

Building a Labor-Community Movement: Make the Road New York

by Walter Barrientos

I grew up here on Long Island, and when I went to college my biggest realization was that there were many more immigrants in the state and near me than I ever imagined. I hoped that we could come together and build a movement based on our identity. That's a lot of the work that we do in Make the Road New York: to create a space where immigrants, regardless of how long they've been here, whether they're first- or second- or third-generation, can come together and talk about the issues that affect us and identify ways to change – to bring about change and sustainability for our families.

Our organization is really the coming together of two organizations that have been around for about 15 years. They started in some of the more traditional immigrant neighborhoods in the city, one in Bushwick, which is where our namesake comes from. It started as Make the Road by Walking, from the poem by a Latin America author that talks about what it's like to build a road to go to new places, and that many of our members connect to. And the other organization was called the Latin America Integration Center, which is actually how I first got involved when I went to school in the city. And it was started in the, at the time, predominantly Columbian neighborhood of Woodside, Queens, and just before merging in the early 2000s, the organization had – the Latin America Integration Center had expanded to Staten Island, which, as some of you might know, is where the fastest-growing Mexican community is in the city, and probably in the region.

By the time we merged, there were major conversations about coming to Long Island, because many of our members or their families were moving here to Long Island, and it was right around the time when some of you may have heard about the case of Marcelo Lucero, and so the issues of violence against immigrants and an unwelcoming environment, really, from many other institutions and the community at large was a major issue, and our organization decided to come and try to bring about change and work with the community here to raise awareness about our rights, but also about some of the policies that we could change to change the environment, because we know that there are -- for all the hatred and everything else we might see on TV, there are many more communities here that are welcoming and that want to build a stronger Long Island. It's representative of the diversity that continues to happen here.

We are a membership-based organization, which in essence means that we don't just try to serve people and address whatever their immediate need might be, but we try to engage them in our community as decision-makers and as leaders. We have currently about 17,000 members, and essentially those are people that have gone through our organization. Sometimes they came in at first looking for a service, like a lawyer or information about health insurance or Sandy. And once introduced to the organization, we also invite them to join some of our membership committees, of which we have many.

The main issues that we work on are: immigration, worker rights and other labor-related issues, as well as housing. Our members, basically across our offices, whether it's Staten Island, Bushwick, Jackson Heights or here on Long Island, are all facing the impact of gentrification and the changes that are happening regionally around housing for low-income and working-class people in different ways. But many times by the same players and decision-makers.

Once someone becomes a member, they join, and they are invited to attend meetings for their own committee. One of our other committees is also our youth power project, which works with young people between the ages of 14 to 21, essentially on issues that affect young people from access to education to policing, which is one of the campaigns that we work on, as well, in all of our offices. And so it is through those committees where we share information, we work with community members to develop their leadership, to engage them in the current events and the ways that decisions are being made on the issues that matter to them.

So just this morning we were actually outside the state office building in Suffolk County with a couple of our members. We had a press conference because one of the senators that represents the district in Brentwood has introduced a bill at the state level that would repeal or turn back many of the reforms and protections that we have worked really hard to ensure that the police and immigration adhere to here on Long Island. We were out there with a couple of our members. One of them spoke, and that's at the very core of the work that we do. We all see ourselves as facilitators of community leadership, and so in everything we do, we try to engage members. That's at the very core of the work that we do.

My family first came here to Hempstead in the late '60s. My first uncle came here on a trip with a friend who was wealthy and had other relatives around here, and my uncle was just sort of like his low-income friend from school or the neighborhood, and that's how my uncle first came here. While they were here, after a couple of months, they had some sort of argument, and my uncle decided that they couldn't be friends anymore. Then he was stuck in a place that he didn't know anything about, and he didn't speak English. And that's really the story of how my family came here about 40 years ago. Since then, many more generations have come here to the Island. My maternal side of the family all live here exclusively, mostly in Nassau County. My uncle still owns that home, the home where essentially every member of my family lived up until my family came, and we were the last family to come, in 1996.

I think this is relevant because the story of immigration is also a story of Long Island. The Island first began drawing larger numbers of Asians and Latinos in the '60s, when the Immigration Act was passed. Inevitably, it continues to reflect demographic changes and this outward push. Many of our members are actually people who first came to the city, but are finding jobs or more affordable housing here on Long Island, or oftentimes, what they consider better schools. So that outward push, I think, is particularly visible here on the Island, with us being an island and being so connected to the city. But that's in essence, I think, what we're seeing.

Part of the reason why immigrants are having such a hard time here is that, when the Island was developed in the '40s and '50s, there was a culture where it was acceptable, and it was actually by design, that working-class or low-income people were zoned out of communities that were more affluent. They could work there, but they were not allowed to live there. As the Island continues to get more populated, and we go through this economic crisis, there is a crunch on all of our communities to also integrate more. I think it's time to question one of the core principles under which this Island was created, which was that the low-income and poor workers who would come and provide their labor here would at some point go back to the city, or go back to the areas that were designated as low-income areas.

