

**PROFILE OF THE ORGANIZING EFFORTS  
OF PROYECTO CAMPESINO AND O.L.A. RAZA**

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by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, politicians have attacked immigrants in a variety of ways. They have blamed immigrants for the economic woes of the United States, the decline in education, racial tensions, over population, and even environmental problems. The passage of Proposition 187 in California in 1994 was really the kick off to the anti-immigrant wave of the 1990s. From the passage of Proposition 187, the war against immigrants grew like an ugly fungus and spread throughout many parts of the country. The scapegoating of immigrants by politicians got so severe that immigrants and immigrant rights activists knew they needed to increase their organizing and civic participation efforts to fight back, make their voices heard and dispel some of the anti-immigrant myths.

Although groups of immigrants, organizers, and activists, have employed different methods to combat the anti-immigrant sentiment and help immigrants make their voices heard, one major tactic has been to help people naturalize. The idea behind this tactic is that once people naturalize and become United States citizens they will feel more confident and capable of becoming full fledged U.S. citizens. They will become more active civic participants, more vocal about their rights and desires, and they will be able to vote. As immigrants become more active civic participants and voters, politicians will be inclined to listen to and respect them, and will not be able to blame them for everything that is wrong in this country. Eventually, the politicians and immigrant foes will realize the true value immigrants bring to the United States. In fact, over the last couple of years this tactic has been working. Politicians are beginning to realize that most of the more than one million people who naturalize every year will vote. Lately, we have seen the politicians tone down their rhetoric, pass “fix it” legislation to provide some public benefits to immigrants with disabilities, and pass the NACARA legislation that

allows some people to immigrate to the United States easier. Obviously, the political climate has not come as far as we would like. The legislative changes are really only the beginning of the changes that should be happening for immigrants. Nonetheless, there has been some turn about in the anti-immigrant sentiment.

The Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) prepared this brief report to share some of the aspects of what two organizations in California's Central Valley, Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza, have been doing to help organize immigrants, many of whom are newly naturalized U.S. citizens. This report is based on conversations the ILRC staff, especially, Meredith Linsky, a summer law clerk working with the ILRC, had with staff at Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza, observations we have made over the past two years of working with Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza, and part of the text of the 1996 American Friends Service Committee's grant proposal to the James Irvine Foundation that discussed Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza's programs. The report is not supposed to be an all-inclusive formula on how to organize immigrants nor on how these two organizations organize immigrants to become more active civic participants. Instead, in this report, we have recorded an introductory narrative to how Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza conduct community organizing and rural leadership development. The ILRC is confident that organizations in other farmworker communities can duplicate and adapt some of the information and organizing techniques in their own communities that these two dynamic organizations have been using for years.

We want to take this opportunity to thank El Primo and Cindy Brito from Proyecto Campesino and Roberto de la Rosa and Teresa de la Rosa from O.L.A. Raza for agreeing to let us speak with them, learn from them, and hang around and watch them do their thing.

## II. ELEMENTS OF PROYECTO CAMPESINO AND O.L.A. RAZA'S CIVIC PARTICIPATION CAMPAIGN STRATEGY

The most impressive aspects of the organizing that both Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza do is the way in which both programs use radio shows, citizenship classes, the naturalization process, and local issues to organize civic action leagues which help immigrants become civic participants. Equally impressive is the incredible amount of trust and respect that the community members have for these organizations and their staff members. It has become obvious to the ILRC that the high degree of trust towards these organizations is a major reason for their success as organizers. Another source of their success has been the creation of an extensive network of personal and organizational collaboration in the Central Valley that has allowed them the opportunity to cast a wide net for outreach, education, and organizing. Finally, the way in which Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza's organizing style encourage the farmworkers to make the decisions and do the work helps create self-confidence and self-sufficiency among the farmworkers and will lead to self-sustaining institutions in the Central Valley in the future.

It is fascinating how well the three major components of Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza's civic participation work complement each other. They use the **radio program** for education and outreach around issues of importance to immigrants such as naturalization. The radio programs also help recruit students for Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza's **citizenship classes**. During these classes, Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza staff help people learn how to pass the English and civics and history exams and help them complete their naturalization applications. Thus, the classes start the naturalization process for the students that will

eventually lead them down the road to becoming civic activists and voters. These classes tie students into the **Tulare County Civic Action League (TCCAL)** because the classes serve as a recruiting ground for TCCAL. The classes provide a wonderful opportunity for Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza to introduce and promote TCCAL to students because TCCAL is an example of a “real life civics” lesson. The TCCAL provides the students with an opportunity to practice what they learned in the classes through civic participation projects and use their new statuses as citizens in this pursuit. Meanwhile, the radio programs also give the TCCAL an added boost because the radio programs promote civic participation issues on which the TCCAL is working.

