

# Fear Spreads in Immigrant Communities

President Trump's roundup of undocumented workers has spread fear through immigrant communities unsure what to expect as federal agents coordinate with local police to hunt people down, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

There is "widespread fear" in the undocumented community, says Pablo Alvarado, executive director of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), whose work in the first two months of the Trump administration has focused on keeping people from panicking while informing them of their rights and how to defend themselves if U.S. immigration agents show up at their workplace or home or intercept them on their way to work or while taking their children to school.

Alvarado is often compared to Cesar Chavez in terms of his leadership and organizing power in the undocumented community. NDLON represents tens of thousands of day-laborers. I spoke to Alvarado on March 10.

Dennis Bernstein: Help us put a face on what it looks like now at ground level. What are the discussions like in the community? Give us a sense of how people are responding to this first salvo, or series of salvos from this anti-immigrant administration.

Pablo Alvarado: Yes, well, there is widespread fear. And, because of the aggressive nature of the Trump immigration policies, the bans, the executive decisions that he's made. And the fact that ICE agents are going all over the country picking people up. They claim that they were going to go after people who have had previous criminal convictions, and violent criminals. That's what they said, but it's not true.

A lot of people who don't have any convictions have been detained. And some people who have had previous convictions like DUIs, dating 15 – 20 years ago are coming back. These folks don't represent a threat to public safety, but yet they're being targeted. They are being separated from their loved ones.

DB: Just to keep the human face on it, in that regard. There was, in fact, a dad who was here 20 – 22 years who was taking, I guess, his kid... he had three or four kids, but he was taking his kid to school, he was separated from his kid, on the way to school?

PA: Correct. It's one of the cases that our organization is assisting with. Romulo [Avelica-Gonzalez] essentially was taking his kids to the school when he was actually followed by ICE agents. Who, by the way, were not wearing their

uniform. Their jackets said that they were police. So, anyway, this type of situation is sending a wave of fear in our community. So, oftentimes, people see white vans driving in the neighborhoods and everyone freaks out. And they start posting on social media. "We saw ICE agents, the vans, ICE vans in such and such location."

And all of us feel this widespread fear. And people are staying inside. So, the good thing is that a lot of allies, immigrants' rights organizations, churches understand that there is this fear. So there is an effort to suppress that fear, and ensure that whatever notification goes out of ICE presence in the neighborhoods, that it's real. That it's not based on the fear.

So, there is no way, absolutely no way, that our community can defend without removing that fear. You cannot fight back when you're fearful, or when you hate somebody, when you're angry. So, our defense has to be very rational, and well thought out. And there is no way we can fight back effectively from a perspective of anger, hatred or fear. And that's why it's essential that we remove that fear.

DB: Alright, and last we spoke you were beginning to set up structures, networks that people could communicate across states, across the country. And so, really I guess, the way to counteract fear is with knowledge and with an approach that's methodical. So, how is that going? How is the community organizing? How is that coming together? If it is.

PA: Yeah. Well, let me elaborate more about the fear, the strategy of fear. Because it's important that Americans understand what this is about. So, it's important to recognize this small segment of nativism, xenophobes, that are promoting this fear, and, who, by the way, are now in power. Who have the power of the federal government, at their hands. We're talking about Steven Bannon, Jeff Sessions, Kris Kobach. These are the main advisors of President Trump. And these folks have been the leaders of these efforts to create that fear. Because they have never been interested in fixing the so-called broken immigration system. They've never been interested in that.

What they want to do is bring down the non-white, foreign-born population. It's been very clear. They know that realistically speaking, logistically speaking, they cannot deport 11 – 12 million people. They're not interested in that. What they want is they want to create so much misery that people will pack their bags, and leave on their own. This is the idea, attrition through enforcement strategy.

And they've never forgotten that strategy. And the main proponents of that strategy are now in power. So that's what it comes from. And obviously creating

that fear is not just directed towards immigrants.

So, obviously what they want is they want to create this state of fear so that people do not fight back for their rights, that we give up our rights. And we say "Okay, Mr. Trump, we're going to deport ourselves. Because the circumstances of living in the United States are unbearable. So I'm going to pack my bags and leave on my own." This has always been their strategy. And that's precisely what they want to create, the wave of fear through this new enforcement policies that Mr. Trump is implementing aggressively.

They also want to tell localities "If you support immigrants, if you have layers of protection for immigrants, we're going to take away your funding." That's again playing with fear, creating fear. And now he's telling significant segments of Americans who believe in his facts, his alternative facts, he's telling them "You have to be fearful of the immigrants because they are dangerous, they are criminals."

