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## The National ACLU Tries to Re-Brand “Sanctuary”—Local Activists Stay the Course

Scott Doyle · Wednesday, March 15th, 2017

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For months, Donald Trump has drawn a clear line in the sand: cities and towns that declare themselves “sanctuary cities” will be punished. It’s classic Trump, and classic demagogue. Retaliate against anyone perceived as disloyal; and pre-emptively threaten to do so in order to quash dissent.

Some California public officials have responded with defiance. A recent profile in the *Sacramento Bee* describes California Senate leader Kevin de León as having “gone all in on pushing back against Trump.” He personally authored and introduced the California Values Act (SB 54), which would severely restrict local law enforcement from coordinating or sharing information with federal immigration authorities. The bill cleared committee and is expected to reach the full Senate floor sometime in the next month. It faces stiff opposition from law enforcement in particular.

Mr. de León also helped push the California Legislature’s move to retain Obama’s former attorney general Eric Holder for additional legal “firepower” in the fight against Trump. “This means we are very, very serious,” he says.

By contrast, leaders in Los Angeles seem hesitant to take up the fight. The Ad Hoc Committee on Immigrant Affairs, chaired by Councilman Gil Cedillo, has met only once. The much-touted LA Justice Fund, set up to ensure representation and due process for undocumented immigrants facing deportation, has yet to go into effect. And there is talk it will be diluted with restrictions and exceptions, in contrast to the model of [universal representation followed by a similar program in New York City](#).

Mayor Eric Garcetti has wobbled and waffled on the issue. He can’t seem to decide whether or not he even likes the term “sanctuary city.” In an interview with NPR, he said he doesn’t “understand” the label, and that “the proof is in the pudding.” In the interview, he twice asserts that Los Angeles is “the strongest defender of immigrants rights” in the country—but then qualifies his statement with “perhaps” or “probably.”

No, the term “sanctuary city” isn’t a magic wand. Declarations of such can be largely symbolic. But they can also have real teeth. Santa Ana, the second biggest city in Orange County, recently

made the leap from the former to the latter. In early December, the City Council passed a non-binding sanctuary resolution. It was a start, but immigrants' rights groups like RAIZ, and allies on the Council like Angelica Amezcua, wanted more.

They got it. On December 20, the Council gave an initial "first reading" approval of the ordinance. And on January 17, a few days before Trump's inauguration, they adopted it by a 6-0 vote. Immigrants' rights advocates point to the Santa Ana Ordinance as a model for preventing collaboration and information-sharing between city agencies and federal immigration enforcement. And just this Monday, 292 legal scholars [signed off on a letter to the White House](#) asserting that Trump's threat to pull funding from sanctuary cities is unconstitutional.



Despite the obvious legal muscle backing up the sanctuary city movement, Mayor Garcetti keeps cautioning us against "getting caught up in terms." Again, language isn't magical. But it does matter.

Something the national ACLU seems to have forgotten.

Flush with a sudden influx of cash and new members (in just one weekend in January, the ACLU received six times what it normally does in a year), the organization is brashly wading into the waters of grassroots organizing—and doing so with tone-deaf arrogance.

Apparently (like Garcetti and others shying away from the term sanctuary cities), they have conceded the war of words to Trump. So, in a move that must surely have originated in the mind of some marketing guru, they are attempting to re-brand sanctuary cities as "Freedom Cities."

The logic behind this linguistic pivot is unclear. Are they trying to tap into the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement, where the term "freedom" played a key role (Freedom Rides, Freedom Schools, Freedom Marches)? Or are they trying to wrap up the sanctuary movement in all-American language (as in Congress's 2003 effort to re-brand French fries as "freedom fries"), thereby making it beyond reproach?

Either way, it's not only laughable, and an unnecessary (and potentially confusing) distraction for grassroots organizers. It's a slap in the face to a decades-long movement in which people have quite literally shed blood, sweat, and tears for a word and an ideal that is deeply resonant, even sacred.



In Los Angeles, as elsewhere across the country, the sanctuary movement grew out of the solidarity movement: a grassroots resistance in the 1970s and 80s to U.S. intervention in Central America—in particular, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. And as conflicts in those countries generated a fresh wave of refugees, that period also saw the creation of mutual aid organizations, like CARECEN, the Central American Resource Center.

Angela Sanbrano has been a leader in both movements. As a law student in Los Angeles in the late 70s, she got involved with CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador). She later went on to become the director of CARECEN, and still serves as chair of its board of directors.

The sanctuary movement began coalescing around 1982, as congregations stepped forward to publically declare their willingness to defend dissidents and refugees fleeing the conflicts in Central America—even if that meant defying U.S. immigration laws (then enforced by INS, the Immigration & Naturalization Service).

