

BUILDING ALLIANCES: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN RURAL ORGANIZING PROJECT (ROP) AND CAUSA IN OREGON

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OVERVIEW AND HIGHLIGHTS

Overview

This ethnography highlights collaboration between two important progressive state-wide organizations in Oregon. These two organizations—CAUSA (an immigrant rights coalition in Oregon) and the Rural Organizing Project (ROP)--have logged significant successes in stopping national, state, and local efforts to limit the rights of Latino immigrants, gay and lesbian citizens, and those who are working for economic and social justice. Shared underlying social values and political strategies are crucial elements in how and why ROP and CAUSA have been able to learn how to be effective allies for one another. Through the voices of the ROP and CAUSA participants, “Building Alliances” presents the challenges the two organizations face in their collaborations based on the social, cultural, and economic differences of their constituents and the way they frame and conceptualize each other’s struggles. To demonstrate the dynamics of successful collaboration, two specific cases are looked at in depth. The first involved the defeat of a national piece of legislation to introduce a guestworker program know by activists as “The New Bracero program” in 1998 that would have limited the rights of already-present immigrant farmworkers. The second was a state-wide initiative in 2000 to prohibit public school teachers and employees from teaching about, promoting or recognizing homosexuality in public schools. The conclusions analyze the risks and benefits of collaboration, ways to continue to nurture such collaborations, and the ways that such collaborations can develop political power in changing political scenarios both in the state of Oregon and in the U.S. as a whole.

Organization Profiles: ROP and CAUSA

Rural Organizing Project (ROP) is dedicated to serving as a progressive voice in the state of Oregon, both to specifically counter initiatives promulgated by groups such as the Oregon Citizen’s Alliance (which has sponsored anti-gay local and state-wide initiatives and regressive legislation on a range of social issues) and to build capacity among rural citizens to create an alternative vision. ROP is focused on expanding local, regional, and state-wide political spaces to include a progressive viewpoint, and to support local autonomous human dignity groups with the goal of keeping such groups an important part of how democracy is understood in Oregon.

A network of rural, volunteer-based human dignity groups, ROP’s constituency is primarily white, middle-class and working class, with many of its members having received a college education. The membership of ROP is also concentrated on those 35 and older, although there are some younger members and leaders. ROP membership also includes a significant number of “out” gay men and lesbians and those who love them.

CAUSA is a state-wide coalition of immigrant rights and Latino organizations that is dedicated to serving as a political voice for Latino, immigrant, and worker rights. Many of the

issues that CAUSA member groups deal with are survival issues such as access to local services, holding public school systems accountable, and combating anti-immigrant discrimination and racism.

Based in the larger urban areas of Oregon running down the I-5 corridor through the Willamette Valley from Portland to Medford, CAUSA's constituency is largely Latino, encompassing a wide-range of Latino experiences from Latino pioneers who settled in the area several generations ago to recent undocumented immigrants, primarily from Mexico. The organizations in CAUSA include youth and more established Latinos who have made a decision to dedicate themselves to improving the situation of immigrants on a variety of fronts.

Experiences of Understanding among Leaders

One of the key factors in initiating the collaboration between CAUSA and ROP can be traced to the social values, political education, and creative interest in collaboration found among several leaders: Ramón Ramírez, Kelley Weigel (no longer with ROP), and Marcy Westerling. In addition, all three of these leaders and other activists in each organization had a history of engaging in broad strategic thinking about how to combat the entrenchment of the right in the state of Oregon and nationally before they met each other. In interviews with Ramón, Marcy, and Kelley, "experiences of understanding" stood out when they narrated their personal political histories. For each of them, these experiences involved an emotional and/or intellectual leap through which they came to see the world in a new way that permitted them to empathize with, respect, and support the struggle of another group with new conviction.

Mechanisms of Collaboration: Structural/Personal/Cultural

Once ROP and CAUSA began to start working together, their continued collaboration was contingent upon not only interpersonal interactions, but also certain structural connections. The first formal connection between the two organizations occurred in February of 1996 when the Executive Committee of CAUSA '96 wrote to ROP and asked that a representative from ROP be on the Board of Directors of CAUSA '96. Kelley Weigel became this representative and a crucial link between the two organizations.

Another important link that occurred during that same time between CAUSA and ROP was a series of visits CAUSA made to different parts of Oregon in order to network with and educate Latino and non-Latino organizations about anti-immigrant legislation and the Oregon Latino Voter Registration Drive.

The Difficulties of Anglo and Latino Collaboration at the Local Level

While leaders such as Ramón and Marcy shared an underlying political analysis that saw a common enemy working to marginalize immigrants, gays and lesbians, working people and the poor, the way this analysis worked politically and strategically on the ground was not easy for local folks to carry through without extensive preparation. A case study in Forest Grove highlights the multiple levels of difference of language, culture, class, and legal status that have to be considered when working towards collaborative organizing between Anglo and Latino local groups.

In some ways it may be easier to build alliances at the regional level focused on larger political goals such as state-wide referendums, than on extremely local struggles where differences are more apparent. The strength of the collaboration of ROP and CAUSA has been in finding ways to build wide alliances that mobilize what each group does best towards a common enemy.

