



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

## International Change Maker and Community Organiser leaves audience inspired after visit to College of Social Sciences

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Ernesto Cortes Jr, world-leading community change campaigner and Co-Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, was welcomed to the University of Birmingham to deliver a rousing call to action to attendees at the new Alan Walters Building.

The event, organised in partnership between the College of Social Sciences and Citizens UK, discussed politics, democracy and organising – while briefly touching on the cause of the solutions, currently inequality.

The lecture was introduced by Professor Saul Becker, Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Head of the College of Social Sciences, and Neil Jameson, Executive Director of Citizens UK. Professor Becker focused on the need for universities to nurture circumstances so that individuals can learn, think and

imagine, further calling on all educational institutions to use their power to strengthen democracy. Mr Jameson discussed how regional organisations, like Citizens UK, work to empower people to create positive, impactful change.

Starting with the state of modern America's economy, Mr Cortes discussed how creative destruction is producing high levels of impotent rage in the working classes. With the move towards a two factor economy, with dynamic and grotesque halves, deep resentment is emerging. A counter-revolution, away from traditional idea that the winners of the American dream compensate the losers, means that there is deep resentment for those whose future is seriously impacted. Internally, this manifests as drug addiction, abusive relationships and suicide. Externally, they begin to look for a group to blame, picking on minorities like immigrants, Muslims, women or LGBT.

The solution? Mr Cortes proposed teaching people to exercise agency – you cannot organise a community if there is no consideration or trust. Adhering to the Aristotelian concept that to be human is to be political, he advocated sharing wisdom to empower others.

After his lecture, Mr Cortes took questions from the audience. Topics included whether to work with the oppressed or the oppressors, how to know when your enterprise is successful and how to manage the increasing metropolitan/rural divide.



Mr Cortes was followed by a short panel discussion with Professor Kiran Trehan (CoSS), Professor Jenny Phillimore (IRIS), Ian McLaughlin (GBSLEP), Dr Ranjit Sondhi (UoB Executive Board) and Saidul Haque Saeed (Citizens UK). They emphasised the need to engage those in communities isolated from education, empowering individuals to take action on the issues that matter to them and the need to ask difficult questions, critically analysing the answers. Dr Sondhi, finishing the discussion, emphasised that the answers lie not with government, but in civil society with individuals.



With attendees from the public and third sectors, faith groups and education, the event has hopefully sparked inspiration on how to improve community engagement in Birmingham and beyond.

- Learn more about the work of Citizens UK: <http://www.citizensuk.org>.
- Find out more about the College of Social Sciences' work with Citizens UK and how you can get involved here: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/university/colleges/socsci/partnerships/citizens-uk/index.aspx>.