Over the years, the movement has evolved and spread beyond the faith community. It started gearing up again well before Trump’s election, as under Obama ICE (Immigration & Customs Enforcement) stopped granting stays of deportation, and seemed to be moving beyond its own stated policies. And in the wake of Trump’s anti-immigrant policies and statements, what some are calling the New Sanctuary Movement appears ready to take center stage once more.

Guillermo Torres is a senior organizer with CLUE (Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice), with a focus on immigration justice issues. He is heading up an initiative called “Sacred Resistance Sanctuary.” The vision here is that any space offering up resistance to persecution, or protection for these being persecuted, is sacred.

Torres recently organized a training for 135 religious leaders looking to publicly declare themselves as either Sanctuary Congregations, or Logistic Support Congregations. Doing so successfully, he says, requires a well-thought out “infrastructure” of training and legal assistance. Groups from Long Beach to Ojai have reached out to him. And over 250 individuals participated in a separate training for a Rapid Response Network, whose mission would include know-your-rights outreach, protective response to ICE raids, and contingency plans to assist families after an arrest

and detention.

Torres feels that the national ACLU's attempt to change the terms of resistance will be a "hard sell" to activists on the ground. Congregations and others offering "sacred space" are not likely to relate to a term with no organic connection to their history or shared struggle. He also worries about the potential confusion caused by the use of a term he and others so closely associate with the Civil Rights Movement. It is important, he says, to be mindful of "stepping into" other people's histories and struggles.



Guillermo Torres was one of a number of faith leaders present at a Monday rally in front of the federal Citizenship & Immigration Services building in downtown Los Angeles. The building houses ICE's "Enforcement & Removal" field office. They were protesting the recent arrest and detention of Rómulo Avelica-Gonzalez, whose case has emerged as an emotional flashpoint in the local resistance to ICE's stepped-up deportation efforts.

Avelica-Gonzalez, a U.S. resident for over 25 years, is a father of four who had just dropped one daughter off at her school in Highland Park, and was getting ready to drop off a second at her school nearby. He was pulled over by ICE agents (wearing vests with "POLICE" in large print) and arrested. His 13-year-old daughter Fatima filmed the arrest from the backseat.

The National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON) has helped spearhead the fight against this and other deportations. Avelica-Gonzalez had an outstanding deportation order, as well as a 10-year-old DUI, and a 20-year-old charge for driving a car with the wrong tags. But under the Obama administration, says NDLON organizer David Abud, enforcement of his deportation order would not have been a high priority. Moreover, brazen tactics like picking up a father dropping his kids off at school were "unheard of" before Trump was elected, but have now become increasingly commonplace—and arguably violate ICE's own guidelines about enforcement actions in so-called "sensitive places."

The notion of sanctuary clearly resonated amongst those at the rally. Ricardo Mireles is the founder and executive director of Academia Avance, the Highland Park charter school attended by two of Rómulo's daughters, and a niece as well. He spoke about the "sanctity" of the act of a parent taking a child to school, and the violation inherent in targeting someone driving from one school to another.

Reverend Francisco Garcia also touched on this theme. "We cannot allow school, or the way to school, or the way from school, to become places of fear," he said. He cited the longstanding tradition among many faiths of welcoming the stranger. "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them," he said, quoting Leviticus. "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt."

Members of the family, accompanied by faith leaders and attorneys working with NDLON, entered the building and presented an ICE official with a letter from Rómulo. “I ask the U.S. authorities to stop separating families, stop making families suffer,” the letter reads in part. “There are profound consequences for children, for families, and entire communities. Let’s stop the raids and detentions. It’s not just my story.”

Rómulo’s current stay of deportation expires on March 23. His allies and attorneys are guardedly optimistic.

Meanwhile, his family is determined to be strong. His two youngest daughters, both serious runners, intend on racing in the youth division of the upcoming LA Marathon. The race is a fitting symbol, says Avance’s Mireles, of a long struggle ahead.

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NDLON encourages calls to local officials, and to the local ICE field office:

- Mayor Eric Garcetti: 213-978-0600
- David Marin, LA Field Office Director, ICE: 213-830-5931
- Norma Bonales Garibay, LA Deputy Field Office Director: 213-830-7912
- Jorge Field, Assistant Field Office Director: 213-830-7908

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ACLU of Southern California representatives were not available for comment. Unofficial word has it that they were not consulted about the Freedom Cities initiative, and have argued for an unapologetic embrace of the term “sanctuary.”

That would certainly be consistent with recent positions taken by the local. In an interview last month with *The Intercept*, the executive director of the ACLU of Southern California, Hector Villagra, was direct in his message to Mayor Garcetti. “I would hope that for a city as terrified as it is now, that he would just say it’s a sanctuary city. That’s the language people understand; that’s what would give them comfort at this moment.”

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