

A Convergence of Dreams: The Third Encuentro for Dignity & Against Displacement

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The Third Encuentro for Dignity and Against Displacement

By RJ Maccani

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The invitation reads, "We propose a coming together, a convergence, to which we can all bring: our histories, what makes us difference, and our dreams."

And in February, rebel voices from throughout the world came together in East Harlem, New York at the Third New York City Encuentro for Dignity and Against Displacement. Hosted by Movement for Justice in El Barrio (Movement), more than 200 people and 40 organizations joined the gathering. Organizers in South Africa and San Salvador Atenco, Mexico were even in attendance, participating via free video calls over the Internet.

The atmosphere of the five-hour gathering fluctuated between festive, somber, combative and celebratory. There were many roses, much chanting, tostadas and, yes, as is tradition here, a neoliberal piñata for the kids to break at the end of the night.

Inspired by the Zapatista practice of "encuentro", Movement, an organization of over 600 immigrant and low-income families in East Harlem, sought "...to create an open, safe, and lively space for dialogue, sharing and learning from people who are directly affected by displacement."

Or as Javier Salamanca of Brooklyn, New York's Sunset Park Alliance of Neighbors put it, "We are here to see what is going on in other parts of the city, country and world."

New York City is Not for Sale!

Near the beginning of the gathering, Movement's Oscar Dominguez announced, "In the past two Encuentros we've introduced ourselves and identified our common enemies, in this Encuentro we want to talk about how far we've come."

Movement continues to celebrate the fall of Dawnay, Day Group, a multibillion dollar, London-based corporation that intended to evict tenants from 47 buildings in East Harlem and raise the rent ten times over. After organizing an international campaign against Dawnay, Day, and winning a landmark legal victory against the company, Movement has now been forced to challenge opportunism within their own neighborhood:

"We have been organizing for justice, in our buildings, since before Dawnay, Day became our landlord. In fact, as tenants, we marched, protested and took legal actions against our previous landlord Steve Kessner until he fled East Harlem... With the fall of real estate giant Dawnay, Day group, the opportunistic Mark-Viverito and her lackeys want to claim that they support Dawnay, Day tenants, and that they have all along. We, the tenants of Dawnay, Day buildings, know this is a sham... Movement for Justice in El Barrio will continue the struggle for dignity and against displacement with more strength and energy than ever before. We will not be fooled, we will not be bought and we will not be moved."

According to Movement's community newspaper, councilmember Mark-Viverito has both led and voted for numerous development plans throughout Harlem that will displace thousands of tenants, small businesses and workers in favor of luxury apartments, private university expansion, and multinational corporations.

The problem of opportunistic politicians and their patron groups interfering with authentic community organizations was a common theme throughout the Encuentro. As Nellie Bailey of Harlem Tenants Council noted in her presentation, "Three or four years ago we decided not to accept money from elected officials. Being free of their influence is great. Non-profit

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organizations are increasingly becoming tools of politicians and developers. They are there to blunt the organic militancy of our groups."

Moving the horizon of the Encuentro to the condition of the city as a whole, Bailey remarked, "Mayor Bloomberg is the richest man in New York City and the 17th richest in the world. He wants a whiter, richer NYC and he will use every means possible. On the other hand, the collapse of the real estate industry has given us room to breathe. What opportunities does this provide us?"

Having suffered a loss against Mayor Bloomberg last September in a struggle to stop the rezoning of their neighborhood, Salamanca of the Sunset Park Alliance of Neighbors asked, "How do we regroup and not react to the timetable that city council creates?"

Bailey encouraged those in attendance to not become complacent in the face of seemingly progressive politicians, "The US government is in crisis and we can't look at this problem of displacement in NYC in isolation from everything else. We can't talk about housing without talking about jobs and we can't talk about jobs without a basic understanding of the Military Industrial Complex. We suffer the same fate regardless of who is in government. With Obama, we got our first African American president, but that can't meet our basic needs."

Tom Kappner, a member of the Coalition to Preserve Community and someone who has been fighting the expansion of Columbia University in West Harlem for decades, stood up from the audience to remind everyone, "Every time we engage in struggle with them, we gain power; eventually a trickle becomes a torrent. It pays to remain faithful. If you get strong enough, the politicians come to you."

From South Africa to San Salvador Atenco, Our Fight is Worldwide

The first group to join the Encuentro through a video call did not need to be reminded of the need to build popular power, or the dangers of putting too much hope in politicians.

In a clip from the forthcoming film, "Dear Mandela," Mazwi Nzimande of the South African Shack Dwellers Movement, also known as Abahlali baseMjondolo, illustrated that, "There is a new apartheid system that is operating in South Africa, and that apartheid system is between the rich and the poor."

Legally institutionalized segregation, known as apartheid, divided South African society into three classes of racial stratification: white, colored, and black, each with its own rights and restrictions, until 1990 when the discriminatory laws began to be dismantled. Riding a high tide of struggle and hope, Nelson Mandela became the first black president of the country in 1994 and the African National Congress (ANC) has been in power ever since. In the sixteen years that have followed, the number of South Africans living on less than \$1 a day has doubled.

