

VIVENCIAS: Reports from the field

THE FREEDOM RIDE: A JOURNEY ACROSS THE GEOGRAPHY OF HUMAN DIGNITY

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Reflections by Alejandro (the older generation)

It was the beginning for some. For others, another step in the journey. For still others, a stop, an act of reflection. For all it was a 12-city, 7-day trip, starting in Chicago, with stops in Dearborn, Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, Rochester, Brockport, Syracuse, Albany, Newburgh, Washington DC, New Jersey, and Flushing Meadows. There were Catholics, Jews, Muslims and Baptists and Atheists in attendance, with the United Methodists leading the way on our bus (Figure 1).

It was an act of human dignity and affirmation, and so, of resistance. With “Sí Se Puede!” as our rallying cry at solidarity marches, send-off rallies, church services, union dinners and many more welcoming activities, hundreds and thousands of people were impacted with the message of amnesty for immigrants, family reunification, workplace rights and civil liberties for all, across the US.

More than 3,000 people sent off 150 Freedom Riders in Chicago, Saturday morning, 27 September 2003. The public send-off at the Federal Plaza, was carried out in a festive atmosphere, with many different organizations speaking about the importance of the Freedom Ride’s goals. Even Nazis set up shop across the street from the send-off, and, protected by a Chicago Police SWAT team, carried out their hateful display with all the effectiveness of a gnat. Families, friends, loved ones and comrades saw us off. The bus we had the good fortune to travel on, organized by Centro Sin Fronteras, had entire families of activists, from 5 to 60+ year olds. It also





Figure 1 Compañero/as from Centro Sin Fronteras gather after the rally across from the Statue of Liberty

carried three of the undocumented activists that would be speaking during the Freedom Ride stops: Emma Lozano, the head of Centro Sin Fronteras, Julietta Bolivar, a Bolivian mother of three children (US citizens) facing a deportation hearing, and Elvira Arrellano, a young Mexican mother (again, of a child, a son, who was a US citizen) who had been arrested in December of 2003 by the FBI and sentenced to 3 years probation for using a false social security number. The other two buses were organized by a labor union.

For our part, we were there as part of a solidarity contingent sponsored by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago – an icon of community and political resistance for over 30 years. Over 5,000 people across the country took part in the Freedom Ride, coming from the Southwest, the Northeast, as well as the

Midwest to meet in Washington DC in a show of extended family, of strength and so, of dignity.

Anti-immigration quotables

“This march has nothing to do with civil rights or freedom,” said Dan Stein, executive director of the Federation for American Immigration Reform. “This is about whether some people can jump the line, skip past law-abiding immigrants and force their way into the country. People who are illegally here, in fact, have all the freedom they want if they simply return to their country.”

Freedom Rider quotables

Mimi Bolivar, age 13

“Because I want to be part of the big difference that we are going to make and also because I think it is important to fight for the rights of immigrants because my Mom is an immigrant and because, somehow, all of us are immigrants.”

In Dearborn, with a rally and march sponsored by several labor unions and Latin American civic organizations, the Midwest Freedom Riders were treated to a sumptuous dinner and cultural activity. Several Freedom Riders performed, including a young Mexican named Michael Reyes (co-author of this article) who is part of a heroic group of young people carrying out intense civic work in the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. It is work aimed at redemption and challenge, and not tranquil acceptance of the status quo. The respect and admiration shown the Freedom Riders throughout the 12-city journey was a wonder to behold.

Over delicious spaghetti and angel food cake, marvelous talk and camaraderie, the organizers of the rally spoke, one by one from the platform, of the commitment of their unions and churches, schools and civic organizations to the concept of amnesty for undocumented workers (see Figure 2). A highlight of the evening, just before we were ready to get on the bus to move on, was a union vice-President, who spoke with passion and reason of the importance of uniting with the Freedom Ride.

In Toledo, we marched down a major thoroughfare of the Latino and Black neighborhood, evoking memories of another time and place, 30 years ago in the Southwest (see Figure 3). We shouted our battle cry of “*¡Sí Se Puede!*” with Mexican, Puerto Rican and red flags, displaying their brilliance despite the overcast sky shaking its head in disapproval. The organizers of the Toledo event sponsored a picnic for the buses, with delicious Mexican food and rock en español performed by local musicians. We left Toledo happy, content at being able to exchange experiences with like-minded activists.



