

High Country News

KNOW THE WEST

The old-school organizers who got it done on Zoom

How the country's oldest organizing group won COVID-19 relief for undocumented immigrants in California.

Nick Bowlin | Aug. 6, 2020 | *From the print edition*



Undocumented residents make up one-tenth of California's workforce. Many work on the pandemic frontlines, like agriculture employees, yet cannot access most forms of COVID-19 financial support.

Brent Stirton/Getty Images

On May 5, the California affiliates of the Industrial Areas Foundation — the nation's largest and oldest community organizing group — gathered for a Zoom call. Artwork and bookshelves were visible behind the faces on the grid-patterned screen, and an unmuted microphone created confusing cross-talk. It was a Zoom call like any other — except this one had 1,200 participants, including 10 bishops and several lawmakers.

The IAF organizes in about 30 cities across the Western U.S. These affiliates — which are comprised of religious congregations, unions, community groups, schools and nonprofits — aim to help working people build political power and social capital. Organizers teach people — many of them Latino, in the California groups — how to demand accountability and responsiveness from the institutions that govern their lives. This Zoom call was about expanding the California Earned Income Tax Credit (Cal-EITC) to include those who file their taxes using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number, or ITIN, rather than a Social Security number — in other words, the undocumented residents who make up about one-10th of California’s workforce. Many of them work on the pandemic’s frontlines in agriculture and in service industries such as restaurants, health- and child-care, yet cannot access most forms of COVID-19 financial support.

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Cristina Garcia of Marin County, for example, lost her housecleaning and child-care income because of the pandemic. She has paid taxes for 18 years and never benefitted from the Cal-EITC. “I don’t understand why they can give us an ITIN number to pay taxes, but in this situation, we don’t get any kind of help,” she said on the call.

“The action is in the reaction, we say in organizing,” said Robert Hoo, lead organizer with One LA, Los Angeles’ IAF affiliate. “If you hold an event and nothing happens after, that was just an activity.”



A screenshot from the California affiliates of the Industrial Areas Foundation Zoom call shows a few of the 1,200 participants that gathered to organize.

Courtesy of IAF

WHEN POLITICS, like most other activities, was forced to migrate online, the IAF didn't seem an obvious winner. For 80 years, the group has embraced one-on-one conversations and "house meetings" to create organized communities whose strong bonds endure beyond a single campaign. These relationships, forged in person, smoothed the transition to digital organizing.

After the virus hit, a flurry of texts, calls and social media outreach followed as California's IAF groups scrambled to get their people on Zoom calls. The news was grim: Budgets were tight and layoffs widespread. Undocumented people, often the hardest-hit population, were excluded from most forms of aid. The Cal-EITC push emerged from these digital house meetings. "It came from the lament of the people," said the Rev. Arturo Corral of Our Lady Queen of Angels / La Placita Catholic Church in Los Angeles, a One LA leader.

In late April, local leaders began gathering Zoom participants from their local networks. Meanwhile, organizers sought out influential lawmakers, focusing on three Budget Committee members: State Assembly members David Chiu and Eloise Gómez Reyes and State Sen. Maria Elena Durazo. All three pledged to work to expand the tax credit.

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The IAF groups were “not at all” confident that the tax credit expansion would end up in the governor’s budget. “Most people told us this was not going to happen,” Hoo said. But after weeks of further organizing, it was included in Gov. Newsom’s June 30 budget. With so much money lost to COVID-19, the budget depends on future tax revenues to prevent major spending cuts, and another federal COVID-19 relief bill, which, as of this writing, was still being hammered out in Congress. Newsom and the Legislature will re-evaluate the budget by Aug. 15. If revenues match the projections, spending cuts will be avoided. But if not, there will be cuts — including, potentially, the Cal-EITC.

California IAF groups are prepared to fight for it, but not in a vacuum. Income loss, housing and schools have dominated recent digital house meetings. Many people will struggle to pay back rent once eviction and rent freezes end, while working families, especially Spanish-speaking ones, often lack support in the transition to distance learning. Organizing around these topics will happen, by necessity, over Zoom, which Meredith Parnell of the Marin Organizing Committee called “accessible” yet “flattening.”

“You’re talking into a void,” Parnell said. “All that stuff that [NEWSLETTER] we rely on in developing our people skills and our judgment — that’s all gone.

“May 5th was really fabulous, but we will see how this works in the long run,” she added. “Maybe we’ll get really good at this.”

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