

# Notes from Arizona

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*Chris is a member of Bring the Ruckus who lives in western Massachusetts. He recently spent six weeks in Arizona, offering support in any and all forms to folks on the ground who are engaged in immigration struggles with a radical bent. These are notes from his first three weeks there.*

## **6/14 through 6/19: Hitting the Ground Running**

On Saturday the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, I landed in Phoenix. I was promptly greeted by my Arizona Bring the Ruckus comrades, and we drove off to meet with several other immigrant rights activists. Exhausted but excited, I sat down with them over tacos and burritos to discuss the coming six weeks. What followed was a meet-and-greet where I got a general idea about what was happening and what the local groups I'd be working with are doing: militant work against white nationalists and anti-immigrant politicians in Phoenix. They laid out what was coming and where — an action at the Maricopa Board of Supervisors, a Know Your Rights Campaign kick-off, a protest against Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio at a signing for his new book *Joe's Law*, and plenty of meetings planning for future actions.

For summer in the Valley, there seems to be a lot happening. The attacks on immigrants continue almost unabated, but there are dedicated groups of people willing to fight back. Beyond the notorious Sheriff Joe, there are anti-immigrant politicians such as Andrew Thomas, the County Attorney, and Russell Pearce, a candidate for Arizona State Senate and member of the Arizona House of Representatives. Thomas is the chief defender of the Sheriff's actions and is known for having the editors of the *New Times*, a local news weekly, arrested for allegedly printing public information (the Sheriff's address), for which he apologized the next day. Pearce is a friend of such noted white supremacists as Chris Simcox of the Minutemen and "Buffalo" Rick Galeener of United for a Sovereign America, as well as the architect of the most infamous piece of anti-immigrant legislation, Prop. 200, which requires proof of citizenship to receive public assistance or to vote. It also requires officials to rat out people who cannot produce these when they attempt to get benefits or vote, or face misdemeanor charges.

Despite how deep this hateful sentiment runs, there are people willing to lend their efforts to fight the Sheriff and the people who pull his strings, and right now those people believe that they can win. Immigrants with and without documentation are being drawn into this struggle as they live with fear for their lives and the lives of their loved ones while simply trying to work, to provide for them. After mere minutes, I'm drawn into this too. That's hitting the ground running.

On Tuesday, I ended up doing phone calls to turn people out for the protest at Sheriff Joe's upcoming book signing. I called folks all afternoon, got comfortable with my space and the neighborhood, and talked a little with a couple activists. Thursday began with an action at a meeting of the Maricopa Board of Supervisors, the agency that controls the budget for Maricopa County, and specifically the money that runs Arpaio's Maricopa County Sheriff's Office (MCSO). Over 300 people turned out, enough that they had to put some people in a food court where they could watch the meeting on TV, mostly the red-shirted ACORN members who were singled out to be excluded from the proceedings, probably because of their numbers and their easily identifiable shirts. (As one speaker rightly pointed out, not allowing everyone to be present, picking and choosing who made it in and who was relegated to the food court, really did not bode well for the democratic character of these meetings). Speakers at the meeting included

organizers, community members, ACLU lawyers, and even young kids who had been affected by the lack of money for social services. All were demanding accountability for the money that had been eaten up by the Sheriff's huge budget. The speakers' impassioned delivery moved the audience; by the time the speakers were finished, people were cheering and shouting at the Supervisors, calling for Arpaio's resignation. The energy was so high I thought people were going to stay and have at it with the supervisors. When the Sheriff's opposition finally filed out of the Board of Supervisors meeting, they formed a large protest outside.

Later, I found myself at the coffee shop that would become my surrogate office space for the next six weeks. I was called by a local organizer and asked if I could start compiling a list of places that could be contacted to hold Know Your Rights forums. Veggie burger in one hand and laptop in the other, I plowed through the various types of spaces in heavily Latino areas of Phoenix where a Know Your Rights forum would be most effective. It was not only an opportunity to be helpful, but also a way to get more acquainted with the geography of greater Phoenix. The best way to get know the city, however, was by riding the bus. The public transportation is not that bad in Phoenix, and I rode it as much as possible. Phoenix is divided into smaller cities, each with its own mayor, like Mesa, Scottsdale, and Tempe. The demographics break down along these city lines within the metro area pretty neatly, too. For instance, Mesa is a heavily Latino city, with a high Mormon population (so high that all live music must end at 10 pm sharp every night), and Scottsdale has the deserved reputation of being a mostly white, upper-class city. Guadalupe, a majority Latino city, almost erupted into a riot when anti-immigrant counter-protestors tried to instigate violence from the immigrant rights protestors at a rally against the Sheriff during one of his raids. The Latina mayor of Guadalupe refused to allow the Sheriff to return to her city. You can't see this from the windows of a Valley Metro bus, but you can see the people and places that shape these events.

