

Expanding the Movement, Beyond the Moment

How We Defend Our Immigrant Neighbors and Transform Democracy

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THE INLAND COALITION FOR IMMIGRANT JUSTICE (ICIJ) is composed of over 35 organizations that serve immigrant communities in the Inland Empire of Southern California. The Inland Empire region includes the counties of Riverside and San Bernardino. Geographically, the region is three times the size of New Jersey, and its population is greater than those of about half of U.S. states. It is a challenging region for community organizing, due to both its size and the complexity of its demographic and political makeup.²

ICIJ's work in the Inland Empire includes policy advocacy, community organizing and education, narrative change, capacity building, and rapid response to ICE and Border Patrol operations. The coalition is leading successful campaigns to adopt protections for immigrants at city and county levels, while also co-leading statewide policy efforts to constrain the Trump detention and deportation regime, such as through laws to protect street workers and ban federal agents from wearing face coverings/masks. ICIJ also brings the voices and stories of directly impacted families to national and international media, drawing public attention to the harm that the Trump administration is causing in the Inland Empire and across California.

This conversation with Javier was in dialogue with Josh Clark, OBI's Senior Social Scientist.

JOSH CLARK (JC): Javier, you've been working in the area of immigrant rights organizing and advocacy for a while now. You've led the Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice (ICIJ) for more than a decade. Before that, you were a community organizer, and before that a youth organizer with immigrant youth. So you've seen a lot, going back to the very beginning of the Obama administration. Throughout that time, and for years before, our federal government has perpetually held immigrant communities in states of vulnerability – with unpredictable changes in administrative policy, status eligibilities, and approaches to detention and deportation. At the risk of asking what might sound like a silly question, what are the biggest things ICIJ is encountering in this second Trump administration that surprised you, or that made you say, "Wow, this is something really different we're dealing with"?

JAVIER HERNANDEZ: Being in this movement and this work for many years now, back to 2008 or 2009, what's surprising me the most are a couple of things. Number one is this administration having a secret police force, with ICE, Border Patrol, FBI, HSI, DHS all basically going around our communities and acting with impunity. That is something that is really scary that

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² The region continues to evolve, but a recent multi-method study of the Inland Empire can be found in, Joshua Clark and Olivia Araiza, "Margins in Movement: Toward Belonging in the Inland Empire of Southern California," Othering and Belonging Institute, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 2021, <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/margins-in-movement>.

I sit with many days and many nights. How is it possible that a federal government can come into our communities, attack our communities, bring violence into our communities, murder people in our communities, and basically get away with it? There are no consequences; there are no real investigations.

This is setting a terrible precedent for our democracy – our democracy in general. When we allow this type of violence to go unchecked, without any accountability, what we're saying is that it is acceptable. We're saying it is acceptable if it is directed at some marginalized group or at "other" communities. I reflect on that violence that the government is bringing, and how there's no accountability, and that many people actually even justify this type of violence in our communities.

Another thing is how this [Trump] administration is able to interpret immigration law any way that they want. They just say, "This is what this means now."

Think about the fact that the Supreme Court heard arguments about the power of the president to take away birthright citizenship. So what this administration is doing is just testing the barriers and boundaries of what they can get away with – testing how much they can do. Again, this is not necessarily about immigrants. It's about a power grab. It's about how much power this administration can amass, and how they can use it for their own advantage. It sets a very scary precedent, and whether you're conservative, liberal, progressive, or an independent, we should all be really worried about the power grab from this administration. If any president can come in and interpret their power any way they want, interpret the Constitution any way they want – that really, again, keeps me up at night. And it keeps me in the fight during the day. Because if our systems of accountability are failing, and Congress and the courts are



Mass Demonstration Against Mass Deportation rally in Ontario on March 1, 2025. Community members gathered to stand and fight for equity, inclusion, and human dignity.

not doing their job, well, what's left is community organizing. What's left is community members doing their job and protecting one another and holding this administration accountable.

JC: That connects to another question I was hoping to ask. Thinking about these attacks on communities, and whether abuses will go unchecked, and the question you posed of, "Will people concede that it's acceptable to target certain communities if this violence is, quote unquote, 'only against them' or against 'those communities'?" How well do you feel communities and organizations in the Inland Empire are positioned to say "no" and to push back – to check that power?

