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UNDOCUMENTED IN AMERICA

*Could you tell us about your backgrounds as Latino immigrants' rights activists in the United States, and how you were radicalized?*¹

RODRÍGUEZ: I was born in 1944 in Torreón, Coahuila, but my family comes from the northern mountains of Durango. My father was a Communist and a trade union leader. When I was five we moved to Ciudad Juárez, on the border. In 1953 my father went to work in the US as a farmworker, under the Bracero quota scheme that was in place then.² That same year, when I was nine, I got deported from the US—I was working as a shoe-shine boy and had gone over to El Paso for the day, but was picked up within a few hours. Three years later, in 1956, I crossed the border for good with my mother and brothers, arriving in Los Angeles that August. We lived in the city centre, and could smell the noxious fumes from the meatpacking plants and other industries. I went to the public junior high school; there was no 'English as a Second Language' programme then, just 'Foreign Adjustment' schemes. My first act of rebellion was in music class, when we were forced to sing patriotic American songs; I refused. As a punishment they put me at the back of the class. Mexicans were constantly being reminded of their difference: we would be called 'wetback' and 'TJ'—short for Tijuana. We all felt the discrimination and exclusion, and began to think about fighting back against it. In 1965 we held a demonstration against police brutality in our neighbourhood. From there I jumped into political activity, entering the radical Latino wing of the Civil Rights movement.

DÍAZ: My family is originally from Aguascalientes, Mexico, but I was born in LA in 1964, one of seven children. I was raised in Chino. We had

a big house, but we lived poor: we didn't get our first television until I was fourteen. As I was growing up I saw my parents help a lot of immigrants: they lived in a trailer at the back of our yard, worked with my father in landscaping or helped my mother round the house. As a child I was aware of the Chicano movement—I would see the Brown Beret marches going down Central Avenue—and experienced discrimination and racism, especially from the police. But I didn't really connect with the movement until I got to college in 2000.

How did you become involved in the struggle for immigrants' rights?

RODRÍGUEZ: After 1965 I became involved in a local Chicano organization called Casa Carnalismo—Mexican slang for 'brotherhood'—which mobilized people from the neighbourhood and college students. The struggle for Latino labour and civil rights was gathering pace at this time: in California, César Chávez of the National Farm Workers Association led the grape pickers' strike in 1965, and the next year, Rodolfo 'Corky' Gonzáles, a former prize-fighter, set up the Denver-based Crusade for Justice, the first Mexican American civil rights organization; in 1967, Reies López Tijerina and his Alianza Federal de Mercedes (Federal Alliance for Land Grants) seized a courthouse in New Mexico. Student groups began to form on campuses. In California, Chicano organizers came into contact with Black activists—the Panthers, George Jackson, Angela Davis—and played a role in the wider struggles against discrimination, racism, police brutality and the Vietnam War. In 1970, the Chicano Moratorium movement against the war organized a big march in East LA which the police broke up in an infamous rampage, killing three people.

In mid 1974, several of us from Carnalismo decided to join forces with Bert Corona—a legendary figure in the immigrants' rights movement. He was from the binational community in El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, but had come to California in the 1930s, working as a longshoreman before becoming a labour organizer. In 1968 he and Soledad Alatorre founded CASA, the Centro de Acción Social Autónomo, which aimed to organize the immigrant community and provide them with legal advice, documentation, help with housing and so on. The number of undocumented

¹ Interview conducted by William I. Robinson, author of *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (2004), and Xuan Santos; both teach sociology at UC Santa Barbara.

² Bracero Program: from 1942 to 1964, this allowed a quota of Mexican farmworkers to come to the United States.

Mexican workers had increased substantially after the end of the Bracero Program in 1964. CASA was the first to organize undocumented immigrants, though it also focused more generally on working-class Mexican-Americans. CASA eventually disintegrated amid major political divisions in 1978.

How has the movement evolved since then?

RODRÍGUEZ: The first phase of the movement runs from 1968 to 1986—up to the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which amnestied immigrants who could prove they had been in the country for four years. That was a real milestone. Throughout the 1970s we had organized against a succession of bills aiming to curb or criminalize immigration. We held marches, started petitions and a lobbying campaign, set up mailing lists; we defended people who had been fired for being undocumented, and went to challenge Immigration and Naturalization Service raids when they took place.