Later that night I traveled by bus to the Know Your Rights campaign meeting. A group of folks from various groups met to discuss the logistics for the upcoming kick-off for the forums. There was a sense that people were looking for something that would address the larger problems, which would be proactive rather than reactive. If the people most at risk of arrest and deportation could protect themselves from being bullied by the MCSO into giving up their rights, perhaps some of the pressure to react would be alleviated as the effectiveness of sweeps and raids would decline. The constant pressure of responding to the sweeps burns people out and sucks up resources. A sustained Know Your Rights Campaign could function to build the base a movement needs to sustain itself. On the other hand, it could also be subsumed as more insidious and brutal tactics are adopted by the Sheriff's Office and local cops.

## **6/20 through 6/26: Heating Up**

Saturday was the protest against the Sheriff at his book signing at a Barnes and Noble in Scottsdale, one of the generally more affluent suburbs of Phoenix. It was 112 degrees and sunny (the usual temperature in Phoenix this time of year — I can count the days on one hand that it was different). Not the perfect weather to stand out on a street corner with signs, but it could have been worse. All the local media outlets were present interviewing and videotaping both the protestors and the event inside, and the actual coverage was surprisingly favorable to the protestors. Even though there were no local anti-immigrant organizations counter-protesting, a few lone repre-

sentatives showed up just to hear Sheriff Joe speak or get a book signed. Maybe 112 is too hot for the old farts of United for a Sovereign America and the Minutemen? Though that may be true, rumor has it that these groups are trying to “re-image” themselves as responsible citizens, well above showing up at a protest and screaming and threatening immigrant rights demonstrators. Workers at one of the restaurants in the shopping plaza parking lot, Uncle Sam’s (whose parking signs read “Patriot Parking Only: All Others Will Be Deported”), brought protestors water and pizza in an attempt to either a) get free advertising from protestors, or b) be nice people. When some of us moved to another entrance to the plaza, the manager of an adjacent Applebee’s confronted us because he thought the picture of the Sheriff on one of the signs was a picture of him; he thought we were protesting him. While these protests make the Sheriff look like an idiot (not a terribly difficult task) and give voice to those who oppose the white supremacist policies of the Maricopa County Sheriff’s Office, they also give an aspiring politician like Arpaio a hell of a lot of face time. Besides, he’s been looking the fool to people for years and the folks who continue to elect him eat that up.

That weekend I went to my first meeting of another group, one attempting to take the fight to anti-immigrant forces rather than waiting for them to strike. The meetings focused on an upcoming action, and planning for the sweeps which we had heard were coming next week. The so-called “crime suppression” sweeps usually take place over the course of two or three days, starting on a Thursday and lasting until Friday or Saturday. The MCSO sets up a substation in the area they will be operating in (usually an area of a few square miles around the substation) in order to quickly process the people they are arresting. Usually the protest and the counter-protest are also located here, though it looks like many of the anti-immigrant groups have backed off in order to appear more “responsible.” The protests at the sweeps draw large crowds and media coverage, and the volunteer citizen patrols, a model based on Copwatch’s patrol model, prevent as many folks as possible from being swept up in the Sheriff’s dragnet as well as gather information on the legality of the operations, information that could be used for future lawsuits against the Sheriff’s department.

A couple days after the meeting, I headed off to learn about how the citizen patrols are conducted, so I could participate. In the days before the sweeps, people were able to spread the word to residents to stay off the streets and stay out of Mesa if possible so with any luck, the city would be deserted. It would look like a general strike— no one shopping, people not working, the city of Mesa grinding to a halt — while the Sheriff’s people would try in vain to build the numbers of “illegals” for the 11 o’ clock news.

