

## **Voices From the New Civil Rights Movement**

By Roberto Lovato, The Nation

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Immigrant rights activists aren't just focused on legalization; they have a vision of helping create a more progressive nation.

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Under cover of an oak tree on a tobacco farm deep in the heart of rural North Carolina, Leticia Zavala challenges the taller, older male migrant farm workers with talk of a boycott and legalization.

"We will not get anything without fighting for it," declares the intense 5-foot-1 organizer with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC). Pen and notebook in hand, Zavala hacks swiftly through the fear and doubt that envelop many migrants. She speaks from a place, an experience, that most organizers in this country don't know: Her earliest childhood and adolescent memories are of migrating each year with her family between Mexico and Florida. "We have five buses and each of you has to decide for yourselves if you want to go to Washington with us," she says. After some deliberation most of the workers, many of whom have just finished the seven-day trek from Nayarit, Mexico, opt to get on another bus and join the May 1 *marcha* and boycott. They trust her, as do the more than 500 other migrant workers from across the state who heed the call from one of the new leaders of the *movimiento* that is upon us.

Asked why she thinks FLOC was so successful in mobilizing farm workers (the union made history after a stunning 2004 victory that secured representation and a contract for more than 10,000 H-2A "guest" workers who labor on strawberry, tobacco, yam, cucumber and other farms), Zavala talks about "the importance of networks" and the need to respond to the globalization of labor through the creation of a "migrating union." She and other FLOC organizers have followed migrant workers to Mexico, where the organization has an office--and then have followed them back over several months. She also points to the vision, strategies and tactics shared by her mentor, FLOC founder Baldemar Velasquez, who passed on to her the advice that Martin Luther King Jr. gave him during the Poor People's Campaign in 1967: "When you impact the rich man's ability to make money, anything is negotiable."

But when you ask her what is most important in the twenty-first-century matrix of successful organizing, the bespectacled, bright-eyed Zavala will bring you back to basics: "One of the biggest successes of the union is that it takes away loneliness."

The 26-year-old Zavala's vision, experience and learning are a telling reflection of how the leaders of the *movimiento* merge traditional labor and civil rights strategies and tactics with more global, networked--and personalized--organizing to meet the challenges of the quintessentially global issue of immigration. While it's important to situate the immigrant struggle within the

context of the ongoing freedom struggles of African-Americans, women (like Zavala, an extraordinary number of movimiento leaders are mujeres) and others who have fought for social justice in the United States, labeling and framing it as a "new civil rights movement" risks erasing its roots in Latin American struggles and history.

The mainstream narrative of the movement emphasizes that single-minded immigrants want legalization--and how "angry Hispanics" and their Spanish-language radio DJ leaders mobilized in reaction to HR 4437 (better known as the Sensenbrenner immigration bill, which would criminalize the undocumented). But Zavala and other movimiento leaders across the country say that while it's true that the Sensenbrenner bill provided a spark, explaining this powerful movement of national and even global significance as a reaction to DJ-led calls to "marchar!" leaves many things--and people--out of the picture.

This time, there is no Martin Luther King or Cesar Chavez centering and centralizing the movement. Instead, grassroots leaders like Zavala mix, scratch and dub different media (think MySpace.com and text messaging, radio and TV, butcher paper and bullhorns) while navigating the cultural, political and historical currents that yoke and inspire the diverse elements making up this young, decentralized, digital-age movimiento.

At the older end of the age and experience spectrum (the average Latino is 26) is 44-year-old Juan Jose Gutierrez. He started organizing in the late 1970s, distributing mimeographed copies of the radical newspaper *Sin Fronteras* to immigrant workers in the face of hostility from the anti-Communist right. The director of Latino Movement USA and a key figure in the recent (and, to some, controversial) May 1 boycott, Gutierrez has logged thousands of miles and met hundreds of leaders in his efforts to build one of many vibrant movement networks. "Since January, I've been to about thirty-five different cities and seen old and new leadership coming together to create something that has never been seen before," says Gutierrez, who migrated to Los Angeles from Tuxpan, Jalisco, Mexico, when he was 11. "The [Spanish-language] DJs played a role, an important role, but they let us put our message in their medium. You can trace this movement all the way back to 1968."

Unlike the movimiento leaders who cut their teeth organizing in left-leaning Latin America, Gutierrez traces his political roots to post-civil rights East LA; he and many of the most important Mexican and Chicano immigrant rights leaders in LA--including union leader Maria Elena Durazo, longtime activist Javier Rodriguez and LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa--came out of the Centro de Accion Social Autonomo (Center for Autonomous Social Action), or CASA, a seminal Chicano political organization founded by legendary leaders Bert Corona and Soledad "Chole" Alatorre in 1968. One of the central tasks of CASA, which from its inception had a strong working-class and trade union orientation, was organizing undocumented workers. Gutierrez and others who have covered the country spiderlike for years see a direct line from the organizing around the amnesty law of 1986, which legalized 3 million undocumented workers, to immigrant rights organizing in California (home to one of every three immigrants in the United States), the fight against Proposition 187 of 1994 (which tried to deny health and education benefits to the children of the undocumented) and the historic shift of the AFL-CIO in 2000, when it decided to undertake immigrant organizing.

Having hopped back and forth among many of the more than 200 cities and towns that staged actions in April and May, Gutierrez sees different kinds of leaders emerging from the grassroots: "There are, of course, the undocumented, who are also leading things in local communities; there are legal immigrants getting involved, because they have friends and family who are affected by the anti-immigrant policies; and there are immigrants from different countries who bring their own political, sometimes radical, experiences from places like Guatemala and El Salvador."