JAVIER HERNANDEZ: I think we see it every day. In terms of our organizations and the work that we've done, I want to start by going back to January 2025. This is even before Trump is sworn into office. We saw Border Patrol already basically acting rogue in operations in the Central Valley here in California.³ What we in the Inland Empire did immediately was put out our hotline, building it out basically overnight. Well, a hotline is something that we started doing around 2010, and during the pandemic, it became more of a resource hotline. But in early January 2025, we knew what was coming our way after seeing Border Patrol active in the Central Valley. So we transitioned our COVID resource hotline into a rapid response hotline for ICE and Border Patrol operations. And overnight, basically, we were operating an almost 24-hour hotline that was serving not just the Inland Empire, but also the rest of California.

So, one thing that's important is being able to quickly pivot in the moments that we need to pivot. For us, it wasn't a question of, "Folks are starting to worry – what do we do?" It was just, "Okay, it's time for us to step it up again. We'll bring back our hotline and get all the information out." We quickly reached out to

our [hotline] volunteers and brought them back on board to respond to the situations we were seeing.

Next, we know that where we have to build is locally. Congress and the [Supreme] Court seem to be siding with the administration. Are we left to fight them all ourselves, or can we build power and build protections at the local level? So this was another pivot. We pivoted to say that we're going to ensure that at the local level, our cities and our counties are being responsible and responsive to the needs of our communities in this time. As a regional coalition in the Inland Empire, we can use our voice so that cities and counties are taking action to protect us.

Here in the Inland Empire, the city of Jurupa Valley was actually the first in California to pass a resolution that banned federal agents from using city-owned property.⁴ That is a big deal! It's something that we learned from Chicago when they passed something similar. We brought it here and the city of Jurupa Valley was the first to take it up. Getting those local wins, other communities in California and throughout the country can do something similar.

Third on "how well are we positioned": How do we reach people? There is a level of organization that we were able to learn during Trump 1.0. Obviously the pandemic was something that helped many organizations build our infrastructure and how we reach our community members and do our work. Because a lot of the work shifted from in-person to organizing digital advocacy. Being able to reach folks digitally is a tool we practiced then. Now we are in a position to organize folks digitally. And it's important, because in-person participation has been lower. And that is understandable. We know folks are scared to go out in their communities. But while directly impacted people are more scared about coming out and joining the protests, there are also allies, right? And

3 This refers to operations led by the since-ousted Border Patrol "commander-at-large," Gregory Bovino, who, according to the ACLU, field tested tactics in Kern County, California in January 2025 that were later used in federal "surges" in Chicago and Minnesota. Orlando Mayorquín and Jesus Jiménez, "Before Urban Raids, Border Patrol Tested Tactics in California Farm Country," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/19/us/border-patrol-tactics-rural-california.html>.

4 Alicia Ramirez, "Jurupa Valley Approves Resolution Restricting Use Of City Property For Immigration Enforcement Actions," *The Riverside Record*, January 26, 2026, <https://riversiderecord.org/jurupa-valley-approves-resolution-restricting-use-of-city-property-for-immigration-enforcement-actions>.

we're reaching out to those that are willing to stand in this moment, willing to come out. What we've seen is a big involvement from folks that are not directly impacted, but care about this issue.

JC: Yeah, I really wanted to hear about your experience with this grouping of people. You mentioned them as allies or people who are not directly impacted. There's a lot of evidence that big parts of the public are disgusted with current detention and deportation practices. We've seen it in polls for a while.⁵ But it isn't just people shifting from "approve" to "disapprove." There are also people who always passively disapproved of Trump's approach to immigration, but who are now taking the next step – they're getting active. Is ICIJ seeing a lot of people joining, for example, your community-observer trainings, who are just getting active for the first time?

JAVIER HERNANDEZ: It's been very important for us to ensure that we are reaching those folks that are willing to take up the fight right now in person, yes. These are people who will use the privilege that they have to protect our communities, and we also make sure that they remain safe. At this point, if we think about legal observers going out to do rapid response to ICE operations, they are literally putting their lives on the line. That is a reality. We have seen how folks are being hurt throughout the country. We have seen how folks have been killed when they were doing these types of responses to ICE and Border Patrol operations. And for us, just as we are very thankful when volunteers take action and come out and fight for our communities, we also take a responsibility to ensure that they understand the risk. ICIJ makes sure that they have the tools necessary to protect themselves, and to understand what to do in cases where violence is escalating. We train in how to deescalate when those moments come up.

JC: How would you describe the profile of the new folks joining this work? Who are they, and what's bringing them to ICIJ?

JAVIER HERNANDEZ: Well, number one, they have human dignity and they believe in human dignity. But also they are people who know: "These are my friends. These are my neighbors. These are people that I care about that are being targeted by this administration." I mean, it's people from all walks of life coming together and wanting to organize, wanting to defend immigrant rights.