Figure 2 Julietta Bolivar, member of Centro Sin Fronteras and fighting a deportation order, speaks at the lunchtime rally organized by a coalition of local unions

In Cleveland, we were treated to a splendid dinner by a local union and church, where we stay for the night. We stayed up late into the night, discussing politics and life, disagreeing sometimes about the how, but never about the when. In a touching display of compassion that marked our journey on the bus, one of the compañeras covered me with her blanket in the middle of the night because, as she explained, “you were shivering like a wet dog.”

Going into Buffalo, we were told that less than 2 years before, one of the sponsoring organizations, part of the hosting coalition, had publicly declared its opposition to the “flood of illegal immigrants.” Our experience there was wonderful. We said grace with our hosts, remembering those times in history when men and women from different places, and immigrants from different countries, came together to take a stand at difficult times in this country’s history...and they made a difference (see Figure 4).

Viewing the countryside on the way to Rochester, our little bus lapsed into introspection and reflection, some families feeding their babies, some talking about the experiences in other towns, the younger people doing homework, the older people beginning a *novena*. In what became an ongoing jest, I was threatened with being reported to the migra, because I am the atheist on the bus and have also retained my Mexican citizenship. In Rochester, we feasted and



Figure 3 Residents of Toledo, OH and members of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) host the Freedom Riders in a march through downtown Toledo

took part in a community activity in a historic old seminary, the site of many civil rights struggles. I was privileged, along with two other *compañeros*, to stay in a monastery with two nuns. The monastery did not burn down, in spite of warnings to the nuns from the other *compañeros* on our bus.

In Liverpool, we stopped to join a hotel picket line and brought the message for freedom and solidarity to hundreds of cars as they drive by. The president of the hotel chain was present and seemed shocked at the outrage and embarrassment of the picket. He tried to talk to one of people on the picket line, presumably an employee, and was promptly rebuffed by jeers and chants.

“Response to those that say, ‘Let’s take it back to the good old days’” was the title of the poem that Michael Reyes read at the rally in Albany. Angry in tone, it was unforgiving and through the voice of a young person, reminds us that race and class are historical and systemic phenomena: not a pesky reminder of the past, rather an evil rejoinder of things to come, if we do not act. We joined forces with over 200 people here, and heard words of faith, and of struggle.

The stops by the Freedom Ride were a whirlwind of emotive welcomes and unitary events for the small towns and big cities that hosted us. In DC, we were scorned by some on the other buses because as usual, the *compañero/as* of Centro Sin Fronteras and the Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center refused to stand for the US pledge of allegiance. In what many of the



Figure 4 Mexican immigrants hold up signs demanding rights at mass rally in Queens, NY

white union organizers took as an affront to the politics of the event, all of the people on our bus refused to take a novelty size American Flag, that was handed out as people crowded into the auditorium (see Figure 5). Pueblo Sin Fronteras president, Emma Lozano, explained it this way when asked by a young Mexican college student on his first political trip. “When what that flag [the US] stands for is for everyone, then we will all stand.” “Para todos, todo” Everything for everyone.

Anti-Immigration quotable

“Thomas Fleming, a White nationalist intellectual, claims: “Arab and Pakistani terrorists, Nigerian con artists, Oriental and South American drug lords, Russian gangsters – all are introducing their particular brands of cultural enrichment into an already fragmented United States that increasingly resembles Bosnia more than the America I grew up in.”

Freedom Rider quotable

“Yolanda Salinas, student at Harold Washington
First of all, I am on this trip because it’s going to be a historical event that I



Figure 5 A total of 5000 Freedom Riders and supporters from across the country meet and march into the great auditorium in Washington, DC for the beginning of the program

want to be a part of. The second Freedom Ride is taking place 40+ years after the first and I want to protest the same kinds of injustice and to support the undocumented workers.”

My own experience as an immigrant began with my parents, a young couple, both Mexican teachers, who arrived in the early 1950s from a small town in Mexico, looking to support a family. Their college degrees not recognized, they soon found themselves faced with the choice of returning to the University to get an “American” degree. My father worked in the factories for 15 years while going to school at night and weekends. At the end of his personal journey of sacrifice, he became a computer technician, at a time when Mexican computer technicians were unheard of, and when one mainframe computer filled a large room. In the years to come, he would always argue with an angry son, the pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps position, certain that a hard work ethic and keeping out of trouble would pay off, and that would help him provide for his family.

