



Southerners On New Ground

Puentes Con Posibilidades/Bridges With Possibilities

How SONG and Our Coalition Partners Defeated the Harboring Clause of Georgia in House Bill 87

In early 2011, SONG became aware that the right wing intended to bring a piece of legislation to Georgia similar to the repressive, anti-immigrant legislation that passed in Arizona in 2010. Georgia House Bill 87 (HB87) sought to legalize federal and state officers' racial and ethnic profile practicing, and asks for documentation from people living in Georgia for no reason and under no suspicion of a crime. It also sought to require employers to implement 'e-verify' and other employment verification systems in all workplaces in Georgia. The above parts of the bill, unfortunately, passed. However, there was one other part of the bill, a very draconian and severe aspect, which we were able to defeat. The bill included a 'harboring clause'. The harboring clause sought to make it illegal for churches, businesses, and organizations to work with, drive in cars with, or in any way associate with undocumented people. In essence, these kinds of clauses, create a level of segregation in states where they pass that is so severe it can fine or destroy groups for defying it: making it illegal for individuals, organizations, and faith groups to 'house' or 'harbor' undocumented people.



This kind of law makes cross-immigration status movement- building leadership and networks illegal, thereby severely limiting our ability to organize. It effectively cuts off whole chunks of organizing infrastructure at its root. It sends a message to states that live under its tyranny that racial and ethnic segregation based on immigration status is acceptable, and that people who seek to build community across such lines should fear the consequences.

Tactically, it promotes the further isolation and oppression of communities already marginalized. For people of faith and conscience who believe in justice, it sends the message that in order to not live under fear of criminalization and legal consequence, we must defy a core value: the worth of *all* other human beings, and our responsibility to care for those we are in community with every day. It also raises an issue that resonates with LGBTQ documented and undocumented people alike: that of the isolation of marginalized communities, and the policing and control of people based on identity. Because of what the harboring clause could mean to a state like Georgia, in a region like the South, SONG and our coalition partners fought this aspect of the bill very hard. We could not let this pass in Georgia, and, as of today, we have stopped it from being made law in Georgia. The clause is suspended, thru a judicial proceeding, in indefinite injunction. Below is the story of how we did this. First and foremost, it is *not* a story of any one organization working alone. It is a story of effective and strategic coalitions—coalitions that work smart, work brave, and work together.

We approached this fight around House Bill 87 (HB87) in terms of how we could work in coalition with other groups, with each group playing to strengths to accomplish our goals—we saw this as a way to ‘power up’ our coalitions in the state of Georgia by bringing together some new and potentially unlikely bed fellows. We started by joining the working and strategy body of the GIRRC (Georgia Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition), and being a co-anchor of We Are Georgia Campaign (a more radical and Left flank of the state-wide work). Within GIRRC, we stayed closest to GLAHR (Georgia Latino and Human Rights), a 6,000+ membership and base-building organization mostly made up of poor, undocumented and rural Latinos; as well as Project South, a Black-led liberation organization that specializes in popular education and people of Color organizing. We fought alongside our partners in Georgia for a full Veto on HB-87 Georgia (which passed) and then for its repeal, or taking the ‘teeth’ out of the enforcement pieces. One of the key ways we were able to fight and bring about the kind of political climate that helped bring attention to the worst clauses was thru our work in the Georgia Sanctuary Zones (with places of worship and community-building) and Georgia Buy-Spots (with businesses), which asked both businesses and places of worship to take a pledge of Non Compliance with HB-87 and help bring a narrative of its consequences to light.

We were able to leverage that visibility and continued push-back against HB-87 through documentation, mobilization, media work, and grassroots organizing; and to provide the political cover and support to our allies involved in direct litigation pieces of this fight (an injunction that halted the harboring clause of HB87 from going into affect) without doing any direct lobbying: but thru the power of organizing people most affected, and the voices of advocates, allies, and oppressed people in Georgia who understood all too well the intent of this divisive legislation. Clearly, the work here is not done—we must find ways to build power across Georgia, and other states directly affected by the same kind of legislation—such as South Carolina and Alabama. We are making steps to close this chapter of this work, and move into the next (broader and deeper) chapter.

Lessons Learned: Key Aspects of our Strategy in this Campaign

Relationship and Trust Building with Key Coalition Partners

Throughout the campaign, we worked to build and maintain trust by moving closely with coalition partners that represent large bases of people, were interested in changing conditions for those most affected, and were led by people of Color and poor people. It is important that coalitions be broad and include many groups that might not always share mission and strategies; however we learned that it is also important to have a key block of groups that we can maneuver closely with on the ground, within the larger coalition. The coalitional aspects of this campaign required a deep commitment on SONG’s part to anchoring certain pieces of the work, being willing to take on a radical arm of the tactics, and staying constantly in sync with the coalitional groups that represent the largest bases of poor, undocumented, rural, people of Color. These were (and are) the groups who we are ready and willing to fight alongside, as they experience how dire the conditions are.



Being Willing to Form Smaller Arms of the Campaign to Take on Radical Tactics

Banner drops, boycotts, and arrests of undocumented youth. These are all aspects of the campaign that were crucial to putting pressure on the state of Georgia. Not all the groups in GIRRC (the wider coalition) wanted to participate in all of these tactics. GLAHR and SONG led the creation of SOMOS Georgia, as a way to make these actions happen outside of GIRRC. GIRRC members agreed that while they might not endorse these actions, they would not publicly condemn them. Thus, we were able to both stay part of the larger coalition and produce joint work, while also splitting off from the coalition when needed, to push less mainstream tactics.

