

BUILDING A CAMPAIGN FOR WORKERS' RIGHTS AND REKINDLING A CULTURE

Tonatierra Community Development Institute
Phoenix, AZ

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A Tonatierra member

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SUMMARY: Salvador Reza, a longtime organizer for indigenous Mexican rights, helped lead a successful campaign to **organize taco vendors** in Phoenix. Faced with a local ordinance that would restrict the operation of mobile food stands, effectively banning them, Reza and his colleagues at Tonatierra mobilized the vendors to fight back. Their ultimate success recaptured the spirit of a community traumatized by 500 years of colonization and cultural destruction. Tonatierra's strategies included the following:

- **Involve Vendors:** Once vendors understood that the ordinance targeted them and threatened their livelihoods, they were able to establish a working group, representative of the community. They fashioned a way of regulating vendors that would ensure safe food and safe neighborhoods.
- **Create a Team and a United Voice:** The vendors negotiated among themselves until they could present their recommendations as a team.
- **Rekindle Culture:** According to Reza, "We are fighting back, but not with weapons of guns. Our weapons are culture and understanding and communication."

The following case example describes Tonatierra's successful vendor organizing campaign and some long-term goals:

SUN OF JUSTICE RISING

Tonatierra Community Development Institute

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When a hot dog vendor in the Phoenix community first heard about a citywide campaign to rid Phoenix of the predominantly Mexican "taqueros"—the mobile taco vendors that are sprinkled throughout the city—he didn't think it was his fight. "I sold hot dogs. Hot dogs are from New York. Hot dogs are from the United States. Tacos are from Mexico. I figured they were going after the taqueros." It wasn't until he saw his own stand featured on an anti-taquero poster that he understood. "There was this sign with a picture of *my* hotdog stand and on top it said, 'What else does this hotdog vendor sell at night?' That's when I realized, 'uh oh, it's me, too, so I better join with these guys.'"

What was at stake in the fight, though, was clearly more than just a disagreement over the impact of the dozens of food stands scattered around Phoenix and its neighborhoods. The taqueros quickly learned that they had become an easy target in a campaign of scapegoating that had been touched off by community concerns over everything from gang activity to trash. "What people were saying is that we were the cause of all the problems in Phoenix," says a taquero. "That we were the ones who introduced the drugs here, the prostitution and all the litter here in Phoenix."

Both politicians and neighborhood organizers had fixed their sites on the taqueros for an obvious reason: the taqueros were the most visible manifestation of the steady influx of Mexicans into Phoenix, a city that had been settled by and for decades run by Anglos. And so a city council dominated by whites quickly agreed to support an ordinance that placed such a long and unreasonable list of rules and restrictions on the operation of the mobile stands that it amounted to an outright ban on operations.

But even as word of the ordinance trickled down, getting the taqueros to team up still proved to be a daunting task. "We were a disintegrated group," says the hot dog vender, now an organizer with Tonatierra, the local Mexican rights organization that was spearheading the opposition to the new ordinance. "And at a certain level we were ignorant; we were not politically aware of what was happening in our community and when that's the case, politicians do whatever they want with your community."

In the face of such "disintegration," the question for Tonatierra was clear: How to galvanize a group of fiercely independent operators—some of whom were actually, initially *suspicious* of Tonatierra's motives—into an effective and lasting local political movement to serve as the focal point for a stronger Mexican voice in local community and government affairs, and to do that, when possible, by convincing potential opponents.

"I think they were stunned"

But the initial issue was the new ordinance and how to stop it. Tonatierra settled on a two-tiered action plan: first, appeal the decision to create the ordinance and use a highly visible show of

public opposition to the ordinance to stall its implementation. Second, try to work with—and not fight head on—those neighborhoods and neighborhood leaders who seemed most opposed to the taqueros.

The first order of business, says a member of Tonatierra, was just to try to get the word out to all taqueros and make them all understand what was really at stake: that it was everyone's fight. "It took us two nights—about 16 hours—to find all the vendors," he says. "Flower vendors, hot dog vendors, taco vendors, any vendor at all because all of them were going to be affected. At first, they thought we were a bunch of crazy people. But I just told them what was going on and to read the papers and to come to our regular Tuesday night meetings."

The grassroots campaign had the desired effect. As word got out, and as more taqueros tuned in, it became clear that they indeed were at risk of losing their businesses. By the time of a final public hearing on the ordinance before the city's Board of Adjustments, a small army of opponents had been galvanized and was marching on city hall. Hundreds showed up in support of the taqueros at the meeting. "I think the board was kind of stunned," says an Anglo neighborhood organizer, who initially supported the new ordinance, but who soon became a pivotal player in fashioning an alternative plan that would allow more regulated taqueros to continue operating. "The taqueros were all at the meeting, but so were their grandmothers and kids, nephews and nieces. And I think the board quickly realized that they had a huge political hot potato on their hands that they did not want to touch at all. And it was disconcerting to the neighborhood organizers, because they had never experienced anything like that show of unity from the Mexican community."

The Board of Adjustments agreed to hold off on the ordinance change and allow Tonatierra and the taqueros the opportunity to work out some compromise with opponents. Doing that would involve engaging representatives of the 13 "villages" into which Phoenix is divided, each with its own planning committee, and each already seemingly set in their opposition to the taqueros. "I think the expectation—and the hope—was that we would fail," says a Tonatierra organizer.