But it's important to say, the message we have for them is: We're not just defending and protecting immigrant rights. The fight for immigrants is the fight for democracy itself right now. Again, if we are able to allow a federal government to get away with the violence they are inflicting in our communities, the violence they're bringing to our schools, to hospitals, to clinics, then we are setting a bad precedent.

So many folks that we are starting to see in this fight are, number one, they are U.S. citizens. They understand what's at stake, because even though they're not undocumented, even though they're not immigrants, they understand that this is a fight for democracy itself. So we have been seeing a big increase in folks that are organizing themselves, and that we're training. A lot of them are monolingual English speakers, and so maybe we work with them and team them up with someone that's bilingual, for example. We have many folks that are first-time activists. Some of these are older folks that have never really been involved, or they have been involved, but they haven't necessarily been active for a while. Now they're retired, and they are active again. They're coming together and maybe some are learning how to use technological tools we use in organizing: how to use Zoom, how to email a video, how to text pictures, right? We use these systems for our rapid response, and there can be a learning curve on both the "how" of rapid response, and also the technology. But the commitment from these folks has been just amazing.

5 The decline in support dates back to media coverage of the illegal rendition to El Salvador of Maryland resident Kilmar Abrego García. But multiple violent incidents by immigration enforcement officers in Minnesota further eroded support. See, e.g., Steve Peoples and Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, "What independents think of Trump's recent immigration actions, according to a new AP-NORC poll," *The Associated Press*, February 12, 2026, <https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2026/what-independents-think-of-trumps-recent-immigration-actions-according-to-a-new-ap-norc-poll>.

I just want to give an example of a group out in the Yucca Valley. They're close to Joshua Tree National Park. So they're out there in the middle of the desert, right? A lot of them are retired, and they want to live in peace in the desert, but they also were like, "Hey, we want to be ready in case something happens in our communities." We train them, we work with them, we have bi-weekly or monthly meetings with our coalition leaders, and just check in to see how things are going. Then, out of nowhere, Border Patrol decides that they are going to Yucca Valley, and making arrests over there. The group that was there – their name is the Karens for Justice – they took action. They were out recording, they were out there fighting what was going on, and they were in communication with ICIJ.

Again, it's very interesting to see folks coming together in this moment to be prepared. We were like, "Okay, let's prepare them," but did we expect anything to happen in Yucca Valley? 100% no. But obviously we're not going to say "no" – we're going to make sure that folks are ready to go. And it was a big learning experience

for us that we were like, "Wow, ICE and Border Patrol really are going everywhere." Like, they really are not going to leave any place alone, and we want to make sure that everyone is prepared. We're very thankful for the Karens for Justice that took action and reached out and are still very active.

We also had local leaders in the mountains of the Inland Empire that we trained in case of any ICE operations. Just this week was their first time that they saw operations up in the mountains, in the Big Bear area [of San Bernardino County]. So we are training folks everywhere that they're reaching out to us. Having people there on the ground is important, and again, these folks are retired, but they want to do something, want to take action. They're saying, "Hey, we're in the mountains, but if something ever comes our way, we want to be ready." So we took the steps to train them.

It's intentional to train many U.S. citizens, because we need them to step up in this moment. And a lot of U.S. citizens are doing the work. What has been beautiful is



Boycott Home Depot rally organized by ICIJ and community members impacted by the recent ICE raids.

seeing the intergenerational organizing that is happening, and how we're able to work with each other. You have young folks in their teens out there documenting, and you have elders that are retired, but also out there recording and making noise about what's going on, organizing their communities and talking to their neighbors. It's just been beautiful to see the folks that have stepped up. But something we want and are really intentional in thinking about is how to make sure that these folks continue to organize and continue in this movement beyond this moment. How do we make sure they continue in this fight?

JC: Yeah, definitely. It seems like an enormous opportunity, like you're saying. You have intergenerational organizing that's happening, and relationship building. You talked about monolingual English speakers being paired with bilingual folks who probably have a lot more experience in this work. You talked about people across diverse geographies. It just seems like a moment when immigrant rights work, or movement work could just expand really rapidly. But that will only happen if organizers keep people plugged in. How are you thinking about doing that? Some of these new people – whether it's organized people like Karens for Justice, or whether it's people in small communities all over – how are you thinking about keeping them plugged in and hopefully getting a longer-term commitment, like you said, that outlasts this administration?