The US Supreme Court's clampdown on temporary rights for applicants for permanent residency was the spark for a wider protest movement in the early 80s. In May 1984 we organized a march in downtown LA for a general immigration amnesty and against the Simpson–Mazzoli Bill on immigration, as it then stood. Jesse Jackson spoke at the rally, which drew 10,000 people—the biggest crowd that had ever gathered in support of immigrants up to that point. This had an important effect, in pressing the Latino establishment, historically very moderate, to come out against the Bill. At the Democratic Convention in San Francisco in July 1984, the Latino delegates forced Mondale and the Party to take a stand against the Bill. Thirty undocumented migrants occupied the offices of a prominent Democrat law firm in Beverly Hills for several days. There were intense negotiations over proposed amendments to Simpson–Mazzoli, which eventually became the IRCA of 1986. This still included sanctions on employers who hired undocumented immigrants, but much more significant was that it legalized the status of about 3 million people. The amnesty also included children, spouses and other family members, and allowed you to apply for citizenship within five years.

After that we entered a new phase. In California, the debate was pushed to the right, with figures such as Pat Buchanan sounding the anti-immigrant alarm. The critical moment here was Proposition 187,

a Californian ballot initiative of 1994 that aimed to deny medical care and other public services to undocumented immigrants, and public education to their children. We developed a two-pronged strategy to try to defeat Proposition 187: electoral lobbying and massive street demonstrations. At the same time, there was a wave of walkouts in immigrant blue-collar high schools, and the beginnings of a new student movement. In mid-October 1994 we brought out 150,000 people against the Proposition in LA, but it was voted through in November. It was only overturned by a district judge in 1998. But we gained a lot of experience from the mobilizations, and made connections with the unions, local communities and Spanish-language Latino media.

What impact did NAFTA have on immigration patterns, and on the movement itself?

RODRÍGUEZ: Within Mexico, the Salinas government pushed through a massive wave of privatization and deregulation from 1988 onwards. NAFTA meant even more public services being sold off, labour protections dismantled, and many tariffs being reduced or eliminated. Mexican agriculture was opened up to heavily subsidized US importers, and hundreds of thousands of farmers were driven off the land, just as countless small businesses were crushed by the arrival of US chains such as Wal-Mart. In the border zones, where most of the *maquiladoras* were established, government clamp-downs on union organizing combined with high unemployment meant that wages actually dropped. One result of this was a surge in people coming to the US. The number of undocumented immigrants has more than doubled since NAFTA came into force, from under 5 million in 1994 to over 12 million today. Well over half of them come from Mexico, with another quarter from Central and Latin America. Of course, there are also a lot of children born in the US into undocumented immigrant families. As these communities have grown, they have begun to feel their needs, aspirations, frustrations, and look for ways to articulate them.

Organizing immigrant workers is a response to this—an effort to prevent exploitation, to improve conditions and reduce impoverishment. But we also try to unite the immigrant and the native worker. Back in 1975 I attended a conference organized by the LA County Federation of Labor, where a keynote speaker claimed that immigrants—both legal and undocumented—could not be organized. Yet today there are unions

with over 80,000 immigrant members, and Latino trade unionists head many Locals; a real process of change is taking place. The Justice for Janitors campaign that started in the late 80s is only one example of the visibility and resources that unions have provided.

What other issues have you organized around?

DÍAZ: One of my first activities after I got to college was to join the struggle for driver's licences—undocumented immigrants had been barred from obtaining them since 1993, but in early 2003 the California State Senate approved a bill reversing that decision. The bill became a key issue in the October recall referendum against Gray Davis, and we started mobilizing in support of it. In December 2003, we organized a three-day march from Claremont to downtown LA. But Schwarzenegger had repealed the bill as soon as he became Governor, and has vetoed the compromises proposed since then by State Senator Gil Cedillo.

In late 2003 I worked with a small group of activists in Ontario, California to organize walkouts of immigrant workers and consumer boycotts to demand driver's licences for the undocumented. On December 12—day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's national saint—we managed to shut down a number of factories and restaurants across California, including the American Apparel plant. At this time, we also made contact with other groups in Atlanta, Arizona and Texas working on similar actions. But serious divisions emerged in the movement from the start of 2004, when Bush announced his plan for guest workers.

What has the movement's response been to anti-immigrant groups?

