, family, patronage, and mutual trust (Alvarez 2005; Lomnitz 1982; Vélez-Ibáñez 1983) are deployed, retooled, and renegotiated among workers as a strategic tactic for labor organizing. Labor literature, using a network analysis, continues to be largely engrossed by strict legal and extralegal economic boundaries, vis-à-vis the social capital concept, to distinguish between those ties that lead to labor exploitation and those that lead to solidarity among workers. Even efforts by labor scholars that account for the negative aspects of social networks, decoupling the social capital and social network concept (Cranford 2005) and reexamining their transformation over time (Boyd 1989; Morales 2016), continue to place value on migrant social networks that fit the “standard” liberal model of organizing.

This project demonstrates the motivation, specific mechanism (i.e., social networks), and informal organizing strategies that Mexican migrant drywallers employ in San Diego, California. For migrant drywallers on the shop floor, the organizing challenge is never simply about funneling workers from nonunion or extralegal economies to unionized jobs but how to address the varying degrees of labor flexibility and precariousness across multiple job sectors. Formal and informal sectors overlap, connect, and disconnect in unpredictable ways that contribute to the shaping of new forms of domination and exploitation in the workplace. As an alternative organizing strategy (Callahan 2005), collective *cuadrillas*, mutual-aid work crews made up of both fictive and actual kin, actively leverage existing social network ties and cultivate new ones under collective agreements of reciprocity and collaboration across industry sectors rather than replicate the contracting arrangement of labor. Collective *cuadrillas* actively renegotiate power differences among drywallers, drawing on self-determined ties of patronage, mutual aid, and trust as a political tactic to develop alternatives to capitalist organization of work. Collective *cuadrillas* are a bordered methodology (see Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) that, far from breaking down borders, refashion the flows of resistance between, through, and along the articulation of market boundaries (i.e., informal, formal, union,
nonunion, commercial, and residential). It is an organizing strategy that meets the unique challenges that some scholars have called “precarious labor regimes” in the construction industry (see Berntsen 2016; Nelson et al. 2015; Torres et al. 2013). The organizing power of collective cuadrillas is in the ability for workers to drift intermittently between formal/informal and union/nonunion job projects that develop alternatives to capitalist organization of work. The strategy meets the challenges of capitalist control strategies and structures (e.g., descanso, subcontracting, labor barons, union percentage wage scales) onerous between and across industry sector jobs, providing workers with greater control over the deployment of their labor power and the work process. The methodological approach is complex and multifaceted and takes into account the heterogeneity of bordered spaces that workers must navigate to meet workplace demands. This approach meets the challenges of the industry’s evolving market boundaries that are multiscalar in reorganizing drywallers’ working lives.

To conclude, more attention to social networks alternative “from below,” organizing models among workers, would allow for a more complete study of the correlates between migrants’ social network ties and labor organizing. Problematizing the investigative work that attempts to address the positive and negative boundaries of social networks based on predetermined endpoints in labor organizing could serve as an impetus to refocus the network analysis toward more innovative strategies against and beyond capital.

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