



a magazine of ideas, arts, and scholarship

ESSAYS

BORDERLANDS

Solo el pueblo: Migrant Justice Against Fascism in the Americas

In this [series](#) commissioned by [A. Naomi Paik](#) and [Catherine S. Ramírez](#), contributors examine the laws and practices that paved the way for today's emergent fascism.

5.21.2026

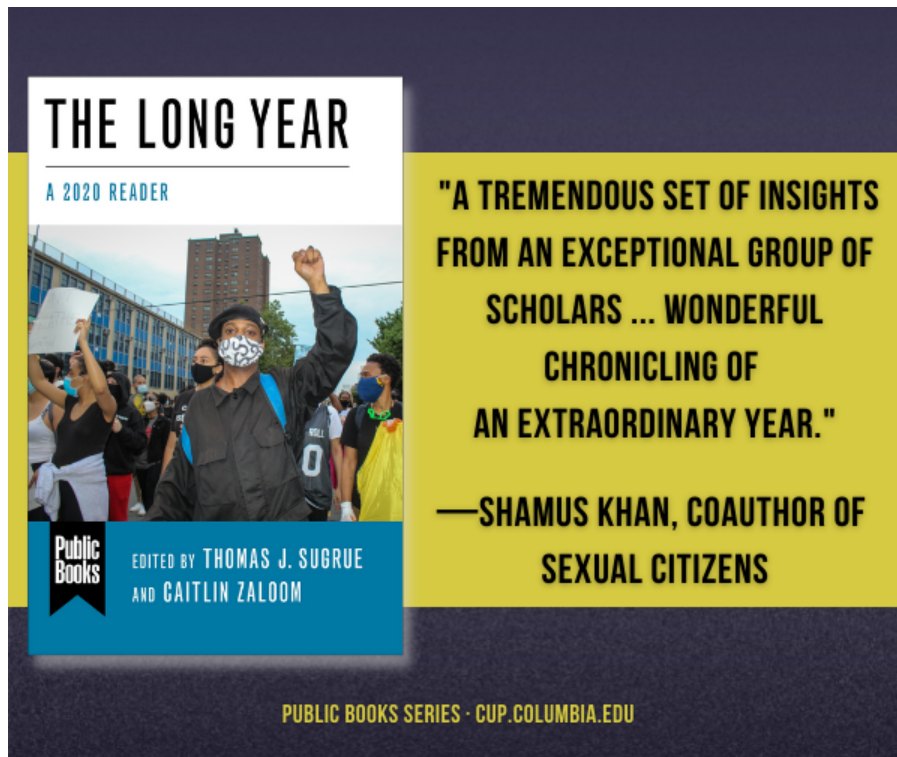
Share





Alicia Schmidt Camacho

Advertisement



Today, citizens and noncitizens are staking their democratic futures on refusing the Trump administration's project of mass expulsion. In Minneapolis, as in Los Angeles, Portland, Chicago, and elsewhere, city residents have held sit-ins at ICE installations and jails, occupied Home Depot parking lots to defend migrant workers, and blocked agents from entering shops and residential neighborhoods. They have pressed state and local officials, who have, in turn, stood with religious clergy, unionists, teachers, and health care workers in broad defiance of federal authority.

For nearly a year—since June 2025—US cities have withstood the extraordinary pressure of military occupation and the radical disruption of everyday life as ICE activity shuttered businesses,

forced school closings, and sent vulnerable residents into hiding. Facing down punitive legal action and funding cuts, and the possibility of martial law, civic leaders and elected officials have begun to adopt frameworks for civil defense drawn from migrant justice and the Movement for Black Lives. If they are not abolitionist (urban officials and most of their constituents still draw distinctions between the deportation of “dangerous, worst of the worst” and “nonthreatening” noncitizens), the occupied cities are forcing a global reckoning with the authoritarian and racist character of US immigration law enforcement.