DÍAZ: A large number of these groups have emerged in recent years—notably Save Our State (SOS) in California, which was formed in late 2004 to lobby firms and politicians supporting immigrants' rights. In 2002, I had started travelling to Arizona, where Anglo landowners had been detaining hundreds of immigrants on their ranches along the border. There were shootings; dead bodies were turning up. The local sheriffs refused to do anything about it, so we sent human-rights delegations to the area. In 2004 we also started mobilizing in response to actions by SOS, who would, for instance, go to a day labour centre to harass immigrants looking for work. We would send 400 or so people there to face them down.

The Minutemen vigilantes were set up in California in late 2004 by Jim Gilchrist, a former Marine. They copied the name from an extreme-right militia that carried out terrorist attacks on the left and the anti-Vietnam war movement in the 1960s, though it originally comes from the American War of Independence. In April 2005, Minutemen began patrolling the Arizona border with Mexico, reporting undocumented immigrants. Governor Schwarzenegger came out publicly in support of the Minutemen, saying they were doing a great job, and that he would welcome them in California. In response, in May 2005 we formed a coalition called *La Tierra es de Todos*—‘The Land Belongs to Everyone’—working with a group called *Gente Unida* (People United) from San Diego. The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles (CHIRLA) also took up the vigilantes issue, setting up workshops and meetings with congressmen.

That same month, the Minutemen marched on Washington, DC, and were painted as heroes by the mainstream and conservative media. When the Minutemen actually decided to gather at the US–Mexican border in Calexico in the summer, we took hundreds of volunteers to disrupt their training exercises. It was confrontational, and many of our undocumented base decided against participating. But it helped to draw some attention to the connections between the vigilantes and anti-immigrant organizations such as Barbara Coe’s California Coalition for Immigration Reform and John Tanton’s Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), as well as their links to Congressional figures such as the Colorado Republican Tom Tancredo, who organized the Immigration Reform Caucus, and James Sensenbrenner, who put forward House of Representatives resolution 4437 in late 2005.

RODRÍGUEZ: In fact, the Minutemen and many other similar right-wing organizations were the shock-troops, used by anti-immigrant establishment forces to create the political environment for the passage of HR4437.

What did HR4437 propose?

DÍAZ: It would have made it a felony to be in the US without documentation, and would have applied criminal sanctions to anybody who even supported an undocumented immigrant—religious leaders, social service workers or humanitarian groups, for instance. If you drove a cab,

say, and you knew that your ride was an undocumented immigrant, you could be charged with a felony. Teachers could be charged for having undocumented students in their classrooms; hence the big mobilization of teachers against the bill. HR4437 also called for the construction of a militarized 2,000-mile fence along the US–Mexico border, gave power to local law officials to enforce federal immigration law, and called for the deportation of 12 million undocumented people.

Was this what prompted the formation of the March 25 Coalition?

DÍAZ: HR4437 was passed by the House on 16 December 2005, catching everyone off guard. Luckily Gloria Saucedo, a former student of Bert Corona's and head of the immigrant advocacy group *Hermandad Mexicana Nacional* in San Fernando Valley, had set up the *Placita Olvera* working group that November, which helped to coordinate the response.

RODRÍGUEZ: A meeting was held at La Placita Church in Los Angeles in January 2006. Apart from Jesse and myself, those present included Saucedo, Father Richard Estrada from the Church itself, Angela Zambrano from CARECEN (Central American Resource Center), and some people from the International Socialists. We all sensed the urgency of responding to HR4437. Some of the proposals were for vigils, a conference, a drive for petitions, a resolution pushing the LA City Council to take a stand. The first meeting resulted in a picket of the Federal Building, a press conference, a petition. Then, on January 17 I wrote an article in *La Opinión*, a Spanish-language LA paper, calling for mass mobilizations and an economic boycott. The piece was widely circulated on the internet, and played a role in framing the next steps. In mid-February, we proposed a plan of action for March 25. The idea was to galvanize not just Southern California, but the whole country. There were divisions—mainstream groups such as the United Farm Workers (UFW) and others said we wouldn't be able to pull it off. But eventually they backed the plans for a National Day of Protest on March 25, which we announced at a press conference on March 2. Over the next two weeks, more and more organizations joined the Coalition—by the second week there were over 100.

