
[Barrio Defense: How Arizona's Immigrants are Standing Up to SB 1070](#)

Posted by: [B. Loewe](#) in [Migrant Rights Blog](#)

on May 22, 2013

Tagged in: Untagged

Shortly after the 2010 passage of [SB 1070](#), Arizona's notorious immigration bill, 20,000 people gathered in Phoenix for a May Day march [to protest the new law](#). Instead of ending with speakers or a formal program, as political marches often do, organizers broke the crowd into small groups and asked them two questions:

How will the new law impact you and your neighbors? What can you do about it?

And with that, a new phase of the migrant rights movement, based on an age-old model of community organizing, was born.

The U.S. Supreme Court will decide very soon whether to strike down SB 1070, but few observers expect that it will choose to do so based on the Department of Justice arguments. That's one reason local capacity development methods, such as Barrio Defense Committees, are crucial, organizers say. "We went to Congress for reform and were treated like a political football," says Carlos Garcia, an organizer with the grassroots group Puente Arizona. "We asked the president for relief and instead got record deportations. Now even the courts may give SB 1070 the green light. It's time we realize we have only each other and start organizing deeper in our own community."

In the weeks and months after those small group discussions, communities across Arizona formed Barrio Defense Committees, neighborhood-based groups focused on resolving local problems, building resilience in the face of attack, and building organic leadership for broader social movements.

The committees are based on neighbor-to-neighbor relations where people commit to support each other to mitigate the negative impacts of deportations. Families sign power of attorney so that someone is prepared to take care of kids, pay bills, and communicate with an employer in the case of being taken away and placed in detention. They develop neighbor watch efforts to watch for abusive police behavior, warn of check-points, and report abuse. Health projects, English classes, and supportive businesses weave together for self-sufficiency. In addition to survival aspects, committees grow to remedy local issues like landlords refusing to make repairs or discrimination within schools. These daily building blocks lay a foundation for dealing with big problems like the anti-immigrant laws.

"Coming out was our only option."

That 2010 march represented a fundamental change from the way advocacy groups had been approaching immigration reform: hammering out compromises in an effort to pass an omnibus piece of Congressional legislation. After that effort failed, many concluded that the compromise effort had conceded too much ground, ushering in new anti-immigrant measures, more border militarization, and a harder road to legalization.

[Migrant families in Phoenix and across the state refused to run. Instead, they responded to the new law with a groundswell of public participation in civic life and a celebration of the cultures the state was set on banning.](#)

Diana Perez Ramirez of Puente Arizona, explains, "SB1070 was a symbol of how far to the right the needle on immigration had moved. It was a wake up call that we needed to do something big to haul it back toward something sensible."

Francisco Pacheco, an organizer for the National Day Laborer Organizing network and a former participant in Salvadoran social movements who migrated to the US after that country's civil war, is a driving force behind the Barrio Defense model. He explains, "The committees are built off the model of movements in Latin America where people come together to resolve their local problems and join peaceful resistance efforts. By focusing on local problems, local leadership is created. The protagonist shifts from an elected official to the mother or worker next door."

Though under great duress—SB 1070's authors called the law a declaration of a "war of attrition" on immigrants—migrant families in Phoenix and across the state refused to run. Instead, they responded to the new law with [a groundswell of public participation in civic life](#) and [a celebration of the cultures the state was set on banning](#).

"For a long time we would only go take the kids to school, to work, and run errands," said Leticia Ramirez, an undocumented mother of three. "Other than that we had become prisoners hidden in our own homes. But with the laws they were passing, even that wasn't safe anymore. We realized the only safe community is an organized one. Coming out was our only option."

The power within

Since 2010, the harsh model of SB 1070 has spread to other states—but so has the barrio defense method of responding to it. After Georgia passed HB87, a copycat of Arizona's law, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR) responded with a series of actions to empower immigrant communities. The group partnered with day laborer networks for a "human rights summer" that included mass mobilization and the establishment of local *comités populares* of mutual support. They also organized businesses and institutions to publicly declare themselves "Sanctuary Zones" that would not allow law enforcement to enter to check migrants' papers without a warrant.

In January of this year, committee members from ten Georgia towns gathered for a state-wide assembly. Together they decided that the pathway to immigration reform should be through challenging local officials who take advantage of its absence. Adelina Nicholls of the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights explains that, "We don't have to wait for Congress to stop police from mistreating our community and real reform is unlikely as long as we allow that mistreatment to continue." In Fayetteville, outside of Atlanta, a hundred people marched to the police department to demand that daily checkpoints, erected under the guise of fighting crime and drugs but frequently used to check papers, be taken down.

As in Arizona, the committee model has turned people from a strategy of hiding in their homes to taking to the streets with clipboards and cameras to monitor and turn back abuses. The idea is to transition from challenging the powers that be, and instead cultivate the power within.

Because the process charges those affected by the laws with combating them, a new form of leadership tends to develop, says Pacheco. "Instead of asking people to attend a march, members of committees are asked to assess the moment, decide when a march is necessary, and plan accordingly. Through that process people's political development is sharpened. They become more critical, more lucid. It makes strategists out of all of us."

In the Puente office in Phoenix, where committees meet on a weekly basis, hangs a sign with a quote by the legendary organizer, Cesar Chavez: "Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. We have seen the future, and the future is ours."