



Organizing Case Study:

The Buffalo 25 and the “Journey to Dignity” (2016)

This case study presents a community response to several large workplace raids in Buffalo NY in 2015. The case study highlights key phases of the campaign and how local organizations both met immediate needs and built structures to support leadership development of immigrant workers and their families. As we enter a new era of peril from the new administration, we believe this case study offers a good model for fights ahead. This case study is written by Maria Fernanda Cabello, who was an organizer with Movimiento Cosecha at the time and is now the training director with Build the Base at Workplace Justice Lab at Rutgers University. A Build the Base training that shares key organizing strategies in responding to raids is also available from WJL.

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For more background on the issues see this [NYT article](#) and/or this [CUNY research report](#).

I. Background and Context

- **Immigration Enforcement Climate**

Under President Barack Obama, deportations reached historic highs, with more than 2.5 million people removed between 2009 and 2016. While the Obama administration introduced initiatives such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), critics labeled him the “deporter-in-chief” due to an aggressive deportation policy.

- **Local Context in Buffalo, NY:**

In October 2016, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) conducted raids on several Mexican restaurants and private residences in and around Buffalo, alarming immigrant communities. These raids targeted undocumented workers, contributing to heightened fear among immigrant families.

II. The Triggering Event

- **The ICE Raids (October 18, 2016):**

- ICE raided four Mexican restaurants—Don Tequila, Agave, El Agave, and La Divina Mexican Store—owned by Sergio Ramses Mucino. Officers searched homes, confiscated life savings, and arrested multiple workers.
- Twenty-five individuals—later known as the “Buffalo 25”—were arrested. Some remained in detention; others were released under strict conditions, such as wearing GPS ankle monitors.

- **Impact on Families:**

- Parents were separated from their children, many of whom are U.S. citizens.
- Homes were left in disarray, with personal documents (including children’s birth certificates) and life savings seized.
- In many cases, mothers were released after a short time—often a day—while fathers were held significantly longer, and some were deported.

III. Emergency Response vs. Campaign Work

In the immediate aftermath of workplace raids, **the priority is not always a full-fledged campaign but rather an emergency response** to locate and support detainees and their families:

1. **Locating Those Detained:**

- Rapidly identify who was arrested, where they were taken, and the status of their loved ones (particularly children).
 - Determine who can be released quickly (often mothers) and who might remain detained.
2. **Urgent Response Near the Workplace:**
- Families and community members frequently gather at or near the raided workplaces.
 - Organizers and volunteers provide real-time assistance: legal referrals, childcare support, and emotional care.
3. **Transition to Mutual Aid and Services:**
- Although emergency response can evolve into a broader campaign, it often defaults to mutual aid.
 - Local organizations (faith groups, nonprofits, etc.) end up taking on significant service provision, such as legal assistance, fundraising for bail, and direct material support.

Key Tension: Emergency relief can overshadow long-term organizing goals if not intentionally managed. Many local groups become “stuck” with ongoing mutual aid, with little capacity left for systemic advocacy or workplace organizing.

IV. The Organizing Response

Formation of the Buffalo 25

After the raids, **organizers from Movimiento Cosecha** traveled to upstate New York to hold community meetings with affected families. Through these gatherings, families and organizers identified urgent needs—release from detention, reunification of families, and recovery of seized assets—and coalesced under a shared identity: the **Buffalo 25**.

- **Public Identity and Demands:**
 - Movimiento Cosecha helped shape a public-facing identity for these families, so their experiences would not be isolated incidents but part of a larger call for immigrant rights.
 - By quickly framing the crisis as a campaign, they elevated specific demands such as **prosecutorial discretion** and the end of ICE raids.
- **“Journey to Dignity” March:**
 - To draw attention to the plight of detained workers and separated families, members of the Buffalo 25 launched a multi-day march from upstate New York into Pennsylvania and onward toward Ohio.
 - Some participants—wearing ICE-issued ankle monitors—served as a visible reminder of the ongoing threat of detention and deportation.

- **Allies and Supporters:**

- **Movimiento Cosecha:** Organizers with experience in deportation defense and in forming worker-led committees helped create and shape the campaign. They supported the public narrative and media strategy, and connected impacted families to legal and political resources.
- **Local Faith Communities:** These congregations rallied the broader community to support the families. They also provided sanctuary for those too afraid to return to homes that had been raided.
- **Local Immigrant Groups:** Coordinated on-the-ground logistics, offered financial support, and conducted follow-up with families after the campaign. They leveraged their existing networks and memberships to bolster the campaign's reach and efficacy.

V. Goals and Demands

1. **Immediate Halt to Deportations:**

- Press ICE for discretionary releases, especially for parents with U.S.-citizen children.
- Demand an end to sudden workplace raids that destabilize families and communities.

2. **Fair Legal Process and Labor Protections:**

- Ensure those arrested receive transparent hearings and access to legal counsel.
- **Hold employers accountable** for labor violations, in collaboration with the state Department of Labor (DOL).

3. **Recognition of Worker Contributions:**

- Undocumented workers power local economies, and raids often violate labor rights—especially when exploitation or trafficking is involved.

4. **Long-Term Protections:**

- Advocate for comprehensive immigration reform and a pathway to legal status, including T visas and U visas for survivors of human trafficking or other serious crimes.

5. **National-Level Demands:**

- **Stop workplace raids** as a matter of federal policy.
- Press for deeper scrutiny and accountability of employers who commit labor and trafficking violations.