DÍAZ: By this time protests had been taking place in other cities. From mid-February to early March there were rallies in Philadelphia, Oakland,

Houston and Washington, DC, the numbers growing from 1,200 to 20,000 or so. Then on March 10 in Chicago, as many as 500,000 people came out onto the streets. Here in Los Angeles, we put a lot of energy into organizing, and had an enormous turnout on March 25: the *LA Times* and LAPD reported 500,000 people; the Spanish-language Channel 22 commissioned a professional digital count, according to which there were 1.7 million on the march. More demonstrations took place in New York the next day, in Detroit the day after, in Oklahoma, Kentucky and Las Vegas.

In the meantime, the Somos América—‘We are America’—Coalition had called for a National Day of Action for Immigrant Rights, April 10. Somos América was set up in March 2006 in direct opposition to our plans. Its mastermind is Congressman Luis Gutiérrez from Chicago, and it is backed by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), UFW and various NGOs that constitute the mainstream wing of the movement: the National Council of La Raza, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), as well as the Catholic Church. They called for a ‘path to citizenship’, as opposed to an unconditional amnesty, which was our position. On April 10 itself, over 50,000 people turned out in Houston; in Phoenix, as many as 200,000; in New York, at least 30,000. The biggest mobilization, though, was in Washington, DC, where 500,000 people marched from Meridian Hill Park to the National Mall.

The April 10 marches were an attempt to co-opt the mobilization by the mainstream groups. We pressed ahead with our plans. The day after the March 25 mobilizations, we had decided to turn the working group into a Coalition, and named it after the day of the big marches. We then proposed May 1 as the date for the ‘Great American Boycott/A Day Without an Immigrant’. The name was inspired by the title of the 2004 Sergio Arau movie, in which the Latino population suddenly disappears from California, which has to learn to cope without them; it was a huge success in Mexico, and really hit home here too. We began to speak to the country directly through the Latino radio stations.

RODRÍGUEZ: There are hundreds of these stations across the US, and at least two dozen just in Greater Los Angeles. Getting the DJs on board was a key part of our strategy from the start. By the time March 25 came around, we had about 25 of them supporting the movement, including

Eddie 'Piolin' Sotelo and Marcela Luévanos—who have the most popular morning shows on KSCA, the top-rated LA station—Ricardo 'El Mandril' Sanchez and Pepe Garza on KBUE, Hugo Cadelago and Gerardo Lorenz on KTNQ, and many others.

DÍAZ: We also did a lot through the internet, using listservs to build contacts, especially the National Immigrant Solidarity Network. Then there were the churches, community groups, unions and the labour movement. It was a loose form of organization, but it gave us the basis for a nation-wide action.

What were you calling for?

DÍAZ: The demands behind the May 1 boycott were agreed at a national conference on April 22, as a series of ten points. First and foremost was an immediate and unconditional amnesty for all undocumented immigrants. Among the other points were: no fence on the border, no increase in the number of immigration agents, no criminalization of the undocumented, an end to the raids and to deportations that divide up families.

What was the turnout on May 1, and how widely was the boycott observed? How did employers react?

RODRÍGUEZ: There were big demonstrations in Chicago, New York and LA—the Univisión network estimated the total turnout here at over a million—and smaller ones in cities across the US, from Florida to Washington State. Over 70 cities nationwide participated in the boycott, but it was most effective in the Southwest. In LA, in almost all the industries employing Latino labour, 75 per cent of production was stopped, and 90 per cent of truckers working out of the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports didn't show up for work. On farms in California and Arizona, fruit and vegetables went unpicked, and across the country, meat-packing and poultry plants, fast-food franchises and other businesses were forced to close. In a lot of cases, employers supported their workers: all over Los Angeles businesses started putting up signs saying they would be closed on May 1. A lot of students from middle and high schools also joined in the boycott.

But the mainstream Latino establishment once again tried to split the movement. The Latino mayor of LA Antonio Villaraigosa refused to

march with us on March 25, although many of us had supported his mayoral campaigns, both in 2005 and the unsuccessful one of 2001. He also came out against the May 1 boycott, along with Cardinal Mahony and Somos América. They had called for a march in the evening, so that people could come after work instead of taking part in the boycott. Their slogan on May 1 was ‘Today We March, Tomorrow We Vote’—ignoring the fact that non-citizens and undocumented immigrants, who are a hugely important part of the movement, cannot vote.

It is estimated that there are between 12 and 15 million undocumented immigrants in the US, out of a total of 35–40 million immigrants. Could you tell us about this community?

