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Self-determination and Intersectionality in the Immigrant Rights Movement

BETTY HUNG

ASIAN AMERICANS ADVANCING JUSTICE-LA

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.

ABORIGINAL ACTIVISTS GROUP, QUEENSLAND, 1970s¹

In the past three years, notable victories have been won by the Immigrant Rights Movement, specifically, the Obama Administration's exercise of executive authority to provide relief from deportation and work authorization to undocumented young people and, more recently announced, also for the undocumented parents of children who are citizens or legal permanent residents (at least for the duration of his presidency). These, arguably, are the most significant positive shifts in a federal immigration policy since 1986 when, under President Ronald Reagan, millions of undocumented immigrants were granted amnesty through the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).

How and why did these victories come about?

The answer is found in the power and inspiration of self-determination. In recent years, many undocumented youth and their families came out of the shadows to take the helm of a diverse, sometimes fractured, movement.

An indisputable moral and strategic authority exists in these experiences, the suffering, and hopes of individuals who are most directly impacted. Instead of allowing others to speak for them, these undocumented immigrants—not just Latino, but also Asian, Pacific Islander, African, Afro-Caribbean, and White or European origin undocumented immigrants—have increasingly spoken for themselves. Moreover, in coming out as “undocumented and unafraid,” many have also simultaneously come out as “queer and unashamed.” This profound shift, grounded in self-determination and respect for the intersectionality of identities and experiences, has led to certain policy victories and an opening in the hearts and minds of society, which would have seemed unimaginable just a few years ago.

The following critical lessons have great importance for the future of the Immigrant Rights Movement. Now,

in looking ahead to the continuing and ongoing struggle for full equality and justice, important strategies must be adopted:

Stay grounded:

A moral and strategic center where respect for the leadership and self-determination of directly impacted individuals is a fundamental guiding principle that also holds accountable allies and other players. The mantra “nothing about us without us,” proclaimed by undocumented youth, encapsulates this concept that immigrants who experience the brunt of the broken immigration system should be at the forefront of the movement, not just in sharing their stories, but in leadership strategizing, organizing, advocating, and decision making.

Ensure support of allies:

Proactively support the leadership of directly impacted immigrants in a manner that respects and defers to their agency and self-determination.² This includes allies stepping back and not purporting to speak for undocumented immigrants. When media and public speaking opportunities arise, allies should defer to affected immigrants to speak for themselves. Negotiations and demands should be made by immigrants who are directly impacted, whose lives are at stake.

Challenge false dichotomies:

Remove and erase the dichotomy of “good immigrants” and “bad immigrants” in order to reshape the narrative of who is “worthy” of inclusion in the American democracy. Some immigrant rights advocates have fallen into a trap of trying to prove the value and worth of “good immigrants,” effectively conveying that others are appropriately excluded from full societal integration. By

supporting the human dignity of *all* immigrants, we can win more significant victories that are capable of changing not just laws and policies, but also hearts and minds.

Address the root causes of migration:

This involves understanding why immigrants and refugees from all over the world are forced to migrate to the U.S., due to foreign, economic, and trade policies that make it untenable to remain in their native countries.

Practice intersectional consciousness:

Value and practice intersectional consciousness and solidarity that recognizes that the liberation of one is tied to the liberation of all. By honoring the complexity of each human being, the practice of intersectionality holds promise for building true solidarity among communities. Connecting parts of oneself—race, gender, immigration status, sexuality, class, and other facets of identity—opens a window into connecting communities, in boundary-crossing ways, and shifts the power dynamic so that there is mutual recognition that one's liberation is bound with the liberation of another.

With at least half of the projected 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. ineligible for relief under President Obama's executive actions, the struggle will continue. A change in the White House and new presidency promises new uncertainty. The above tenets of self determination and intersectionality will be critical to ensure that the journey toward immigrant rights is as liberatory as the victories we seek.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson>.
- ² For example, the formulation of demands, organizing, and advocacy strategies should always include directly impacted individuals, not just advocates and allies.