According to Shamita Naidoo, a member of Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), 2005 was the year that the people in South Africa began successfully uniting to fight back against the neoliberal policies of the ANC government. In September of last year the ANC attacked the Kennedy Road settlement, a hub of AbM organizing, killing three people and displacing over a thousand. Over the two weeks that followed, thirteen Abahlali supporters were arrested.

The attack appears to be in retaliation for AbM's organizing within the "No Land! No House! No Vote!" campaign against party politics in the country as well as their ongoing struggle against the Slums Act, which allowed for the possibility of mass evictions without the possibility of suitable alternative accommodation. A month after the brutal attack, AbM won a victory in South Africa's highest court that declared the Slums Act unconstitutional.

When Movimiento's Juan Haro informed AbM members Mazwi Nzimande, Zodwa Nsiband and Mnikelo Ndabankul that 40 organizations were listening to their presentation, Nzimande replied, "You are contributing something to everyone throughout the African continent."

Reflecting on the ANC's brutal attack against them in September, Ndabankul noted, "A lot of branches are joining AbM. Their goal was to get rid of the organization, but more people have joined and we are more popular."

The AbM members told of their political prisoners' ongoing troubles as well as the government's initiative to clear out the slums in time for the World Cup games coming to Cape Town this June and July. Nsiband requested that Encuentro attendees, "Continue to support, spread news and put pressure on the South African government. Most things happening are not exposed because of the democratic façade."

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Nzimande concluded their intervention by stating, "We cannot do more than to be there for each other. Let us build this global alliance."

Across the ocean from AbM, back in the Americas, the people of San Salvador Atenco, Mexico have also been struggling against a government who has tried to hide its brutality behind the image of an emerging liberal democracy.

As Diana Vega from Movement recounted while introducing them, "Displacement is happening all over. There is a group called the People's Front in Defense of the Land (the Front). In 2002 they successfully defeated the Mexican government's plans to kick them off of their land to build an airport. In 2006 they were attacked by the government and still have twelve political prisoners in jail today."

In a video presentation in advance of their participation in the Encuentro, we watched footage of the Front's groundbreaking victory in 2002, which set a precedent for social struggles throughout the country that the new Federal government could be defeated. We also saw the 2006 invasion of their community by 3,000 municipal, state and federal police, in which two boys were killed and two hundred people were imprisoned, most of whom were subjected to cruel tortures including the rape of 26 women.

Members of the Front were brought in through the video call in time to watch the portion of the presentation featuring footage of Movement's peaceful occupation and shut down of the Mexican consulate in New York City less than a year ago.

Seeing the footage of Movement's solidarity action for the first time, Trinidad Ramirez del Valle, a leader of the Front and wife of one of their twelve political prisoners, declared, "Distance, barriers cannot keep us from fighting back against so much injustice."

Following an update on the Campaign For Freedom and Justice for Atenco, which completed its 12 prisoners/12 States tour involving "over 130 organizations of Mexican civil society in over 100 political actions, marches and meetings" in December and just gained the support of 11 Nobel Prize winners, Ramirez del Valle asked those in attendance to, "Send letters, support our actions and denounce what is happening."

Another member of the Front added, "In addition to our political prisoners and the heavy repression, the government is launching an environmental project in order to take land and continue with the airport project. We continue informing people of the true intentions of the government."

A third member, Marta Pérez, directly addressed the conditions of organizing in the US, "We know you are also rebellious in a country where the power of Empire is very great. We are certain that we are going to win in Mexico, in the United States and the world because of people like you."

Haiti, a Rebel Country

One of the last voices to address the Encuentro was that of Dahoud Andre. A Haitian organizer with Lakou New York, Andre had just returned from his shaken homeland.

Not unlike New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina, where elites demolished public housing, privatized public services and drove the black population of the city down to a fraction of its previous numbers, Haiti has become the site of a man-made disaster in the wake of the earthquake.

As Andre reported, "The US military took over the Haitian airport and would not allow aid to come in. We collaborated with the Movement of Dominican and Haitian Women to bring the aid in through the Dominican Republic and over the border to Haiti."

In words that echoed sentiments heard throughout the Encuentro, he urged participants to, "Support local community groups instead of the larger groups, such as the Red Cross or the Clinton Bush Fund. These are the people responsible for destruction in Atenco, Haiti and Harlem. They will never do the right thing."

Andre pointed out, "Almost two months after the earthquake the tragedy continues even though it's not in the media. The biggest problem is shelter: 1.5 million people have lost their homes and are living in make-shift tents," before reminding the crowd with a fitting close to the Encuentro, "Haiti is a rebel country. In 1804, the enslaved community militarily defeated their oppressors. We've supported liberation movements around the world. The US did not recognize us until 1865 and has never forgiven Haiti for what happened in 1804. We don't expect friendship from our enemies, we expect it from you."

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