But, we're literally running out of space. There is not a lot of housing where immigrants can go, or people of low income can go on the Island, and there's also not a lot more space where we can build luxury housing on the Island. We're really seeing that in Brentwood. I want to highlight that, because I think it's critical. From what I see and what I've been reading, we're actually turning more into an ethnoburb. The other ethnoburb in the East Coast that I'm most familiar with is northern Virginia, the D.C. area, which also happens to reflect Long Island demographically, because it's the largest concentration of Central Americans on the East Coast, Long Island being the second one.

The reason I bring that up is because I think the way that we think about place changes the way we think about the solutions and what the problems are. And part of the problem is that, to many people here on the Island, they actually want this Island to remain as segregated as it has been in the past. It's the way things have been, and we know that it makes a lot of people uncomfortable, and yet the Island continues to diversify.

Long Island is now a gateway, just like it was for my family. We didn't go to New York City. My entire family has come through Nassau County, essentially. I have relatives that have not gone to the city in 20 years, and if they went it was only because they had to process something for immigration.

I want to highlight those things, because I think that brings up the other issues that we're seeing in the community. The work that we're doing on Make the Road New York is focused on immigration. One of the reasons I highlight that we have a predominantly Central American community here is because many of them, like my family, came in the '90s. That was sort of the major wave, mostly drawn here through the major construction boost that we had in then. That was where my dad and most of the other males in my family worked, and the people that we knew. And also, the growing number of middle-class and upper-class households here on the Island were demanding more housekeepers and nannies and home health aides, which are all the sorts of the jobs that my mom and all of my aunts here on the Island have had over the last few decades. There is no shortage of demand for their labor, especially as we have an aging population here.

Those are some of the major things that I think are shaping the work that we're doing. Also, the refugee crisis around the world, it's not unique to other places. It's also happening right here in our own backyards. Both counties, Nassau and Suffolk County, are among the five counties that are recommending the most unaccompanied minor children coming through the border.

And that is not by mistake. Many of the families that came here in the '90s, after the hurricanes in Central America and other major natural disasters, came here undocumented. There were programs designed to allow them to stay here to work -- a sort of ad hoc refugee program, if you will, but it's not fully for refugees. It's literally called a temporary protected status, TPS, which is what the majority of Central Americans on the Island have as their immigration status. And the challenge is that that program was only meant to help them stay, make a living, and eventually they would go back. But as you all know, Central America is going through very trying times, with gang violence and drugs, and so most of those families actually stayed here.

Under TPS, you can't petition your family like people who have a green card can, or people who are citizens can. One of the interpretations I have of what's going on with all of these children coming here – because I also should point out, this crisis began just a few years ago, after the debate over immigration reform sort

of failed, and it became clear that we were not going to have an immigration reform bill anytime soon. For many of the families that we see, they were families who have this temporary protected status, which only allows them to work and have a Social Security number and have a driver's licence, and they have to renew this every couple of years. They were really waiting for this immigration reform bill that would allow them to legalize their U.S. immigration status to a more permanent form so that they could reunite with their families. For many of them, the failure of immigration reform really became that breaking point where they said, "We can't keep waiting another ten years, or until some unlimited number of years to reunite with our children." That's the story that we hear from many of our members who have unaccompanied children coming or who have arrived in recent years, that they just lost hope.

I want to highlight this, because I think many of the arguments are that people don't want to go through the system. I can tell you that there's probably no immigrants that we see at our office that are not desperate to find a way to go through our immigration system to have a legal channel to legalize their status. And yet, for many of them, that's still not real. I would be in that situation myself if it wasn't for the fact that I was a victim of an assault by gang members, which allowed me to adjust my status, because I was a victim of a violent crime. But if it wasn't for that, I would probably still be undocumented to this day, even though I've lived here for 18 years. This is where I have spent the majority of my life. Even though I did adjust my status, it's still another three more years until I'm able to vote. So I will have lived in the United States for about 20 years by the time I'm actually allowed to cast my first vote ever. The only elections I have participated in since coming here were my college elections, because we were allowed to vote there if we were students.

Another issue now playing out with immigrants on the Island is policing. We have a police force that is not very reflective of the demographic changes here, and who see themselves as policing more affluent communities and policing low-income and working-class people away from many of the communities where they work and where they now increasingly live. That creates a lot of friction. Every week we have multiple cases of unfortunate exchanges between community members and the police, whether that is because the community member is an undocumented driver, and police officers are overwhelming them with sometimes up to 12 or

15 traffic tickets in one study, or they're threatening to hand them over to Immigration if they continue driving.

