

East Harlem: Fighting for Justice, One Building at a Time

Movement for Justice in El Barrio Combines Local Issues with a Radical Vision

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For nearly three years, they've been fighting gentrification in East Harlem, organizing one building at a time for better housing conditions. Two years ago, they connected their local struggle to struggles worldwide when they joined the Zapatista's Otra Campaña (Other Campaign). Since then, they have continued building a grassroots movement in their own neighborhood while articulating a broader struggle against neoliberalism. They are Movimiento por Justicia del Barrio, or Movement for Justice in El Barrio (MJB).

Viewed by many as one of the few Manhattan neighborhoods that is not yet completely gentrified, East Harlem - or El Barrio - has been the target of landlords, business owners, and corporate conglomerates who are eager to profit. Movement for Justice in El Barrio has been resisting attempts to push people out of their homes.

The group recently held a presentation at the CUNY Graduate Center in Manhattan. The presentation consisted of four segments: The Other Campaign, Mexican Immigrants in The Other Campaign, Movement for Justice in El Barrio in The Other Campaign, and Message from the Zapatistas. Each segment consisted of commentary from MJB members followed by the screening of a short documentary.

Four members from the group conducted the event, each taking a turn speaking on a number of issues. Member Oscar Dominguez began the presentation by providing a background of The Sixth Declaration and The Other Campaign. The Sixth Declaration of the Lacondon Jungle, released by The Zapatistas in June 2005, identifies capitalism and neoliberalism as the root of many problems facing oppressed groups today. Said Dominguez: "The capitalist system forces people to migrate to other countries." Dominguez went on to describe how The Sixth Declaration condemns capitalism for robbing people, destroying cultures, and displacing communities.

Ana Laura Merino then introduced The Other Campaign, a two-tiered campaign that developed from the ideas of The Sixth Declaration. The campaign involves the Zapatistas working in solidarity with other Mexicans to identify the needs of various communities and determine how to move forward. During the first stage of the campaign, Subcomandante Marcos traveled throughout the 32 Mexican states to listen to people's problems and take detailed notes. The second stage is currently being implemented as Zapatista delegates travel throughout the country and listen to how people want to overcome these problems. Dedicated to autonomy and direct democracy, The Other Campaign addresses "the need to change Mexico and create a new one," said Merino.

After describing The Other Campaign in Mexico, the presentation segued to the problems facing Mexican immigrants in the US. The Zapatistas invited Mexicans living in the US to come share their stories at two meetings held in northern Mexico. Due to immigration law, most MJB members were not able to attend, so instead, they made a video message which MJB member Juan Haro presented at one of the meetings.

The video, entitled “Message to the Zapatistas,” featured interviews of Mexican immigrants living in El Barrio. They told stories of being forced to leave Mexico due to extreme poverty and having to leave behind their homes and families to find a better life. They also described the problems they faced in the US, such as racial discrimination, low-paying jobs, and poor housing conditions. Lastly, they gave messages of support to The Other Campaign, expressing their hopes of creating a better Mexico and someday returning to their homes and loved ones. “We believe if Mexico changes we can return to our country of origin,” said Dominguez.

Throughout the presentation, MJB members emphasized the importance of autonomous and inclusive organizing, in which the people make decisions for themselves. They frequently brought up the struggles of women, poor people, people of color, lesbians, gays, and transgendered people, noting that it is the most marginalized people who are most hurt by neoliberalism. Haro discussed the importance of connecting these issues so that marginalized groups can come together under “one broad struggle.”

Georgina Quiroz spoke specifically about the repression of women. Quiroz brought to light the unsettling fact that women and their bodies often become collateral in times of political repression. For example, in the Mexican city of Atenco – which has been a hotbed of state repression and civil unrest – sexual assault against women has been frequent. Quiroz ended her talk by announcing an upcoming international encuentro for women. Hosted by the Zapatista’s, the encuentro, or gathering, is to take place December 27th in Chiapas.

The night ended with Haro sharing a recent victory and next steps. Haro explained how MJB successfully forced millionaire and ruthless gentrifier Steven Kessner to sell the 47 buildings he owned in El Barrio. Shortly after Kessner left town, the buildings were bought up by a multi-national corporation based in London called Dawnay, Day Group. Dawnay, Day has since instigated dirty and illegal tactics to force long-term residents to leave their homes. MJB is planning a trip to London to confront the company at their headquarters.

As Movement for Justice in El Barrio continues to organize, the group is helping people better their housing conditions in El Barrio while waging a broader struggle for liberty, justice, and democracy around the world.

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