Leadership and Gender

While Marcy and Ramón share important elements of how they lead and interact with the people they work with, there are also important gendered differences in their approaches. These gendered differences can be traced in part to the type of organizing each cut their teeth in. Marcy began in the battered women's movement, which emphasized process, networking, and very self-consciously confronting racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Ramón Ramirez became politically active in East Los Angeles as a junior high school student who participated as an ally to walk-outs of Latino high school students protesting the inferior conditions of the schools. He later worked to support boycotts called by the UFW, and in 1971 brought César Chávez to his high school. From there he became involved in the farmworker movement and co-founded Pineros y Campesinos del Noroeste (Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United/PCUN).

Collaborations that Work

By looking at how ROP was a good ally in fighting guestworker legislation and how CAUSA helped to defeat a major anti-gay initiative, readers get an inside look at how constituents and leaders in each organization educated and supported their members in political arenas they are not always comfortable in. The case studies highlight how participants can successfully grow into an issue that is not a part of their life experience and understanding.

The success and impact of ROP's contribution in 1997 and 1998 to a campaign against the "New Bracero" program was significant in building further trust and confidence between the two organizations. Marcy commented on this:

...I think the whole guestworker stuff really helped us to define our relationship, in terms of people having a hard time understanding where ROP can be useful. We kept trying to say, "We are useful in our own communities." Ramón could hear that, but most people can't. Their response is, "I don't even know where your community is". But he said, "Okay, we need this many people to show up at this town hall in Burns."

ROP activists from local human dignity groups in small towns such as Burns were successful in pressuring Oregon's senator Ron Wyden in ways that are believed to have contributed to the defeat of the 1998 agricultural guest worker bill sponsored by Oregon senators Smith and Wyden

Just as the Burns, Oregon human dignity committee of ROP was able to use their training about farmworker issues to respond effectively on the spur of the moment, youth from LUS (Latinos Unidos Siempre) were able to spontaneously deploy their knowledge about how Measure 9 furthered discrimination and bigotry on a Latino cable television show in 2000. Training from ROP helped them to be prepared. Ramón Ramírez recalled this event:

So they [LUS members] get to Portland to one of the [cable TV] programs, and they're put on the same program as this evangelical Latino preacher from L.A. who is promoting Measure 9—telling people to vote yes. We [CAUSA coalition members] had attended training about a week or two earlier that ROP had put together with a group they were working with in Salem called the Committee Against Hate, who we still work with. They are a part of the ROP network. They did a training, and the leadership of LUS went to the training about Measure 9. So they're prepared. They get into it with this minister, saying that's not true.... They throw down the line. Then the CAUSA board meets, and we [ROP and CAUSA] decide we're going to work together on this.

Common elements that could be replicated by other groups as a model for successful collaborations can be taken from the two case studies discussed above. These include:

1. Leaders educated and committed to the issue at hand;
2. Mutual trainings and workshops on the campaign issue;
3. Constant contact with constituents and continual feeding of talking points and counter-arguments to allow people to respond spontaneously;
4. Examination of organizational culture and inter-personal relationships in terms of the issues at hand (racism and homophobia here)
5. Structural means of planning and maintaining ongoing contact between the two organizations (sitting on each other's boards, attending mutual strategy meetings).
6. Trust in the ability of the leaders and participants in the collaborating organization to follow the lead of the initiating organization and then do to a good job in representing the issue

Overview of Conclusions

PCUN and ROP have clearly been able to establish a strong record of collaboration and have made significant strides both internally and in relation to one another in developing the capacity to be effective allies. Some of the elements of this successful collaboration can be replicated in other organizations and some are intrinsic to the unique nature of ROP and CAUSA and to the shared perspectives of their leaders. A key element in the ability of the two organizations to work together is the shared underlying social values of social justice, participatory democracy, and to fighting discrimination of all kinds. These values are strongly shared by leaders Marcy Westerling and Ramón Ramírez. Ramón has given gay and lesbian activists and their allies a new experience in dealing with Latino males who are often suspected of being homophobic. By building solid and long-lasting relationships with queers and their allies, Ramón has demonstrated his commitment to fighting homophobia externally as well as internally. Marcy has consistently taken immigrants rights issues to many communities where there is little or no awareness of the existence of local Latino immigrant populations and their rights. By questioning divisions between Anglos and immigrant Latinos in small town Oregon, Marcy has built credibility with CAUSA and also raised awareness in ROP at many levels. Both Marcy and Ramón are effective in harnessing new individuals and groups to work with them and in listening and respecting other established groups in an effort to find common ground to work from.

ROP and CAUSA have been candid about what the differences are between the two organizations and the blind spots of each. Each organization has had opportunities in which they called the other on issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. Part of this awareness-building has been an ongoing process of education and re-education of internal constituents of each organization and cross-education of those in the other organization. Ongoing education within CAUSA about homophobia and sexism has been important, as has ongoing education within ROP on racism and its anti-immigrant forms. These educational and organizational culture-building efforts have been stimulated both by the commitments of the leaders of ROP and CAUSA to eliminating discrimination as well as by the political context driving the work of each organization and their collaboration. As long as there are anti-immigrant and anti-gay legislative proposals in Oregon (which looks likely into the future) then each organization will continue to have to educate internally and externally about these issues. But what are the costs of such work? How is it sustained into the future? And how can the collaboration of ROP and CAUSA be sustained in the changing political and demographic context of the state of Oregon? The conclusion tries to begin to answer these questions.