VI. Strategies and Tactics

1. **Emergency to Campaign Transition**

- **Initial Intake and Relationship-Building:** Organizers conducted intake forms to identify possible T or U visa eligibility for survivors of trafficking or other abuses.

- **Rapid Mobilization:** Gathered names, set demands, and launched “Buffalo 25” to reframe the crisis as more than just isolated raids.
- 2. **Community Fundraising and Mutual Aid**
 - Although the focus was on building a campaign, **mutual aid** (fundraising, providing food, housing, and legal aid) was inevitable.
 - This support was often led by local organizations and churches that would remain long after national groups pivoted to other emergencies.
- 3. **Legal Coordination**
 - **Partnership with NIPNLG** (National Immigration Project of the National Lawyers Guild) to secure legal counsel.
 - **Collaboration with NYS DOL:** Identified labor violations, helping some detainees gain release or consideration for immigration relief.
 - **T and U Visas:** Workers who showed signs of labor trafficking—such as confiscated passports, payment in cash-only, work under threat—applied for T or U visas. Minors were identified as potential trafficking survivors.
 - **Gender Disparities:** Mothers were released more quickly (sometimes within a day), whereas fathers were often held longer and faced higher risk of deportation.
- 4. **Direct Action and Media Advocacy**
 - Civil disobedience (e.g., blocking ICE offices) demanded immediate releases and pressured local ICE agents.
 - Public storytelling—focusing on families’ emotional and financial toll—engendered community empathy and media coverage.
- 5. **Workplace/Employer Demands**
 - Even though **this response was not classic “workplace organizing,”** it included labor-related demands on state and federal agencies, such as calling for a deeper investigation of Sergio Mucino’s labor practices.
 - The Buffalo 25 campaign tried to elevate the narrative that these raids were not only immigration issues but also labor rights issues.

VII. Outcomes and Ongoing Challenges

1. **Partial Release and Mixed Results**
 - Some individuals secured T visas or deferred action due to labor trafficking indicators.
 - Others—particularly men—were deported or faced prolonged detention despite legal advocacy.
2. **Long-Term Mutual Aid Burden**
 - As national attention shifted, local organizations continued to handle the aftermath, providing long-term legal, financial, and emotional support to families left behind.

- This underscores the strain on local community groups when emergencies turn into protracted struggles.
- 3. **Limited Community Organizing at the Workplace**
 - While the Buffalo 25 briefly became a highly visible campaign, **systemic workplace organizing** to improve labor conditions was not fully realized.
 - Most efforts remained focused on immediate emergency response and individual case outcomes.
- 4. **Raising National Demands**
 - The Buffalo 25 helped spotlight a **national demand to stop workplace raids** under any administration.
- 5. **Greater Need for Comprehensive Campaign Structures**
 - Local campaigns benefit from having a clear set of **demands, targets, and timelines**—including collaboration with worker centers—so that employees (rather than external organizers) lead in demanding their rights and shaping outcomes.

VIII. Lessons for Organizers

1. **Emergency Response vs. Campaign Work:**
 - Workplace raids spark urgent humanitarian crises. Immediate response is critical, but organizers must be intentional if they want to transition from short-term aid to a long-term campaign.
2. **Legal Coordination is Essential:**
 - **Knowing basic immigration and labor law** (T visas, U visas, prosecutorial discretion, etc.) helps organizers guide families quickly.
 - Partnerships with legal experts—like NIPNLG—ensure that potential trafficking or labor abuses are documented for visa relief.
3. **Balancing Mutual Aid and Movement Building:**
 - Mutual aid is often “inevitable,” but it can absorb limited resources if not paired with broader demands (e.g., pressuring the state DOL, demanding ICE halt raids).
 - Local groups can be overwhelmed by service provision; national networks should offer continued support to avoid leaving communities on their own.
4. **Identify Clear Demands and Targets Early:**
 - Having **specific demands for employers, state agencies (like DOL), and federal agencies (ICE, DHS)** allows for a more strategic campaign.
 - For example, “Stop workplace raids” is a national demand; “Investigate labor violations at [X workplace]” is a state-level demand.
5. **Empower Workers in Their Own Defense:**
 - Whenever possible, involve impacted workers in planning and advocacy.

- A “defense committee” approach can build worker leadership, rather than leaving it to outside organizers or attorneys.
- 6. Sustaining Momentum After the Crisis:**
- High-profile marches and actions (like “Journey to Dignity”) can fade if there is no structure for continued engagement.
 - Long-term organizing strategies—e.g., worker centers, local committees—create a base for future labor and immigrant-rights efforts.

IX. Conclusion

The Buffalo 25’s story shows how a sudden workplace raid can spark both **emergency relief** and a **short-lived but impactful campaign**, highlighting the power of personal storytelling, legal coordination, and public marches. Yet it also illustrates the challenges:

- **Emergency relief** often overshadows sustained organizing.
- **Local groups** bear the brunt of long-term mutual aid and legal support.
- **National campaigns** against workplace raids require deeper, ongoing coordination to address systemic problems.

By rapidly forming the Buffalo 25 identity, partnering with legal experts, and mobilizing allies, Movimiento Cosecha and local leaders turned a chaotic situation into a high-profile protest for dignity. However, for truly transformative change, future efforts must integrate a clear **campaign model**—with defined demands, timelines, and targets—while ensuring that local communities are supported long after the initial crisis subsides.