RODRÍGUEZ: Mexican immigrants predominate for historical reasons—they account for over half of the undocumented arrivals. But there are many others: from Central and South America, Asia, Eastern Europe. Around 7 million of the undocumented have jobs of some description. They make up something like a quarter of the workforce in agriculture, and a significant proportion in food processing, textiles, construction, domestic service and cleaning. The immigrant community is primarily bilingual, primarily working class, though there is a growing entrepreneurial class within its ranks: at least a million US businesses are run by immigrants. And there are immigrant students throughout the country.

DÍAZ: Many people thought May Day 2006 was ‘a day without a Mexican’ or ‘a day without a Latino’. But our movement is internationalist: it includes all the undocumented, without distinguishing between ethnic or national groups. This was one of the keys to the success of the March 25 Coalition here in LA—we had Koreans, Filipinos, Chinese and Central Americans on board.

Mexican immigration nevertheless predominates. Does the immigrants’ rights movement have links to organizations in Mexico? What role has the Mexican government played?

RODRÍGUEZ: The Mexican government has been attempting to co-opt us for a long time. There was an especially strong push under Salinas after 1988, as the pace of neoliberal reforms quickened, and especially

when they wanted us to line up behind NAFTA. Much of the US Latino establishment, including the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, saw an opportunity for its own advancement in promoting the NAFTA agenda. After Salinas, Zedillo continued on the same neoliberal line, and the PRI's defeat by the PAN in 2000 brought only a shift further to the right, under Fox. Calderón promises more of the same.

We have made trips to Mexico to organize there, and have connections with a number of Mexican unions—the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores and the STRM, the telephone workers' union—as well as with the PRD, through figures such as the parliamentary deputy José Jacques Medina. We also have links to unions and other social movements in New Mexico, Texas and Chihuahua through the Border Social Forum. Links like these enabled us to spread the boycott across the border, and effectively close down several ports of entry. Over 40,000 Mexican day-labourers refused to cross into El Paso from Ciudad Juárez on May Day 2006, and hardly anyone went from Tijuana to San Diego. The boycott had a wide resonance in Mexico as a whole. Everyone there knows that the country's second-largest source of income is remittances, and there are millions of people with family members or friends in the US, not only from northern Mexican states, but also from further south—especially Jalisco. On May 1, a lot of people across Mexico also refused to buy products from American companies like Sears or Wal-Mart.

Are there divisions between the Hispanic and Black communities?

DÍAZ: Black leaders took an active part in the 2006 May Day mobilization. But there are definitely tensions—in the unions, the high schools, prisons, and in the wider community as a whole. The divisions have a lot to do with labour conditions. Black workers are no longer being sought after, since businesses can now hire immigrants who cannot speak up for themselves because they don't have citizenship. With this threat hanging over them, Black workers have in many cases been intimidated out of demanding their civil and labour rights. The employers have been able to divide us along race lines. The argument that immigrants are 'taking jobs' from Black people has even meant a handful of African-Americans joining the Minutemen, which is a real travesty. But it shows how much we need to prioritize this, because in class terms we're all facing the same conditions; we're all in this together.

What was the impact of the mobilizations on immigration legislation?

DÍAZ: The spring 2006 mobilizations effectively killed off HR4437. But since then the focus of new legislation—the Kennedy–McCain Bill and S2611 in 2006, the STRIVE Act and Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act (CIRA) in 2007—has been the idea of a ‘pathway to citizenship’.³ This means a restricted process for legalization, through payment of fines and back taxes, which could take as long as 14 years. In the meantime, there would be stepped-up border security, deportations, and criminalization of undocumented immigrants arriving. In fact, raids were launched right after the May Day boycott, with 1,800 people rounded up for deportation within a day or two.

What has happened to the movement since spring 2006?

RODRÍGUEZ: Like any mass protest movement in the US, the immigrants’ rights movement always ran the risk of being diverted into the Democrats’ electoral machine. The legislation put forward since HR4437, in offering a limited track to legalization, succeeded in drawing the support of many mainstream Latino leaders—for example Raúl Murillo from Hermandad Mexicana Nacional and Juan José Gutiérrez from Latino Movement USA gave qualified backing to the STRIVE Act—as well as the SEIU and organizations like the National Council of La Raza, though the AFL-CIO and many NGOs have been opposed. This co-optation of one wing of the movement by the Democrats, along with raids and deportations later in 2006, made us lose a lot of the momentum we had built up during the spring. As a result, the battle in Washington since 2006 has been between the mainstream and the Republican Right—and by the summer of 2007 it was clear it was the Right who won. They managed to mobilize and unify their grassroots through talk radio stations, and the CIRA was effectively strangled by Republican legislators in June.

