

## **From Mississippi to Arizona: For Freedom and Human Rights By Linda Burnham**

The room was small, but it was filled with enormous possibility. And everyone in there knew it.

On Saturday, May 29<sup>th</sup>, after a long, hot day of marching, chanting and rallying, a group of activists met in a windowless room at the Phoenix Doubletree Inn. Many had worked non-stop for weeks on end, mobilizing the tens of thousands who poured out of their homes in support of justice for the migratory workers and families whose lives and livelihood are threatened by Arizona immigration policy. Their phone-banking and door-knocking and e-mailing and community meetings had produced sea of people who filled the streets with their bodies and their voices.

Obama, escucha. Estamos en la lucha.

Que queremos? Justicia. Cuando? Ahora.

And now, though their day had started before sunrise, here these activists were, 14 hours later, eager to engage in an historic dialogue with veterans of Mississippi Freedom Summer.

MacArthur Cotton came to Phoenix from Kosciusko, Mississippi, Jesse Harris from Jackson, Mississippi, and Betty Garman Robinson from Baltimore, Maryland. These Freedom Summer vets came to march and rally against Arizona's punitive legislation and to share their stories and their wisdom, gleaned from decades of struggling for justice. Arizona activists from the Puente Movement [www.puenteaz.org](http://www.puenteaz.org) and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network [www.ndlon.org](http://www.ndlon.org) have called for an Arizona Human Rights Summer to intensify non-violent resistance to SB1070, due to go into effect July 29, 2010.

The Doubletree meeting was meant to forge a vital connection between the summer of 1964, a season that changed the course of U.S. democracy, and the summer of 2010, a season that may yet do the same. The times are oh so different. For young activists – the high schoolers who organize their massive walk-outs via text messaging, the college students trying to negotiate a college education without documents – 1964 might just as well be a century or two ago. 21<sup>st</sup> century Arizona is not the Mississippi that clung for dear life to its profound distortions of democracy set in place in the post-Reconstruction period. And yet, the resonances are many.

Gross abuse of power by local law enforcement? Check. Sheriff Joe Arpaio is the modern-day incarnation of the despotic, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century southern sheriff charged with keeping the Negroes in their place, even if that meant encouraging violence and vigilantism. Megalomania plus racism was a lethal combination then; it's just as lethal today.

Unjust, anti-democratic policy enshrined in law? Check.

A white population that is subject to being driven by fear of the brown tide, and that, consequently, has a very hard time getting on the right side of history? Check.

Demagogues bent on mobilizing mistrust of the federal government, gaining power through a states' rights agenda, and building the influence of a right wing populism firmly grounded in race hatred? Hate to say it, but check, check, check.

But there are hopeful resonances as well.

The massing up of the power of poor people who have had enough. Basta ya!

People in motion despite their profound vulnerabilities to the arbitrary exercise of state power.

Committed, tireless organizers, young, old and in between, who have decided to throw down, dig in, hold the line.

The creativity and fearlessness of young leaders coming into their own.

And the Arizona activists link themselves directly to the black freedom struggle and the civil rights movement. Placards for the march, quickly silk-screened by the dozens at Tonatierra community center, carried a trio of images: Cesar Chavez, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. A portrait of King, along with one of Chavez, held pride of place in the restaurant owned by Mary Rose Wilcox, Maricopa County supervisor, immigrant rights advocate and Joe Arpaio's nemesis-in-chief. A banner reading "From Selma to Phoenix, from Civil Rights to Human Rights" was on prominent display at the main stage for the rally in front of the state capitol.

So when MacArthur talked about the years of organizing that went on before the Mississippi Summer Project, the uncanceled summer projects of 1961, 1962 and 1963, Arizona's on-the-ground organizers could relate to the slow and steady aggregation of forces and experience that constitutes the groundwork on which mass transformational movements are built. And they listened closely as Jesse described how Mississippi activists earned the trust of communities marked by both poverty and fear, and learned to marry a single statewide programmatic objective (the right to vote) with a wide array of locally generated tactics. Betty shared her experience with mobilizing resources in the north – people, money, public opinion – to support the southern struggle.

As the discussion opened out in that small room overflowing with both the past and the future, 45 activists grappled with tough questions: How do we protect the integrity, trusted relationships and hard-won gains of deep community organizing while situating that work as a building block in a burgeoning national movement? How do we reconcile different approaches, different organizing methods, different cultural and spiritual traditions in ways that build mutual respect and strength? How do we organize in

communities where residents are so demoralized and despairing that they see no point in coming out to a meeting?

Those questions were certainly not definitively answered, but as one participant put it, “Anytime we get together and put our deepest challenges on the table, it’s a good thing.”

The Doubletree meeting brought activists and organizers together across regions, across generations, across races and nationalities, and, perhaps most importantly, across sectors of the social justice movement whose alignment cannot be taken for granted, but must be nurtured with care and broad vision. Our conversation prepared us to walk on a path cleared by the elders while at the same time breaking brand new ground.

Visit [www.altoarizona.com](http://www.altoarizona.com) for the latest news about Arizona Human Rights summer. Visit [www.ms civilrights veterans.org](http://www.ms civilrights veterans.org) for more information about the ongoing activities of the Mississippi Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement.

*My thanks to Puente for receiving us with such grace, and to all the Mississippi Summer veterans who could not travel to Phoenix, but who were generous with their time and sage counsel. Special thanks to the Urgent Action Fund [www.urgentactionfund.org](http://www.urgentactionfund.org), whose quick turn around made the Mississippi-Arizona exchange possible.*