It also has implications for how government services are delivered. One of our major victories is ensuring that local government agencies are literally speaking the language of the people they are serving. In Suffolk County, we had a major victory last year, where they have made major progress and created a plan for how immigrants regardless of which language they speak -- I think the database they have and the services they have can translate up to 200 languages -- so that any time anyone comes in for any services that they are eligible for, as anyone else, whether it's health or anything you can imagine, can be spoken to in their language.



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Because the majority of the agencies don't have bilingual or multilingual staff here on the Island yet. But we are actually, believe it or not, still having a lot of very tense conversations with Nassau County because they agreed to a language access program that they're mandated by law to have that they refuse to implement in many ways.

On labor, one of our latest campaigns has been on increasing the minimum wage for all workers. But most importantly this year our focus was on fast food workers. What we're seeing is, aside from the service industry, where the majority of immigrant women are employed here on the Island, the fast food industry is probably the second major industry where the immigrant women that we work

with work. Many times, because they're undocumented, they are not getting some of the increases that some of their counterparts with lawful immigration status get, even working at a fast-food restaurant. We have a number of cases of women who have been working at fast food restaurants here on Long Island for over ten years and have not gotten one increase in all of those ten years, do not get paid overtime and don't get benefits, like some of their other counterparts.

That's why this campaign is so critical for us, because we know that these are some of the ways in which immigrants continue to feed into the economy. But they are not getting the benefits and protections that other workers are getting. Generally, wage theft is also a major issue, along with the police and other government agencies not being as open to serve immigrants.

We also see that employers are also generally not as well informed about the rights that their workers have regardless of their immigration status. We probably have somewhere between six to

12 people at our office in Brentwood walk in every day telling us that their boss is telling them that they are not entitled to their back wages, that they are not entitled to overtime pay, and who have been threatened, or some of them have been injured on the job and are threatened to be reported to Immigration if they say anything. That's our biggest backlog at our office, because particularly in the landscape and construction industry, as well as some factories, that is one of the most pressing issues for immigrant communities.

I talked a little bit about housing, and the way that that plays out with immigrants here on the Island is through exclusionary zoning. We know that it has been through exclusionary zoning that many immigrants and other communities of color and low income here on the Island have been kept away from specific towns or areas here on the Island. But the way it plays out now is also that it is in immigrant neighborhoods where we see the strict enforcement of housing code. The town of Islip, where we work and where the majority of our members come from, is also one of the areas where the housing crisis has impacted the most and there have been the most houses that have been foreclosed on, one of the areas in the Island where there are the most homes in foreclosure. Around Thanksgiving last year, when no one was paying attention, town leaders passed an ordinance that would actually make it so that very simple fixes outside a home, like a broken shingle on the siding of a home, over one or two weeks, if not fixed, can eventually lead to someone being put in prison, in county jail. And we know from the cases of the community members that we serve, that the people getting the most tickets or housing code violations are many Latino neighbors. It's no surprise, as it's also part of the culture there.

One of my aunts moved into Levittown after living in Hempstead, and she did not know the history of Levittown. It's known to be a very conservative and segregated town. Back when the Island was first developed, particularly in that town, it was against the law to sell that home to a person of color or someone who was Jewish. That was in the deed of many of those homes, and it's been sort of the culture of Levittown. My aunt is very religious, actually, and it was just her and her two children and her husband. She never hosts parties because she's a Jehovah's Witness. But her new neighbors called the police on her every day for the first two weeks she lived in that home, with complaints of noise and partying and drinking and overcrowding. That's the story of many immigrants across the Island. That's how they are made to feel unwelcomed, sometimes by their own neighbors, but also by some of the other authorities or some of the local government officials. And that's the culture that we're trying to change in Make the Road.

Finally, another major issue for us is the New York Dream Act. Undocumented students in New York who graduated from high school here are already recognized as New York State residents for tuition purposes at any of the state universities or colleges. However, they're not considered residents when it comes to benefitting from the tuition assistance program that is also designed for New York state student residents. The Dream Act is

a bill that would allow, in its current version at the state level, immigrant students who have grown up here in New York access to the state's tuition assistance program.

Everyone knows how expensive college can be, so we can imagine that an undocumented immigrant who doesn't have access to federal financial aid, doesn't have access to a lot of scholarships, and essentially doesn't have access to a lot of other financial support to attend college. We already won in 2001 to ensure that undocumented students were able to get in-state tuition. In fact, that's how I was able to go to undergrad at Baruch College the year I graduated, in 2002. And that's why we're fighting for Dreamers again with this new bill.

Walter Barrientos is the regional coordinator on Long Island for Make The Road New York. This is excerpted from his remarks at a forum on "Immigration and New York's Future: 50 Years After A Landmark Law," presented by Hofstra's Labor Studies Program at Hofstra University on October 15, 2015.

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