They have created an office, a special office now, for victims of undocumented people that kill Americans. So, precisely with that purpose of sending, of creating, that fear of immigrants. So, everything is about fear. This man... I mean that's how fascism operates, creating that fear.

So, in order for us to fight back we need to remove that fear and we need to tap into the power that people have. Remember that immigrants... we are courageous people. We come from places where we have faced dictators, drug cartels, gang members, extreme poverty, political persecution. Then we cross borders, deserts, and some of us rode the train. We've crossed deserts, etc., etc. We're powerful people. We need to tap into that sense of courage to overcome the fear. And the first step towards overcoming that fear is essentially knowing your rights and, more importantly, how to exercise those rights, in different scenarios. And this is precisely the first step that we are taking with the day labor community, and beyond.

We plan to visit – there are 700 day labor corners in this country – we are going to visit them all in the next four years. And everyone, every worker out there, will have the information that they need to protect themselves. And the training that they need to talk to other day laborers and begin organizing themselves to defend each other. That's the first step.

The second is that we're looking for friends of the day laborers, so if there are some listeners who might live close to a day labor location and they want to volunteer, they want to monitor what happens in that corner and they want to come help day laborers understand, and know their rights, please get in touch with us. Because across the country we are going to be recruiting people that

are going to be monitoring the activities that take place at that corner, including hate crimes and incidents. Including violations of wage and hours laws, like wage theft, injuries at the work place, including coming to the corner, or the center, and teaching people about their rights.

So, if there are folks who are listening who live nearby a day labor corner, please call us. And we'll train you on how to approach the workers and train them. We want to make sure that every corner across the country has the basic layers of community protection. There are so many friends of day laborers who will want to participate in these efforts.

DB: I just want you to say a little bit more about the infrastructure of NDLOM so people understand what your work has been, since 2002 – 2003, when you became executive director. So, you said there are over 700 corners that you represent. And that's the way in which you can create a network of pro-active, defense and fight back. Explain the infrastructure a little bit.

PA: Alright. Well, NDLOM was established to address issues that workers face every single day when they look for work, either at day laborer corners or day laborer centers. And throughout our work, we believe that setting up places that are safe and dignified for workers to get together and meet their employers, not only helps workers and employers and communities, but it improves public safety. It improves community relations, so that's why we've built 70 day labor centers across the country. These are places that people go every single day to find a day of work. There is staff in those places, and essentially to make sure that the transactions between employer and worker are clear, and transparent. But there are only 70 of those job centers across the country.

More day laborers are in the streets. And, of course, when you are in the streets you are subjected to many indignities. And NDLOM was built to address many of these indignities. But our infrastructure is not enough, because the need is big. That's why we are recruiting volunteers to join our forces, to join our efforts, to make sure that people's rights are respected.

So we do have a basic infrastructure, and we do have centers across the country. And these centers will be working together with whomever volunteers to make sure that day laborers are well protected. But, again, we're also looking for resources.

For example, in order to bring the Know Your Rights training to every corner, we're going to need a lot of printing and duplications. So, we're going to be asking folks to donate to make sure that every single day laborer out there knows about his rights and how to exercise them. And at the very least, if there is a basic infrastructure, to at least for people to know what their rights are.

So that campaign is on its way. So, if there are folks that want to participate, please get in touch with us.

DB: And, again, there's some very interesting information coming out of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network. You can go to their web site. I want to ask you, have you been in any way monitoring, or just noticing how to evaluate sort of the upsurge in the sense of white people now being freed by these white supremacists, these nationalists in power now, is there an upsurge? Are people being attacked more, being threatened more? How do you read that?

PA: There is. There is more... now that an employer who has stolen workers' wages is a precedent, of course, you know, other employers who believe the same as Mr. Trump, are going to feel emboldened. And as a consequence are going to hire people and refuse to pay their wages. So there has been an increase in the number of people who are getting hired and not being paid for the work that they performed. So we have that. We have... there's been a series of incidents of violence against day laborers.

I've seen it here in Los Angeles, in five places, of people being harassed, and chased. And one of the workers was actually beaten here in downtown Los Angeles. So, we've seen an increase on people passing by at day laborer corners and yelling racial epitaphs to the workers. So, yes, there is this increase and I only expect to see more, unfortunately.

The number of hate crimes in our country has increased, not just against Muslims, and against the Jewish community, but against Mexican and Central American immigrants. And I think the increase in the incidents, the hate crimes and incidents has been proportional to the attacks on Muslims and Jewish communities. And that is something that is happening nation-wide.