Not an easy process, but process was key

Tonatierra and the neighborhood associations came up with a 10-member working group, five people from each camp, to see if some compromise could be fashioned on the issue of regulating the taqueros in a way that ensured safe food and safe neighborhoods, but that also would allow the vendors to pursue what for many was a very good living. The strategy from the Tonatierra's side was the taqueros themselves to be as involved as possible in resolving the issue, says Salvador Reza, Tonatierra Coordinator and long-time local organizer for indigenous Mexican rights. Not only were they closest to the issues, but Reza and other organizers with Tonatierra saw it as a way to recruit new leadership into Tonatierra. "They are the future," says a Tonatierra board member, of new people joining the organization. "They bring new ideas. They leaven the bread and that makes the bread rise."

The meetings were tough, agree individuals from both camps holding their ground. Discussions frequently went in circles, says the neighborhood organizer, with the same issues and stumbling blocks coming up over and over. "I don't like going around in the same circles all the time," she says, "but in this instance, it really turned out that the process was probably the most important part of it. The fact that we stuck together and worked things out."

In fact, negotiations had been so tough and so circular that by the time a compromise had been fashioned, three of the five neighborhood representatives had dropped out of negotiations. But those two had actually won over the taqueros. "I think finally they understood that we were sincere, that we weren't trying to put anyone out of business," says the neighborhood organizer.

"In the end we were actually a team," says Salvador Reza. "When we finally turned our alternative plan to regulate taqueros over to the city, there was no disagreement. It's not that we agreed 100 percent all the time, but we suppressed those [disagreements] for the sake of unity. And so when we went back to fight the city and some neighborhoods that fought us to the end, we were unified, and that made it very difficult for the city to oppose us."

In victory, recapturing spirit

When the alternative plan passed--a plan that licensed taqueros in a reasonable and sensible way, allowing them to continue to pursue their work and support their families—there was jubilation among the large crowd of Mexicans who attended the meeting. But the win meant much more than a discreet victory for the community, says a member of Tonatierra who worked closely with Reza on the taquero issue. "I saw it in the eyes of the children that night. The kids were just flying, off the ground, hands in the air saying, 'We won! We won! Ganamos! Ganamos!' They saw something happen that had never happened in their own personal or family histories. They had heard of Cinco de Mayo. They had heard of Dieciseis de Septiembre. But they had never actually experienced victory."

And it was having children see their culture fight back and win, says the Tonatierra member, which was the real victory that night. "What has happened to native Mexicans, to Indians, has been so traumatic, so damaging to our psyche and our culture and our families and our understanding of ourselves."

Indeed, organizers in Tonatierra saw the victory that night as not only rooted in a clear effort to recapture their culture, but as part of an ancient and continuing pattern in the history of indigenous Mexicans. "We are still in the midst of 500 years of colonization of the continent," says Reza. To fight back, he says, regaining a sense of culture, is absolutely critical. "The problem is—we've misplaced our identity. And the cultural is key because it is the source of our spirit. The weakness of most organizations is they are missing that spirit." Adds Reza, "We are fighting back, but not with weapons of guns. Our weapons are culture and understanding and communication."

Battles to come

It is only in capturing and using that rekindling of culture, say organizers like Reza, that the power illustrated in the taquero fight can be directed at new battlefronts. "Tonatierra is just an expression of community," says Reza. "We are the seed that started many thousands of years ago. Information, knowledge, wisdom, they are the trajectory in pursuit of understanding and that understanding is rooted in our culture."

How hardy a plant grows from that seed will continue to be tested, however. With the taquero fight behind them, Tonatierra is now tackling the issue of "jornaleros," day laborers who

congregate in parking lots and street corners, putting themselves up as temporary labor. In a battle with familiar overtones, neighborhood groups and the city are once again trying to find ways to end the practice, and Tonatierra is once again testing the proposition that through cultural identity, understanding and communication, there is strength and potential victory.

So far, a day labor center has been opened as a pilot program, the city is treating it merely as a nuisance to deal with and some businesses, like Wal Mart, have learned to tolerate the workers on their property, a logical gathering point for day laborers. "I think the whole struggle is just a continuation," says Reza, "it's a continuation of the Indian Wars. It is racial. It is political. It is economics."

It is, of course, the political side that also now preoccupies Tonatierra. Organizers well understand that to have real impact on city government, they need to mobilize voters, which is part of an ongoing effort. "For example, when you teach an English class, you don't just teach people to say, 'Good morning. How are you,'" says Reza. "You teach them about community. How to fight for your rights. How to be active and involved."

And if the immediate past is any predictor, then the tide in that fight may be turning, ever so slowly. "I think something is going to come of our victory with the taqueros," says a member of Tonatierra. "It was a point of reference for our young people that tells them, 'Even though there was once a city regulation, a city ordinance that said it is illegal for us to work inside the city limits, we won.' Those children that were among the thousand people who were at the night of victory of the taqueros, that was the point of the arrow, and I don't think we have yet to see the full impact of that victory. It is still to come."

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