It may be that in the multiracial city, a challenge to authoritarian power has taken root from the politics of sanctuary and abolition, even as the traditional forms of liberal democratic authority have faltered utterly against the rise of right-wing, white ethnonationalism. When Mayor Jacob Frey told ICE to get the fuck out of Minneapolis, he was resisting federal intervention as many municipalities have done in US history. But he was doing it in the name of a community that is demographically diverse and globally integrated, on a scale that makes this articulation of local sovereignty one that may yet open space for migrants to obtain greater legal protections and social status.

Still, we have not yet gotten to the full articulation that no human being is illegal. And without greater, deliberative commitment from all of us, the specific concerns of noncitizens, and their stake in the fight against military occupation, could easily be eclipsed. As in

every historic confrontation with an apartheid regime, much depends on whether the enfranchised, protected classes are willing to relinquish their privilege for the liberation of the formally unprotected.

Mass opposition to ICE owes its energies to decades of painstaking organizing, especially by migrant-led organizations like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, Alianza Americas, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, and other more grassroots collectives.

While we contend with the dehumanizing impact of US immigration law enforcement, we must also attend to the ways that migrant struggle has been a humanizing force in cruel and bewildering times. This means that rather than treat migrants as a population in need of humanitarian rescue, the community of enfranchised citizens had better recognize the global dimensions of the antifascist struggle. Migrants have been waging a fight against state terror informed by the longer history of antiauthoritarian movements in the Americas.

The current ICE-OUT campaign has not been driven by the principles and values of the historic immigrant rights framework. Past tenets—that the US is a nation of immigrants, and that the unauthorized migrant presence is a problem to be solved by bargaining for a limited legalization of the deserving—lost traction and coherence over decades of stalled immigration reform. Mass opposition to ICE owes its energies to decades of painstaking organizing, especially by migrant-led organizations like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, Alianza Americas, the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, and other more grassroots collectives. These groups emerged in the early 2000s to challenge the illegalization of diasporic populations, and to expand protections for undocumented workers and students under assault.

As the right-wing project of mass expulsion took shape in the early 2000s, migrant civic action took hold in the global cities of Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago; in the rural centers of commercial agriculture, dairy, and meatpacking; and in the camps and detention centers proliferating across the US. The mass immigrant rights marches of 2006—during which millions of noncitizens protested legislative reforms that threatened to raise criminal penalties for unauthorized status and classify unauthorized migrants and their allies as felons—demonstrated the enormous vitality of migrant organizing. The largest popular mobilizations in North America over many generations, they marked a transformative moment in the civic involvement of undocumented people in US political life.

The multitudes who rallied under the principle that *ningún ser humano es ilegal* made a show of political strength, one that surprised even immigrant rights leadership. Noncitizens—who have so often been deemed unorganizable—took the lead in articulating a vision of transnational rights of belonging. They surpassed the political demand for amnesty by articulating a vision beyond the logic of unitary citizenship: *ahora seremos gente de aquí y de allá*; that we can be protected as members of more than one national polity.

Migrant-led organizations drew on diasporic networks and developed distinct political cultures designed to mitigate the harms of illegalization and deportability. Their tactics reflect the complex factors that made illegality a condition beyond legal status, which mediates the undocumented person's entire social being. As citizenship receded from political possibility and immigrant rights coalitions splintered, the most effective challenges to the crimmigration regime came from migrant-led organizations which turned from large-scale legislative strategies toward grassroots activity. Communities helped overturn the SB1070 law and curtailed the expansion of 287(g) agreements between federal authorities and police. Their actions exposed the narrow social ambitions of the Democratic platform which had abandoned them.

Worker centers and membership-based organizations used legal assistance and policy advocacy to mitigate the harms of criminalized status and removability, while building social alliances that enlarge migrant civic life. Their organizing reanimated the

sanctuary movement, making it a project of civic governance in many US cities.