JAVIER HERNANDEZ: What we see during this administration, it's the worst of the worst. However, immigrant detention still exists under other administrations. Family separation still happens under other administrations. Deportation of immigrants also happens with other administrations. So this fight doesn't end with this administration going away. If anything, this is just the beginning of how we can really start building toward a system of immigration that works for all of us – one that doesn't exclude people, that welcomes those that need shelter or are seeking asylum, and also that ensures that people have their day in court, with legal representation when they're in front of an immigration judge.

The work right now is fighting back. But at the same time, for us, we need to also build long-term power, and long-term organizers – beyond the next 3 years. One thing that's important from my experience,

coming into this work in late 2008, doing advocacy at state and national levels, is seeing how organizing can lead to changing policy. A lot of what we're seeing right now is because of problems with policy, and how a new administration can come in and interpret policy however they want.

I'll give you an example of policy work we're doing: The campaign to unmask ICE. We pushed a bill last year, ICIJ together with CHIRLA and other statewide organizations, to unmask ICE. There were immigrant rights organizations that didn't want to take this on, because they felt that it wasn't going to be enforceable. We understand that; it's in court now. We will keep pushing for it to be enforced. Then, we hope it sets a precedent for the rest of the country. The risk and the reality was always that it might not be enforceable; we understand we're taking on the federal government. But many in our community wanted to fight for it, and we wanted to listen and to hear from community members that are directly impacted, as well as our rapid responders.

A lot of these folks that are new to this work, or to really getting involved, we had them come and share their experiences of how they have had to deal with masked agents in their communities, how they were treated by masked agents. The work that we do in ICIJ, when we're talking about policy advocacy, has always been led by folks that are directly impacted. And it's guided by the folks that are doing the work on the ground. That includes all our rapid responders. I do rapid response out in the field whenever I can. But I haven't seen the level of violence that some of our volunteer responders have seen. So making sure that we are giving them a space to share their story, to share with legislators what they're seeing, as a constituent, is important. I think it's important that they realize that beyond just volunteering their time, they are also part of this movement. You're not just putting your life at risk, and then we're like, "Thank you for volunteering." No, we're actually bringing you to the table as we're thinking about what our policy priorities should be. We're lifting up your stories, making sure that legislators hear those stories.

Then, beyond that, is making sure that we are also caring for them, right? And we do – we care about

our volunteers. Every day, we're concerned about what could happen to our volunteers based on what we have seen throughout the country. We're concerned about their safety, and so we are constantly in communication with them, reminding them of safety procedures, reminding them to try to go in groups, try to team up, not one person [alone]. When an agent says move, you move, and you record yourself moving. Record your whole interaction. So we are supporting, making sure that folks are safe, and that they have support when they need it.

We also provide spaces to support mental wellbeing of our organizers, with certified therapists, community circles, and opportunities to process together some of the horrible things they have seen. These steps build a movement of care, it builds a movement of justice, it builds a movement that really just encompasses the needs of our communities. We're providing resources like portable chargers, megaphones, gas cards, all these different things that folks need. But we're also really making sure that they know that they are part of a movement beyond just going out and recording and documenting what's happening in their communities. They're part of a movement that is pushing for real change.

So thinking of the long term, how we can just keep people active beyond this moment, part of that is ensuring that they feel that they're part of this work – and they are part of this work – and educating about how these injustices have been happening for many years. The violence that we're seeing from DHS, the family separation, those things will continue under other administrations, and it is our responsibility to change that. This organizing has been happening, and it will continue to happen beyond this administration, and the change that we need is not just in this administration, but has been needed for many years.

JC: That sounds like a great formula. You described that when you're bringing new people in, you're showing them care, you're letting them know they're not just on the fringe – they're a part of this. "You're part of our 'we'," right? Make them know that they're a part of the movement. Have them be involved in some of the decision making, create spaces to share their stories, make their voices heard, be at the table. And then there's the politi-

cal education piece that you described. That seems like a great formula for retaining this newer grouping of people that could really build the movement and sustain it.

Now let's shift a little bit. We've been talking about community members who are newly active and taking a stand for immigrant rights. But there are also those in the Inland Empire – just like in any part of the country – who hold anti-immigrant sentiment. Riverside and San Bernardino counties are actually pretty evenly split politically – "purple," so to speak. And 2024 was Trump's best election in both counties. Does ICIJ strategize much around reaching or communicating with oppositional audiences, even if just to turn down the temperature?

JAVIER HERNANDEZ: As you mentioned, the Inland Empire is a "purple" region, but go back a few years, and we had KKK leaders marching in our streets. In Riverside, Claremont, and Pomona, the KKK or neo-nazi groups held rallies back, like, 2010 or 2009. So it's not too long ago that these groups were very active in our communities. We've had anti-immigrant groups. One of the most famous ones is We the People Rising, based out of the city of Claremont. They are the ones that for many years have pushed anti-immigrant narratives throughout the state. We've also seen the Proud Boys being active in the Inland Empire. So when we think about opposition in the Inland Empire, it's not just people coming out and being like, "We don't like you." It is actively organized, well-funded groups – and hate groups – that are really coming out against the work that we're doing.