One of the "radical" legacies that New York immigrant rights leader Miguel Ramirez has carried with him since fleeing El Salvador is an intensely collective outlook on personal and political identity. Ramirez, who heads the Queens-based Centro Hispano Cuzcatlan, recalls how one of his US-born colleagues told him to "correct" the resume he used to apply for his first organizing job in New York. "He [the friend] told me I had to take out the 'we,'" says 53-year-old Ramirez, whose bushy mustache often lifts to reveal a disarming smile. "I didn't know it was wrong to write, 'We organized a forum, we organized a workshop, we organized a network.'"

The experience and approach of Ramirez, who left his homeland in 1979 after many of his fellow students at the University of El Salvador were persecuted and killed, show that the US movimiento is as much the northernmost expression of a resurgent Latin American left as it is a new, more globalized, human rights-centered continuation of the Chicano, civil rights and other previous struggles that facilitated immigrant rights work here.

Ramirez, who estimates that since migrating he's helped organize more than 100 marches--all of them "very disciplined and without incidents"--is informed by the experience of organizing students, campesinos and others in revolutionary El Salvador, where one of every three Salvadorans adopted radicalized politics during the war. Lacking the wealth and pro-US government politics of Cuban-Americans and other, more conservative immigrant groups, Ramirez and many Salvadoran immigrants (most of whom were denied legal status and benefits granted to Cubans, Vietnamese and others) created organizations that then formed vast multi-issue, mass-based networks challenging the foreign and domestic policies of the most powerful country on earth.

This robust legacy energizes Ramirez and Centro Hispano Cuzcatlan, which organizes around worker rights, housing and immigration, as they play definitive roles in the construction of local networks like the Immigrant Communities in Action coalition. Through the coalition, Centro joined Indian, Pakistani, Korean, Filipino, Bangladeshi, Indonesian and other groups that have organized some of the country's most diverse marches.

Reflecting the historic and ongoing tensions between more election- and legislative-focused immigrant rights advocates in Washington and local and regional players, Ramirez, like the younger Zavala, calmly insists the movimiento must look beyond the upcoming elections and even the pending immigration bill. "In the end, it's an issue of power, one that can only be addressed by constant organizing."

US-born Latinos also feel Ramirez's urgency about organizing around immigration. Their ranks include teens and twentysomethings relatively new to politics, along with veterans like

Wisconsin's Christine Neumann-Ortiz, who was influenced by several Latin American movements as well as the struggle against California's Proposition 187.

"To see those thousands of people marching against Prop 187 was an inspiration," says Ortiz, who heads Voces de la Frontera, an immigrant worker center in the belly of the anti-immigrant beast, James Sensenbrenner's Milwaukee. "I was very impressed that there was that kind of response [to Prop 187]. We used that as a lesson," says Ortiz, who was one of the main organizers of marches of 30,000 and 70,000 people, some of the largest marches ever in a state with a storied progressive past.

Ortiz was not caught off guard by the movimiento. "I'm happy to be alive to see this shift," she states from one of Voces's three offices in Wisconsin, "but I'm not at all surprised. We've been building up networks of people over many years."

She and other activists point to years of service and advocacy on behalf of immigrants, which built up good will and trust in the community, as being defining factors in the ability to rally people into political action.

Founded in Austin, Texas, with a mission to build solidarity between US and Mexican maquiladora workers following the signing of the NAFTA accords in nearby San Antonio in 1994, Voces de la Frontera embodies a local-global sensibility. Ortiz started the Milwaukee Voces in November 2001 in response to the growing needs of Milwaukee's fast-growing Latino immigrant population. Like the settlement houses and mutual aid societies and other organizations that supported German and other white European immigrant workers of previous, more progressive eras in Wisconsin and elsewhere, Voces provides a critical support structure for the mostly Mexican and Central American workers in the agricultural, hotel and restaurant, construction and manufacturing industries in HR 4437 country.

Sensenbrenner "wants to leave a legacy. So did McCarthy. Immigrants in Wisconsin know his hypocrisy better than anyone," says Ortiz, whose German and Mexican immigrant heritage portends the not-so-distant future of once wholly white Wisconsin. "He is encroaching on his own base. Dairy farmers in his own district are revolting because he's attacking their economic base. This can't last in the long term," she says, as if eyeing developments in post-Prop 187 California, where short-term anti-immigrant backlash led to a longer-term movement that gave Los Angeles its first Latino (and progressive) mayor--and gave the movimiento a vision of its potential.

Like organizers in Los Angeles, Chicago and other cities, Ortiz and Voces have built strong and deep relationships with the local Spanish-language media. But they're also keenly aware of who's leading the charge. "We had lists of more than 4,000 workers before the radio stations or Sensenbrenner came into the picture," Ortiz explains.

As they continue to organize and lobby around the immigration debate in Congress, around the inevitable backlash at the local and state levels and around a more proactive agenda, Ortiz and many of the other leaders of the immigrant rights movement are keeping their eyes on a larger prize, beyond the issue of immigration. "We're going to change this country," she says, adding,

"We've gained public sympathy for immigrants. We've gained recognition and power, and we are an inspiration to the larger movement for change." She is especially motivated when she describes the effect of the movimiento on the generations to come. Like the "Hmong students who went to a Sensenbrenner town hall meeting in South Alice [a Milwaukee suburb] and chanted 'Si se puede, Si se puede' at him." Asked if the backlash will damage the movimiento, Ortiz responds, "In the long run this will make us stronger and build our movement."

Roberto Lovato is a Los Angeles-based writer.

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