Documenting Stories to Raise Visibility

SONG cannot, nor do we wish, to lobby directly or spearhead litigation. There are many other groups who are better at this than us, so we chose to use key strategies and actions to support lobby and litigation without playing these roles. For example, GLAHR chose to be a co-plaintiff in the case that eventually caused the injunction against the harboring clause. The work of GIRRC and the We Are Georgia Campaign (which SONG was part of building and anchoring) worked thru out the state doing outreach and political education that ranged from trailer parks in rural Georgia to holding Atlanta-based town halls to collect stories of people who would be affected by HB87 as a whole. The documentation of these stories, and the political momentum built around our collective work ended up being key to winning this injunction. In fact, the presiding judge who ordered the injunction cited the stories (particularly stories about the effect this legislation would have on children) as pivotal in the injunction decision.

Media Work that Gave Voice to the Intersections of Issues

We were able to achieve groundbreaking, worldwide coverage by CNN Español and BBC, with SONG leaders talking about the connections between anti-immigrant hate, LGBTQ struggles, and all oppressions. On several occasions, we had LGBTQ-identified Latino SONG members and leadership doing presswork on CNN Español, BBC International, National Public Radio, and all kinds of local Georgia press. Our leaders were able to move a message that spoke to the intersections of these issues, and connected the fight against HB87 to the national climate of hate and repression of all marginalized communities. Much of our message centered around stating that “nobody in Georgia should be policed simply for being—whether it was because they ‘looked’ undocumented, or because they were Black, appeared poor, or because they were Transgender and told they were in the wrong bathroom.”

Using Long-term Trust and Deep Roots in LGBTQ Communities to Mobilize People

Because we have long roots in Georgia, we were able to mobilize and bring LGBTQ people into this fight in a way that many other groups could not. In doing so, we were in the lead of changing the public face of “Immigrant Rights” in Georgia by centering poor, undocumented, rural and LGBTQ immigrants, particularly by bringing an out and visible set of LGBTQ immigrant faces to this fight. Some of our rallies mobilized upwards of 25,000 people, and SONG recruited a majority LGBTQ people of color leadership to run security for these marches. This made sense because that is such a common occupation for folks in our membership in Atlanta, thereby creating roles for our folks that brought out strengths in our base that clearly and visibly moved people power to a cross-sexuality and cross-race campaign. This also created moments of interaction that ‘brought to life’ the on-going need for Black & Brown alliances: Black and Latino, LGBTQ leaders providing security and safety for mostly immigrant Latino / Indigenous, and undocumented youth and adults. This meant we were putting our values and strategies into practice, and building relationship through shared work and shared risk.

Being Willing to Call the Question to LGBTQ Communities

We were not afraid to ask the LGBTQ community to see this issue as “our” issue. Some LGBTQ Georgia groups came with us on this, and some did not—but we found that thousands of LGBTQ people were ready to be asked to stand up for a broader platform of progressive justice. Many were tired of being assumed to only be interested in gay marriage. In fact, the Southern Voice (the biggest Southern LGBT paper) reporters named SONG as a “must track” group due to “engagement and mobilization of Atlanta LGBT people (outside of Gay Marriage) that is unprecedented in the last 15 years”. Clearly, in terms of SONG membership, we have never had so many SONG members in Georgia involved so deeply in the work. From press conferences to running security to making copies—SONG learned that when we trust membership to do more, pick fights that are relevant with concrete roles for them, they step up more.

Mobilizing Key Support among SONG leaders in Georgia Black Legislative Caucus

Through long-term relationships with Black SONG members and supporters in local politics (particularly, Rep. Simone Bell) we were part of coalitional efforts spear-headed by GLAHR that drew in Rep. John Lewis and other key leaders to support the fight against HB87. These leaders, including Lewis, spoke to the press, attended rallies, and helped to heat up the political climate in the state around these issues. The leadership (both inside of SONG and allied to SONG) played a huge role in making this happen.

Trusting other Coalition Partners to Do What they Do Well, and then Playing our Part

Our coalition partners played their parts in being plaintiff for the case around the injunction, and their lobbying efforts. We knew that they brought more relationships and experience to this work than we did, and so we concentrated hard on ambitious grassroots organizing strategies, mobilizing people who have never come out to demonstrations and civil disobedience before, documenting stories, and raising visibility through the media. By each group doing what they do well, and working hard to keep genuine relationship and trust, we were able to halt the harboring clause, build base, and *model a different way of building coalitions that power up (as oppose to water down) the strongest and most grassroots groups within.*

Building New Structures for Power that Outlast the Campaign

As we were organizing, we pulled in LGBTQ groups that worked with us to form a new LGBTQ Left Coalition which convened hundreds in the state: this is a key leadership body to cement the new relationships we built during this campaign, and build towards our next steps.

In Conclusion

We face a critical time in intersectional organizing, as elder Carmen Vazquez stated this year: “We have had some form of an intersectional analysis for twenty years, what we need to figure out is how to put it on the ground.” The day-to-day struggle that our communities endure just to make it, mean that we must be willing to work hard and creatively to create the kinds of coalitions, alliances, and base building that will help us win concrete gains for our people. More often than not, these coalitions are made up of leaders in deep relationship with each other—who share at least some long-term vision and goal. For years, many groups have asked what it takes for us to build these kinds of relationships across communities that are systemically divided and turned against each other: SONG asserts that one way is through taking risks together. Taking collective risk is one way to accelerate building trust, while fighting for wins on behalf of shared communities. We must build more intersectional models of organizing that bring oppressed communities together. This case study is one offering to some lessons from a model that is still evolving. Are you working on models or have stories to share? Please contact us, if so! We would love to learn from you.

Have questions, need support or technical assistance on this tool?
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