And, obviously, one of the things that... part of the campaign that we are implementing right now of adopting a corner and asking for volunteers... it's insuring that every time someone goes by and screams a racial epitaph at workers, that's a hate incident. These are not getting reported. and it's important that we create a data base, and description of these kinds of incidents because unless people speak out, we won't be able to show America its ugly side. Because people need to see ... what's happening. So part of what volunteers are going to be doing is training workers how to document these types of hate incidents. Where, and how to report them. That's going to be part of this campaign.

DB: And, I know you're very busy and you have to go soon. Just two more quick questions. It sort of looks like Trump's jobs program is like... they are already hiring in Stars and Stripes and all these military magazines to come and get a

good job working at the border. Trump has already referred... he was corrected by surrogates, but he's already referred to what's going on at the border, the hiring of 10 and then 5,000 more folks, as a military operation. Your thoughts about what's happening on that front.

PA: Well, you know, people who believe that Trump's promises, and the total campaign was just electoral politics and rhetoric were, essentially, wrong. Now, it's not hypotheticals anymore. People are getting rounded up and ICE is being more aggressive.

ICE has always been a rogue agency, no oversight. They don't have to follow the same rules of respecting the constitution that police officers are supposed to follow. And, essentially, there's no oversight. At a given point, ICE even disobeyed the orders of President Obama when he told us "Hey, these are the priorities, that you may want to follow them"... as a matter of fact the ICE union, the border patrol union, even filed a lawsuit against President Obama.

So, this is a rogue agency, that's been beefed up. But it's been strengthened and there is no doubt in my mind that when President Trump said "I will build a deportation force"... that that's exactly what he plans to do. So, 5,000 original border patrol agents with no oversight. Imagine the kind of human rights' crisis that's going to be caused at the U.S./Mexico border. And internally they're planning to hire 10,000 additional ICE agents. Meaning that more places... places where people gather would not be safe for migrants, across this country. So, his deportation force is being built up.

Now, in order for him to deport the 2 – 3 million people that he said that he would deport during the first years, he has to enlist local police. So the dilemma that is being presented here is not just for immigrants, it's also for elected officials, who have to determine how far they're going to go in terms of collaborating with ICE. And where they're going to be complicit in the mass deportation policies of this administration. In the near future, our country will be viewing this moment as one of the most shameful period in the history of our country. And localities of police departments will have to give testimonies on which side they stood.

And I think that's why there are so many elected leaders, both at the local and state level, who are taking a stronger stand against President Trump, because they understand what is the right side of history, they understand that participating in this immigration force will be devastating not just to migrant families, but the people that they work for. And it will be devastating for the same concept of public safety. And that percent of people who fear police will not report crimes, when they are victims or witnesses. And this is only detrimental to communities, actually to public safety.

And I think some police officers understand that. And this is a dilemma that this administration is putting every single police department and every single city council in this country. And local governments have to make the right choice. And they are. A significant number of them are saying “We’re not going to collaborate in the construction of this deportation force. We want to make sure that there’s a bright line between what we do and what the federal agents do.”

So, obviously, this militarization is not just detrimental to migrants, who are going to be persecuted even more, with more officers. But is detrimental to what localities can do, to protect everyone, every resident within their boundaries.

DB: And, just in the final minute that we have. The other side of that dad getting arrested on the way... after 22 years... taking his kids to school, is the family, the mom and her kids being placed in a private prison. There’s now a private prison boom, the private prison industry, they’re all getting ready for a surge in business.

PA: They’re salivating, right now, they’re salivating. They see Mr. Trump, that Mr. Trump is going to be kind of like the oppression that’s going to make their growth possible. And it’s grotesque, when private corporations make money out of the suffering of people. But it doesn’t surprise me because this has been the framework of our adversaries. This is the framework that Trump has brought into the debate.

In order to make America great you need to make some people suffer. And it’s idiotic, because you don’t have to make people suffer. In order to make America great you don’t have to divide people into good and bad immigrants. In order to make America great you don’t have to be a deportation force that is going to undermine what I believe is the heart of this country. Talking about fear... I think that President Trump is fearful of the courage that immigrants demonstrate, every single day.

I strongly believe that the president and his closest advisers are a bunch of scared people. They’re scared of the fact that whether they like it or not this is a country of migrants. And in every generation, migrants have been the beating heart of this country. Migrants live the idea of the American dream with more intensity than anybody else, precisely because of the circumstances of where they come from. And that is what Mr. Trump and his advisers are fearful of, that courage, and the ability to push forward in this country.

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