In June 2019, a Blue Ribbon Commission met to produce a policy document they called *The Migrant Justice Platform*.¹ Created by representatives of Latinx, Asian, Middle Eastern, and migrant labor organizations, like the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), this “unity blueprint” set out to establish a “new conversation about migration” tied to shared social and economic concerns of “impacted communities” comprised of citizens and noncitizens across the US. The document went further in considering the “the whole of the global crisis” than the elected leaders charged with managing public health, security, and welfare. Their proposal, to “build bridges, not walls,” met the ravages of this era with principles for decriminalizing mobility and constructing a solidarity economy across borders.

These principles guided the most effective resistance to authoritarianism in 2025. And they did so by providing language that resists the separation of citizen and noncitizen concerns, and by confronting openly the complexity of their relations.

It was as Democratic leadership retreated from a commitment to legalization that a new framework came to the fore: “migrant justice.” This term accounts for the fact that most migrants form part of mixed-status families and retain close ties and obligations

across national borders. As such, migrant justice centers the condition of being disenfranchised, both in one's country of residence and country of origin. This double condition of unbelonging engendered a political project that reflects its Latin American sensibility: first, by its faith that rights are gained by exercising them, not by asking for them (*al andar se hace el camino*, or “the road is made by walking”); and second, by its reproach of liberal paternalism. “Nothing about us, without us” is the slogan for the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) Alliance. Meanwhile, *¿Y nosotros que?* (What about us?) was the provocation to citizens issued by migrant workers deemed essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, and yet excluded from government relief.

The proponents of migrant justice never forgot the promise of legalization. Still, in its infinite deferral, they articulated a politics beyond the limited construction of citizenship in this age.

Related readings



INTERVIEWS

“The Basic Liberal Narrative Is Gone”: Immigrant Rights and Abolition with Silky Shah

Amna A. Akbar

Migrant organizers are telling us something we cannot afford to miss: that what we are seeing in the first years of Trump’s second term is only the tip of the iceberg. Decades of detention, expulsion, and familial separation—as well as the normalization of racial profiling, the erosion of labor and civil rights, and widespread economic precarity—*are* authoritarian governance. And this substance of authoritarianism will still be with us, even when this siege lets up.

Migrant organizers have much to teach ordinary citizens about how to claim and expand our rights while under siege. Relegated to the most extreme forms of nonbelonging, unauthorized migrants and their kin have waged an expansive movement for the dignity of all low-wage labor and communal life. And they have done so across the transnational circuits that organize today's integrated—and profoundly unequal—extractive economy. While defending their own rights of mobility, migrant workers invigorated general campaigns for fair housing and wages, universal health care, educational equity, and environmental protections. Noncitizens animated challenges to institutionalized gender, sexual, and racial discrimination, going door to door for voter registration, leading hunger strikes against the depredations of the carceral system, and building the organizational bases for the Movement for Black Lives. Migrant organizing, based in deeply local and translocal activity, offers the most promising methods for confronting authoritarianism in the US and the wider global scene.

Following the mass migrant marches of 2006 and the rise of mass raids in their wake, and in the period of deep economic recession in 2008, political organizers and thinkers on the left recognized that long-standing frameworks for achieving social change were not serving them. As larger-scale civic institutions like unions and civil rights organizations lost power, grassroots organizations of migrants, prisoners, and low-wage workers adopted the term “justice” for their political pursuits. Migrant organizers use “justice” to articulate the gap between formal protections and the actual

exercise of rights, and to create spaces of autonomy from the state and its institutions. Their justice sets a horizon of social transformation beyond redress within existing law.

The citizens taking their stands against mass deportation—the congregations hosting vigils in front of Alligator Alcatraz in Ochopee, Florida, and the monitors surveilling ICE operations—are using the languages of Latin American liberation movements to fight Trumpism. We are witnessing the evolution of a justice movement that fuses the assertion of rights of mobility and migrant worker rights with the anticarceral energies of abolition. ICE-occupied cities are densely populated by migrant workers and major nodes of the carceral archipelago. (Both Portland, Oregon, and Minneapolis experienced the deployment of the National Guard during the uprisings that followed George Floyd's murder in 2020.) Their small-d democratic cultures have been nurtured by the struggles of disenfranchised populations to secure livelihoods and social mobility from a condition of imposed precarity and abandonment.