Now we haven't seen them a lot in the past few years, but ICIJ has had years of experience dealing with those groups. When they were most active, showing up to counterprotest our events, we at least kept a conversation across our leadership. Like, "Let's make sure that there's no violence. We will keep our people in check if you keep your people in check." That was always important, and it took having people that could actually have a conversation.

Now when we have actions or rallies and people are upset and want to confront people on our side, we try to de-escalate by talking about democracy, freedom of speech, and how we should all be proud that everyone has a right to protest and to disagree. So those are two different strategies that have worked



Over 200 community members gather for the 2024 May Day march outside of the Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art and Culture.

for us. They both require being able to talk and that, even though we disagree, we all have rights and no one wants to see fighting or any sort of altercations.

In terms of how we are also trying to reach people on the other side, we talk about the shootings that have happened here by Border Patrol against community members. The one community member that was shot here in Ontario – thankfully he survived – was a U.S. citizen.⁶ The other shooting that happened in San Bernardino, there were two U.S. citizens in the truck [that was shot three times by Border Patrol agents]. So we remind folks that, again, we’re not just fighting for immigrants. We’re fighting for all of our communities. We’re fighting for democracy, and we shouldn’t allow a federal government to come into our communities to inflict panic, fear, violence. We can’t think that it is okay as long as they’re not targeting “us.”

So it’s really broadening the conversation: that the fight for immigrant rights is the fight for democracy. Some folks are willing to have that conversation. Even if they don’t see themselves in immigrant communities, they may see themselves in Ms. Good and Alex Pretti. They do see themselves in their neighbors that have been attacked here in our communities, and we want to highlight those stories and why it’s important to hold governments accountable. This is about our democracy, it is about our neighbors, it is about our families, it is about us being in danger, simply because we are out in the street and we take our camera out and record something that’s happening. Those messages seem to get to folks on the other side, and get them to agree that some of what we’ve seen is unacceptable. We think that’s a first step, right? The way we change hearts and minds, and continue to organize and mobilize is by really lifting up local

6 The individual in question is named Carlos Jimenez. He was shot in the back of his shoulder by an ICE agent, and has pleaded not guilty to the charge of backing his vehicle in the direction of agents. Rachel Uranga, “Man shot in back by ICE pleads not guilty to assault charge,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-11-25/man-shot-in-back-by-ice-pleads-not-guilt-to-assault-charges>.

stories, and the people and stories that people can see themselves in, where people can understand this is not so far away. This is not a few thousand miles away; it's just three miles away from my house.

JC: One last question, and it's a general one: Any final thoughts you would offer – anything you haven't yet shared – about how you see the organizing field and strategy in the face of what we're living in 2026?

JAVIER HERNANDEZ: Well, I want to be careful about saying that what we are facing is unprecedented, because this type of state violence is something that some communities have faced for many years – for decades. So it isn't new. Still, we need to be clear: What we are seeing is the federal government getting away with violence. So, when we think about organizing, and strategizing, it is not business as usual. That's an important thing to note.

We have to think outside of the box. We have to think outside of what we've done. We have to think outside of just building power on the ground, to making sure that the power that we're building on the ground translates to political power as well. Not just in this moment, but again, beyond this moment. If we want to change the way immigrants are treated in the United States, the way our immigration system works in the United States, the way the federal government can implement policies in the U.S., the way we protect our democracy – again, all of this goes beyond just one administration.

Organizing will need to hold powers accountable. And not just on the conservative side, but also on the progressive side. Why is it that in 2021, right after Trump 1.0, there were no standards set on how DHS could be held accountable? Why was it that we didn't, and that Congress didn't, do enough to protect our democracy? In Trump 1.0, we saw how quickly things can be shifted, and yet nothing was done to protect democracy from an authoritarian government.

We have to organize, to mobilize, and to engage people that we haven't in the past, and think outside of the usual organizing strategies to better hold those in power accountable at every step. I look forward to if there's a shift in Congress, if there's a shift in the administration eventually, that we will continue with this same energy we have now – bringing this same

energy to whoever's in power, and demanding real change for our communities, real protections for our democracy. Because what we're seeing now – this could continue to happen if we don't take a serious look at how we protect our democracy and how we hold everyone in power accountable.