



Mónica Hernández: Change from the Bottom up

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When I first got to Highlander, we had a program designed to support the formation of grassroots Latino immigrant organizations in the South. It was important because it gave people the opportunity to gather periodically and break their isolation, both geographical and psychological. Immigrant communities in the rural areas of the South sometimes face a hostile reception from neighbors who are dealing with a growing immigrant population for the first time. The opportunity for these immigrants to realize they're not alone is critical.

When immigrants are starting out with no infrastructure and no other organizations supporting them, there is a tendency to try to address the entire range of needs of the community. People see immediate needs, so they try to form a Hispanic or Latino community center. People are working under tremendous pressure, with no opportunity to take a more strategic view of what's needed. So there's not a lot of community organizing in those initial stages. They are surviving in the service provision model, which is necessary, but limited in its potential for change.

Redefining Leadership

The Immigrant Leadership Development Institute (Instituto para el Desarrollo de Liderazgo, INDELI) really provided people with a different model for

leadership. When people hear, "This person's a leader," they tend to think of the individual, charismatic, boss-type leader. But we were offering leadership trainings focusing on collaboration, with the idea that anybody can be a leader. Another aspect of INDELI was to give people concrete organizing and organizational skills—how to facilitate a meeting, how to recruit people, how to assess the needs of your community.

The third component was political education focused on bringing in an anti-oppression framework, so people could see their struggles connecting with other people's struggles. Particularly here in the South, immigrants should know more about the struggles and history of the African-American community. Political education also looked at the framework and particulars of the debate on immigration.

The demographic shift in the South has been different in different states. Georgia and North Carolina have had Latino communities for more than 15 years and have had a chance to build organizations. Other places—Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi—are just starting to see the immigrant influx as a visible, palpable presence. So the varying development of the immigrant community has implications for where they are organizationally. We felt that leaders had the potential to transform how organizing was

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approached and to spur more organizing. Part of it was helping communities figure out why organizing as a strategy was important and why it was crucial to build people's organizing skills. We realized that we had to be flexible and open to some of the people who did not yet have a full political framework, but did have a sense of their work being connected to social justice—whether or not they were actually organizing at that point.

Providing a Framework for Change

We had a clear sense of what we wanted to do: form small organizing committees in communities to teach people how to do “know your rights” workshops and use that as a tool to organize people. Folks weren't ready for that. A lot of folks came back and used the “know your rights” workshop that we had, but it was on their timeline, not ours. That's part of what makes it popular education—you have your methodology and plan, and it can go out the window.

That's why we had such a heavy emphasis on political education and skills-building. We provided a framework so that people would start changing the way they thought about what they were doing. Instead of just being focused on one particular campaign, they could see how it fit into a broader effort to do movement-building. I believe that's the only way change is going to happen—from the bottom up. Popular education is a key part of that process.

Through my work, I have become more and more convinced that movements need to be led by the people most affected. The way to do that is not to just go in and say, “This is what you're going to do.” You need to start from where people are, and honor their experiences. Immigrants and poor people in general are always being told that their knowledge and experiences don't matter. Folks have a lot of self-esteem issues because the education system has failed them, and they believe it's their fault—they think they're stupid and dumb and ignorant.

Transformation happens within people. In many cases, immigrant women come in feeling like they're



worth nothing. They're afraid to talk and to participate in a public hearing or a protest; they're afraid just being out there. The fact is that their vulnerability as undocumented immigrants really hasn't changed—if anything, it's gotten worse. But they become stronger and stronger as they participate and become leaders and support other women to become leaders. ■

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Mónica Hernández is the lead person on Highlander's Pueblos de Latinoamérica project, which seeks to develop Latino grassroots leadership and organizations in the Southeast. She is also chair of the board of the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition.

A native of Mexico, Mónica joined the Highlander staff after working 13 years at the Northern California Coalition for Immigration Rights in San Francisco.

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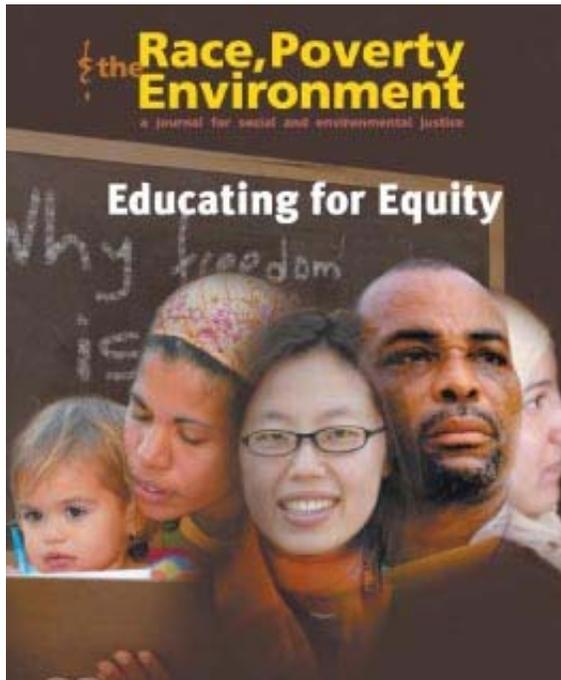
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