

## *Mexican and Central American Immigrants as Strategic Consumers*

Community activists throughout North and Central America are increasingly interested in promoting strategic consumption as an element of new models for civic participation that respond to the globally integrated world in which we live. The magnitude and complexity of problems that local communities face poses a challenge for strengthening grassroots civic participation. Even the best-intentioned citizens can find themselves feeling apathetic and hopeless in the face of a daunting array of economic and social problems, many of which have roots in decision-making processes which seem out of their control.

However, individuals express their economic power every time they purchase food, buy clothes, or dine at a restaurant. Each time we spend money, we are, in essence “voting” with our dollars. For people who feel disconnected from the policy choices that impact their lives, the notion of “voting with our dollars” through strategic and deliberate consumption is a concrete, immediate, and tangible way of taking action to improve their communities. As Leoncio Vásquez of the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front remarked at an enlancesAmérica conference in June 2002, “This [responsible consumerism] is something we can do now. I can begin tomorrow with my family by going to the farmers market to buy local produce. Then I can ask my friends to do the same. Little by little, we will build a movement.”

Immigrant communities often face pressing day-to-day economic challenges, and may not feel able to participate vocally in political processes, either because of concerns about immigration status or for fear of retribution. Strategic consumption could represent a powerful way for them to bring their voices to bear on the political and economic processes that affect their lives in the U.S. and countries of origin. In addition to the remittances they send home annually, recently estimated at \$23 billion, immigrants from Central America and Mexico in the U.S. have an annual domestic purchasing power that exceeds \$150 billion. That figure includes about \$34 billion for food and \$13 billion for clothing. Large corporations are well aware of the growing consumer power in the Latino community. Many people were surprised to see an advertisement in Spanish running on a major network during the Super Bowl, but it was just the latest example of big-budget ad campaigns aimed at influencing the preferences of the rapidly growing Latino population in the U.S.

So far, Latino immigrant communities have yet to steer their consumer power in ways that reflect their values and interests. Given their history of innovative transnational community work, though, a consumer campaign could fit well into the agenda of Latino immigrant community organizations throughout the U.S. In Chicago alone, there are 13 state-level “Federations” of local Mexican hometown associations, representing more than 40,000 members. These organizations focus on increasing the quality of life in their countries of origin, while also creating stronger communities in the U.S. They are well aware of the crisis in the Mexican countryside that continues to force many families to abandon farming and go north in search of a better life. A consumer campaign for immigrant communities, particularly one encouraging the consumption of sustainably-produced goods from their countries of origin, could give people concrete opportunities to develop transnational political awareness through strategic use of their consumer dollars.