My mother raised our family trying to keep us out of harm’s way, in a country that was as foreign to them as were its values and culture. In frenetically trying to assimilate, my family learned English by speaking English everywhere, including at home, so that I learned English first, and it was only when I was in sixth grade that I made the decision to learn Spanish (swear words first, of



Figure 6 Over 100,000 rally for immigrants rights in Queens, NY

course). My mother went on to study at the University of Illinois in Chicago, receiving her BA and MA, and becoming part of a new generation of students that became socially and politically *conscientizada* as a result of student and community struggles against the racist University Administration. She chose to teach in the Mexican community of Pilsen, and did so for over 20 years. She was instrumental in teaching me to love being Mexican and proud of being Latino (see Figure 6).

Freedom Rider quotable

Vanessa Saucedo, Columbia College student

“I felt that I needed to support the immigrants that want amnesty because my parents were immigrants and that is important to me. I think it is also important because this ride takes place in the context of anti-immigrant backlash and it is important to fight that. It was a sudden decision, since I am not an activist, but Dr. José Lopez, my professor at Columbia College, offered me the opportunity and I seized it.”

Anti-Immigration quotable

“From our viewpoint, what they really want is a free ride, free from the laws of the land, free from the obligations to play fairly and immigrate legally into

the United States,” said David Ray, spokesperson for the Federation for America Immigration Reform.

Reflections by Michael Reyes (the younger generation)

“A ghost of a Mexican living in the empire of the United States” is a statement I often feel, being a third generation Chicano Mexicano in the midst of this concrete jungle we call the Latino Metropolis. My childhood has many memories and stories about my tío Nico sneaking across the border and my uncles and aunts working in the fields in order to survive. “It is all we had” my uncle Roy would say.

My *abuelo* worked the sugar beet fields heading north, and then landed a job working on an assembly line until he retired from General Motors. Back then, they would hire you whether you spoke English or not, and it was okay to hire people even if they did not know how to read or write. My *abuela* worked the same assembly line until she retired as well. Both sets of grandparents, three out of four natural born citizens of the United States, one even a veteran of World War II, hardworking, model citizens and yet, they were still regarded as intruders, illegal and a nuisance. It was out of this collective memory that my dedication to fight for the rights of all citizens that face daily oppression on this spinning rock called earth, was born.

My first understanding of the plight of undocumented workers came when I was 14. Becoming more aware of the world around me, I started to organize at my middle school, and I stumbled across a local news article in Saginaw, Michigan that caught my attention. Seven brown faces on the front page of that newspaper stared back at me as if I were part of the photo – seven undocumented farm workers, their picture and an article on the realities they faced as undocumented workers in the US. Since that day, I have worked to understand not only the plight of the undocumented but also how to change it.

Being a Chicano–Mexicano with US citizenship I feel it is my responsibility, not my burden, to be a voice for those whose voices have been stripped by US policy and law, their vocal cords cut out with the precision of a slaughterhouse. That same precision has been used for the people of Vieques and Puerto Rico who cannot vote for their future. I have an understanding of the use of neoliberal instruments such as NAFTA and of unjust foreign policies in Latin America and throughout the world – policies that place products and capital above human dignity and freedom, and in turn cause the migration of people who just want to work and feed their families in the first place. I am forced, by my lived experience, to fight against such atrocities not only on a global scale but also more importantly at the local level.

The Freedom Ride for me was much more than a mobilization to address the issue of the undocumented. It was also a cry of the human spirit. In the chaos of war, destruction and despair, the Freedom Ride was an act of hope. It was an act

of self-determination of a people that are the vagabonds, the wretched of the earth, working the worst jobs and receiving the worst pay. Hated but needed, loved because of their culture and food but despised because of their language, identity and refusal to assimilate.

When we reached DC and New York with all the stops along the way, we did not ask for rights for the undocumented, we demanded them. And when our bus refused to fly the American flag and we felt the hate of the empire, we did not budge.

The only flags we flew were those of our respective nations, not for their governments, but for the people that each represented. It was with that radical spirit that we addressed the issue of undocumented rights on the Freedom Ride.

The demands that are being made by the undocumented themselves and other Latinos, on the other hand, are not to live the American dream. The demand is much more simple: to once again be able to dream.

The Freedom Ride was a blur, a whirlwind of memories, mostly new, some very old, of small towns, big cities and new *compañerolas*, eager to help; of the different faces of hate, many white, but also some looking too much like ours. We joined hundreds of buses from all over the US in Flushing Meadows, New York on Saturday, 4 October 2003 for a rally of over 100,000 people that have come to say, “Sí Se Puede!” All came to honor the words and memory of César, but some also came to pick up the torch, some came to pass it on and most importantly, all come to hold it high to light the way for the millennium ahead.

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