### **III. ORGANIZING TECHNIQUES: USING RADIO AND COLLABORATING WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS**

El Primo, Roberto de la Rosa, and Teresa de la Rosa each have decades of experience working in the Central Valley. Community members recognize their dedication and respond to their ongoing organizing efforts. Their model of organizing is not one of organizing in a vacuum. Both Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza rely on collaboration with other community-based organizations and work closely with the Central Valley Partners, United Farm Workers Union (UFW), and other organizations. Cindy Brito and Teresa give frequent talks at other social service agencies about immigration matters, especially citizenship. The organizers also rely on the talents and resources of the community they serve in order to carry out their work. For example, they have recruited and trained many of the community members' children (high school and college students) to teach citizenship classes to naturalization applicants and to help with civic participation campaigns.

El Primo has a weekly radio program broadcast from Porterville. Roberto de la Rosa's weekly program, "Foro Sin Fronteras," is broadcast from Bakersfield. Farmworkers throughout the San Joaquin Valley (San Joaquin, Kern, Kings, Tulare, Fresno, Madera, and Merced Counties) listen to both of these radio programs. Radio has helped Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza inform and/or organize people around humane working conditions, safer housing, affordable healthcare, AIDS, pesticide exposure, access to social services, education issues, labor rights, immigration and citizenship issues, public health concerns, and countering negative public perceptions about immigrants.

El Primo's radio program is broadcast on station KOJJ from Porterville, California. El Primo's program focuses on five main issue areas: housing, labor, immigration, health, and education. El Primo invites guests to appear on his program and discusses these issues with them over the air. The guests include people from community based organizations, politicians, government employees, and TCCAL members.

Radio is an extremely effective organizing tool because many of the farmworkers listen to the radio on their walkman radios in the fields. Roberto's program, "Foro Sin Fronteras," which is aired on Wednesday mornings at Radio Campesina in Bakersfield, is hosted by some of the most popular disc jockeys. Roberto uses his show to discuss current immigration policies and legislation that relate to the lives of farmworkers. El Primo and Roberto are very gifted in their ability to explain complex political and social issues in the community's language. They describe ideas and terms by relating them to the lives of their listeners. During a recent organizing campaign designed to help immigrant families stay together, El Primo and Roberto described on their radio programs the extremely complicated legal issues in simple, concise

language and encouraged people to educate others including elected and appointed officials on this important issue.

The keys to the success of the radio programs are that they reach a wide audience, discuss a variety of topics that the farmworker community has an interest in and in ways that the farmworkers can relate to, and help continue to build trust and confidence in El Primo and Roberto, Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza, and in their organizing campaigns.

According to Cindy Brito, the Associate Program Coordinator at Proyecto Campesino, radio is Proyecto Campesino's most effective organizing tool. They are able to talk the language of the community and the community responds to them. They ask community members to help with a campaign and they do it. An example of this was during the campaign to keep immigrant families together. During that campaign, on the air El Primo and Roberto explained the importance of the campaign, invited people to sign petitions and collect signatures from their family members, friends and neighbors, and raised money to take a delegation to Washington D.C. to hand deliver 15,000 petitions they collected aimed at educating members of congress about important family separation issues facing immigrants.

The radio programs provide a vital part of the organizing process for Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza. The benefit of a well-established radio program is that it can provide an outstanding vehicle for outreach on issues of common concern to immigrants. Radio helps communicate ideas to a population that is not as literate as some other populations. It tells people how to get involved, how to participate in civic affairs, and who to contact to become active. Radio can motivate people to get involved in and participate in campaigns. Radio has served as a motivating force to people to apply for naturalization and take classes on English and civics so they can pass the naturalization exam, become U.S. citizens and participate more in our

democracy. Lastly, radio is a way to gain the trust of the community. The community listens closely to what El Primo and Roberto say on the radio each week and begin to see that El Primo and Roberto come from their community, and are trying to work with their community for the improvement of the community. Based on what we have heard and observed, the familiarity and trust that community members have with Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza are vital parts to their successful activism and, in the case of the family separation issue, the trust was an important reason why they gathered 15,000 signatures in such a short period.

There are many opportunities in other parts of the Central Valley, or even other parts of California, to have radio programs on a station that caters to an immigrant group. People should approach the radio stations in their counties and inquire. Sometimes radio stations are actually looking for informative speakers to have their own program or be a consistent guest on a program, which is already established.

#### **IV. TULARE COUNTY CIVIC ACTION LEAGUE**

The Tulare County Civic Action League (TCCAL) was formally organized a couple of years ago. The objective of TCCAL is twofold: to create rural leadership and encourage political and civic action.

Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza staff provide the basic organizing skills to committee members that enable them to assist in organizing community gatherings and being active in civic affairs. TCCAL committee members learn to analyze common problems, define obtainable goals for change, develop an outreach plan, and design a strategy.

Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza staff conduct training sessions on political issues of concern to farmworkers and on the way in which local governments, school boards and other community groups conduct their meetings. Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza staff also



provide training in preparing for and delivering presentations to decision-making bodies in municipalities, the county, and the state. They also provide training on the organization of local campaigns centered on issues or candidates.

Proyecto Campesino also helps the committees with the basic skills of organizing a public event such as obtaining a venue, booking speakers, producing and printing flyers, and distributing press releases. They train committees in formal meeting procedures and government decision-making entities.

As of August 1997, the TCCAL included six citizenship classes in four towns with a total of approximately 200 students. Each class represents a committee and each committee elects its officers. The first priority of TCCAL is to provide citizenship classes. This involves the recruitment of students and volunteer teachers and the development of a curriculum that integrates government, history, politics, organizing, and English as a second language. Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza recruit students through the radio programs, flyers, word of mouth and personal and organizational networks. TCCAL has organized around the following issues during the past few years: denying undocumented children the right to go to public school, denying health benefits to people without legal residence, anti-affirmative action proposals, separating immigrant families, and outlawing street vendor activity in Porterville.

TCCAL's goal is that members of the committees are invited to participate in quarterly conventions at the end of each 12 week citizenship class session. At the conventions students receive final review of their citizenship applications which Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza staff helped complete, and they have the opportunity to purchase photos to send with their citizenship applications. The teachers elect valedictorians and community leaders speak about

current issues like immigration laws, welfare reform and civic action. At the conventions students pass resolutions and decide on what kinds of issues and activities they wish to work.

One way of creating leadership is to elect officers in each committee. Each committee elects an executive board that includes a President, first Vice-President, second Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, Parliamentarian, and Historian. In smaller classes, they may elect fewer officers. The officers make up a pool of potential leaders. The members of the committee nominate some of the officers at the first meeting. Some people express interest in these positions but they must be elected by a majority of the group. Some times students in the classes do not know each other, but they rely on their community instinct and faith to nominate and vote for each other.

As mentioned earlier in this report, during the fall of 1997 an issue arose of major significance to immigrant families. Under changes to the immigration process hundreds of thousands of immigrants were due to be forced to separate from their family members. One of the functions of the TCCAL Executive Board was to help fundraise for a delegation of six TCCAL members who were farmworkers to go to Washington, D.C. to educate congressional members about these family separation issues facing immigrants. Members of TCCAL helped Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza collected over 15,000 signatures on petitions on this important immigrant issue. The delegates hand delivered all of the petitions to the appropriate members of Congress in Washington D.C. To raise the necessary money the Executive Board members of each committee met in August 1997 to discuss a plan to fundraise for the delegation. In order to send six people to Washington, D.C., the organizers needed to raise a total of \$7,500.

The Board members adopted and carried out a fundraising plan which included the following activities:

- a. each student would contribute \$1 per week;
- b. they would sell 3,500 raffle tickets and request donations from local businesses and flea markets;
- c. each committee would hold a car wash;
- d. they would make tamales to sell; and
- e. they would hold a dance with live music and charge \$10 per ticket.

It is important to note that the organizing of the both Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza is such that they encourage the people to do the work. For instance, the farmworkers raised over \$7000 for the delegation to go to Washington D.C. TCCAL members organized a dance to raise money, went to local businesses for donations, and even went on the radio program to solicit donations to the public in general. This was the first time in twenty years of experience that El Primo has seen a radio station allow fundraising to be conducted on the air.

Additionally, the farmworkers collected all the signatures for the petitions which were given to members of Congress in Washington D.C. The staff at Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza did not get 15,000 signatures, but using the radio show, the staff at Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza discussed the issue and encouraged TCCAL and other farmworkers to gather all the signatures. Most importantly, it is the farmworkers themselves who form the decision-making body of TCCAL, not the staff at Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza.

The results of this campaign were outstanding. The efforts of Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza increased the active civic participation of the immigrants in the communities in which these organizations work. The organizers and staff in these organizations were effective in

stimulating the creative energy of the members of the Tulare County Civic Action League and others. They distributed information about the issues of family separation facing people in the Valley, raised thousand of dollars to cover the costs of their activities, and participated in press conferences.

Developing leaders and involving people in civic action is both exciting and tiring. The key to success involves a significant amount of patience on the part of the organizers. The organizers must teach community members many skills to allow them to proceed on their own in the future. Some of these skills include teaching people how to function in a meeting, participate in a city council meeting, approach an elected official and register people to vote.