This division between the pro-amnesty forces and the Democratic establishment is the background to the demonstrations we organized this year. The actions on March 25 and May 1, 2007 were both a lot smaller

³ CIRA 2007 incorporated much that was in previous, failed bills, and was strongly backed by the White House as well as a majority of Senate Democrats. The Security Through Regularized Immigration and a Vibrant Economy (STRIVE) Act, proposed by Congressman Gutiérrez, is presently under discussion in House subcommittees.

than in 2006. On May Day there were again two demonstrations: ours, which went to City Hall, and another one backed by the Latino establishment and Cardinal Mahony, which ended up in MacArthur Park. The MacArthur Park march was violently broken up by the police, who injured over 100 demonstrators and several journalists. It showed all the claims that the LAPD had been reformed to be completely empty—though the widespread public anger over this may make it more difficult for them to clamp down on immigrants in the same way in the future.

Between them, the two May Day marches this year drew up to 100,000 people, but we had twice as many as the afternoon one. Mobilizations took place in 75 cities; besides the major urban centres, there were marches in places like Denver, Phoenix and Milwaukee. These were also much smaller than in 2006, though still significant. The May boycott wasn't observed nearly as much as last year, but we did manage to shut down LA and Long Beach harbours and the garment district, as well as stopping many cargo deliveries across LA county. Another boycott we called for September 12 was not such a success, however; the momentum is visibly down compared to 2006.

DÍAZ: All along, the fundamental principle of our movement has been full, unconditional amnesty for all undocumented immigrants, and full labour and civil rights for anyone working here. But Somos América, which is little more than a cover for the Democratic Party, used the mobilizations to push forward a set of legislative proposals totally at odds with this; they essentially switched to supporting the guest worker programme. This would, of course, serve the interests of the big corporations the Latino establishment is linked to—if you go to one of the National Council of La Raza's events, for example, there is corporate sponsorship from the likes of Wal-Mart and Home Depot, and they get millions in grants from Citibank, Pepsi and Ford. When we sent a delegation to Washington, DC in April 2006 to lobby against the proposals then being debated, we found the mainstream Latino NGOs and activists and the SEIU working hand in hand with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, promoting legislation that would criminalize undocumented workers, pushing them underground and making it easier to exploit them. This comes on top of deportation raids that would break up families and leave hundreds of thousands of people without a livelihood, and the massive militarization of the border.

The Hispanic Caucus and figures like Gutiérrez have not spoken out against the violence on the border, the construction of the border wall or the raids. Meanwhile, the UFW and the SEIU—including its vice president Eliseo Medina, himself a Mexican immigrant—have given their backing to a ‘blue card’ scheme for agricultural labourers, which is being promoted in Congress by the California Democrat Senator Dianne Feinstein. This has led to something of a backlash from the SEIU rank and file against the leadership, who are now planning a new push in favour of these temporary schemes.

In the meantime, there have been splits on our side. Hermandad Mexicana Nacional has fractured as regional leaders of HMN have taken different positions on the proposed immigration bills. A large part of the movement has been absorbed by the legislative cycle. It has to be said that at this point in time the movement is a shadow of its former self.

What challenges does the immigrants’ rights movement face now?

DÍAZ: At the moment the priority is to defend our communities against raids and deportations. Beyond that, we have to get back to ground level organizing—small-scale forums, organizing from within the community, local marches. The spring 2006 mobilizations showed us how easily the movement can be co-opted by mainstream groups. Many people put their faith in the Democrats, who simply sold us out. We weren’t able to sustain the momentum of 2006 into 2007. Now, all the leading Democrats have one eye on the 2008 elections, and are trying to stall the immigration debate. We have applied for a permit to march on the Capitol on May Day 2008, and are now focusing our efforts on that. Many of our people feel discouraged, that their efforts were fruitless, or that their leaders let them down. We need to learn from this anger at what has happened over the past year if we want to mount any kind of challenge in future.

September 2007