In this way, the LA organizers who have led in Home Depot parking lots and urban apartment blocks are not just waging contests against the legal violence of this regime. They are building ties of solidarity designed to take us all into an equitable future. They secure protection from exploitative labor conditions and deportation by building relationships of mutual assistance. They cultivate horizontal relations with citizens by distributing aid during the

COVID-19 pandemic or helping residents displaced by fires. They make conditions of emergency into opportunities for exercising collective power. From the condition of permanent illegality, they are *forjando pueblo* beyond the limited imagination of nations.

***Pueblo* is open-ended and shifting in definition, it may be instantiated in place or placeless. It admits the citizen and the illegalized and makes them answerable to one another.**

The NDLOM slogan is *Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo* (Only the people can save the people). *Pueblo* is neither racialized (as *raza* was for an earlier generation of Latinx activists), nor is it geographically bounded to a single national polity. Drawn from Latin American antiauthoritarian movements, this slogan places responsibility for social change on the affected communities themselves, while simultaneously guarding their political autonomy. Principles of mutual aid and solidarity hold precedence over the appeal for protections from the state.

Pueblo is open-ended and shifting in definition, it may be instantiated in place or placeless. It admits the citizen and the illegalized and makes them answerable to one another.

Today, undocumented workers must calculate whether driving to work will lead to an encounter with immigration enforcement, and undocumented parents must decide who will take custody of their children in the event of their arrests. In this climate of expulsion, making life livable has depended enormously on a politics of *convivencia*: the kind of conviviality on display at the weekly “Chant Down the Walls” concerts led by NDLOM at LA County Jail, where migrant kin and their supporters sing to migrant detainees to let them know they are not alone, that they will not be disappeared. These rites animated a popular front of resistance in June as LA came under occupation.

The principle that *solo el pueblo salva el pueblo* clearly resonated for the citizens who have raised “ICE Not Welcome Here” signs and pushed the National Guard out of their neighborhoods. When thousands of Minnesotans marched in subzero temperatures on January 23 in declaration of a general strike, they were exercising a force new to many of them. Their banner read: “The People Have the Power TO STOP ICE TERROR.” They are calling new *pueblos* into being. ■

*This article was commissioned by **A. Naomi Paik** and **Catherine S. Ramírez**.*

Footnotes:

1. The Migrant Justice Platform, 2019, available at <https://www.migrantjusticeplatform.org/the-platform/>. ↩

Featured image photograph by Trevor Stone / Wikimedia (CC BY-SA 2.0).

ACTIVISM BORDER PATROL BORDERLANDS FASCISM FASCISM'S BUILDING BLOCKS

IMMIGRATION SOCIAL JUSTICE

*Also in the **Borderlands** section:*



“Our Guns Make the Violence That People Are Fleeing”: Ieva Jusionyte on Guns & Violence in Mexico

A Tale of Two Families: Birthright Citizenship and Family Reunification for Chinese Migrants in 1925

Documenting Birthright Citizenship under Chinese Exclusion

You might also like:



REVIEWS



INTERVIEWS



REVIEWS



REVIEWS

Birds Beyond Birding



Cal Biruk

“Our Guns Make the Violence That People Are Fleeing”: Ieva Jusionyte on Guns & Violence in Mexico

Elizabeth Ferry ,
et al.

Literature in the Time of Suicide



Carolyn
Fornoff

Can Centuries-Old Nuns Really Save Us from Ourselves?



Paul
Michael
Johnson



ABOUT

ADVERTISE

SUBMISSIONS

PARTNERS

CONTACT

Sign up for Newsletter

Subscribe to get our newsletter, for the latest reviews, essays and interviews delivered straight to your inbox!

Email address