The use of radio as an organizing tool complemented TCCAL and its goals wonderfully. When TCAL took on the issue of working to keep families together, it used the radio programs to educate the community on the issue, motivate them to become active, collect signatures for the petitions, and raise money for the trip to Washington D.C. to hand deliver the petitions. Radio proved to be a valuable organizing tool for TCCAL and will continue to be in other civic participation campaigns they wage in the future.

Although a civic action league can be difficult to set up and maintain, dozens of communities around the Central Valley could sponsor such an organization to increase civic participatory activities. Additionally, there have been discussions about some day having a Central Valley wide civic action league where the civic action leagues in each town can learn from each other and join together on certain issues of common concern to make their voices more powerful.

## V. CITIZENSHIP CLASSES AND TEACHING TECHNIQUES

Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza sponsor several citizenship classes simultaneously. Each citizenship class session meets two hours a week for 12 weeks. The classes are held at various locations, even in the comfort of someone's home. The teachers are all volunteer, bilingual community members who receive a day long training session from Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza. In the past the teachers have been high school and college students, small business owners, homemakers, and on one occasion, a certified teacher.

The classes have several purposes. First, the classes provide an opportunity for the students to prepare to pass the English, civics and history part of the naturalization interview. Second, during the classes Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza help the students complete their naturalization applications, form N-400. Third, the classes help get the students involved in practicing what it means to become a citizen of the United States. Fourth, the classes serve as a recruiting ground for the Civic Action Leagues and civic participation campaigns.

During a new class, Proyecto Campesino or O.L.A. Raza staff explains that the purpose of the class is not only to learn about how to become a citizen, but also to practice what it is to be a citizen. As one teacher said during the first day of one of the classes, "The citizenship certificate is pretty hanging on the wall in a frame, but it is even prettier to participate in the decisions that are being made in our society." In explaining this purpose, staff give an example, such as the family separation issue campaign and the effect the students working through a committee had on the issue. As one teacher told the students, "We must respond to what is going on around us through our committees, we cannot depend on the lawyers. We have the right to make requests of the government."

During one class we observed in Dinuba, California, the teacher mentioned the trip to Washington, D.C. and the need for the class to elect at least one representative from the class to participate in TCCAL activities. The teacher asked the students if anyone was interested in serving as the Dinuba representative. He addressed each student individually.

Alicia Alizondo, the first woman the teacher addressed, was interested in the position but was concerned that since she had small children taking the position might be difficult. She asked if it would be possible to bring her children with her to the meetings. The teacher responded that they try not to have children at the meetings but maybe another person in the group would be willing to baby-sit for her children while she attended the meetings. Other students declined the position for other reasons. The class decided to elect Ms. Alizondo to be the class representative.

The teacher's style was participatory and empowering. Everyone in these classes must participate. For those who are fearful of speaking in public, the teacher used the "choir method" ("El coro"), common in Mexico, where all of the students repeat after the teacher in unison. He encouraged the students by telling them that, "in this class, we will teach you how to study to learn." The teacher remarked that it is difficult to be a student, "some people have never studied before or studied over 40 years ago." He emphasized that it is important to learn and not just memorize and stated, "Many people just want to memorize the 100 questions and 100 answers but they do not understand the answers and will find it harder to pass the exam."

The teacher then discussed the substance of the class. He introduced them to practical learning and test taking techniques. He explained to the students that by learning one fact, they would be able to answer several questions. For example, by knowing that there are 50 states in the United States, a student can answer the following questions: What do the 50 stars on the flag represent? In addition, why are there 100 Senators? He also offered the students tips for taking

the exam. For instance, of the 100 questions, 43 of them begin with the word "what," ten questions begin with "how many," which asks for a number, and ten questions begin with "who," which asks for a name. The teacher then explained that understanding the words "what," "how many," and "who," the students will be well on their way to understanding the majority of the 100 questions. At the end of the class, the teacher made a pitch for everyone to help collect signatures to support the campaign to keep families together. Each student took a petition on which to collect signatures and agreed to return it at the next class.

By helping people fulfill the requirements to become U.S. citizens and providing Proyecto Campesino, O.L.A. Raza, and TCCAL with the opportunity to recruit students to be TCCAL members, the classes complement the organizing efforts of TCCAL and the radio programs.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

El Primo summed up the purpose of the Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza's organizing efforts when he said:

People cannot only become citizens without civic participation. We need to develop leadership, so that the organizing efforts can continue after we leave. At this time, we have just begun to wet our fingers. We will keep developing the citizenship project to make it stronger and better.

The organizing work performed by Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza is done at a grassroots level, with direct and substantial participation from the community. Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza staff members strive to create a sense of community and shared responsibility. Although it is hard work, people in other rural communities throughout California could duplicate and adapt much of what Proyecto Campesino and O.L.A. Raza have

been doing and wage a naturalization and civic participation program which involves organizing people at the grassroots with the ultimate goal of creating self-sustaining capacity in immigrant communities.