In the run up, the chief of the Mesa police department expressed concern that he did not know exactly when the sweeps would be taking place, putting his officers at risk, and that the media knew that they were taking place before he did. Even the police union spoke against Arpaio (of course against his methods, not the ideology that drives him). These disputes between city and county law enforcement serve to plaster Arpaio’s face all across the print news and TV, the most important goal of anyone looking to fill higher offices than sheriff in the future. Not only that, but the Mesa police are left looking like the protagonists, honest cops just trying to do their jobs fighting the real criminals of Mesa. This is a much-needed boost in image for the Mesa police, seeing that the arrival of the MCSO is viewed as a sign that the local police are failing to halt “crime” in their jurisdiction. (This became apparent to me at the end of Friday’s sweep when the Mesa police were out in full force against young Black folks at the water park and on the streets. There could have been as many as a dozen cruisers out, all of which had Black youths

with their hands in the air in the water park parking lot or their faces in the curb on the street.) The harmfulness of this activity by local police seems absent from the immigrant rights discourse, though it is acknowledged by individuals.

That being said, local immigrant rights activists across the city mobilized quickly and effectively in response to the sweeps. Lawyers were recruited to keep tabs on civil rights violations and racial profiling by the Sheriff's officers. People were ready with an organized response when the brown-shirted deputies of the MCSO hit the streets.

## **6/27 through 7/7: In the Streets**

On Thursday morning, Arpaio announced that the sweeps would start at about 4 pm. In the streets, it seemed like the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office began to round up brown-skinned folks for "minor violations", such as mechanical failures (cracked lights, windshields, lights out, etc.), rolling stops, and expired tags, around 2 pm in the city of Mesa. I went down to help out with the volunteer patrols. I rode with anyone who had a car, from lawyers to students, radicals to concerned liberals, a whole spectrum of political motivations and persuasions. Most of the stops we witnessed involved at least one person, in all cases except two an obviously Latino male, being arrested by the MCSO. Among those detained were landscapers, families, a man selling puppies (who managed to produce his papers and was eventually free to go), and various other individuals, most of whom were already in the process of being arrested when we arrived on the scene. In pairs, armed with video cameras and incident reports, we documented these stops and arrests in hopes that what we caught on tape could be used to prevent jail time or deportation, and add fuel to the many pending lawsuits against the MCSO.

The patrols were carried out all day on Thursday and Friday, in conjunction with a larger protest at the Sheriff's sub-station, where arrestees are brought in and booked. The sweeps were supposed to end by 10 p.m., but continued until almost 11. The best way to keep your numbers up is to say you're going to be performing a sweep between 4 and 10, but in reality have it last from 2 until 11. Over the course of those two days, sheriff's deputies rounded up folks who could not afford to stay off the streets, and all save one were Latino. In Maricopa County, if you have brown skin, you are a target for the sheriff. Like the pass system in apartheid South Africa or slaves being hunted under the fugitive slave laws, you need to prove that you are a citizen, that you are 'free', or else you will be shackled and chained and sent back, like a piece of property that had the audacity to claim its humanity in the face of the state. It is important to note that even though there were organized patrols, we saw many Latinos out videotaping and watching the Sheriff's men independently. One individual said that it was just the natural thing to do when you knew that you, your friends, your neighbors or your family could be the next folks nabbed by the MCSO.

By the end of the day on Thursday, the Sheriff was ready to concede to defeat for the MCSO. They could no longer use the multiple sub-stations they had set up in order to confuse protestors and patrollers, and had to book people in downtown Phoenix, which added an hour to their processing time for arrestees. The Sheriff declared that the sweeps failed as the result of a leak from his department; the sweeps can't possibly be effective if the targeted communities have time to respond. In the words of an activist who was on the ground that day:

“Last I heard, Arpaio was claiming he had made over 50 arrests, and 16 or so of the people were undocumented. The number of arrests on Friday fell to half of Thursday’s total, and there were only 3 undocumented, compared to 13 on Thursday. Apparently people got the message not to go out after Thursday. The media were also reporting a huge drop in business in the area.”

Winning a battle in the war against the Sheriff felt great. I felt as if our side was really winning against the anti-immigrant forces. The hate groups and the state both had to fall back and change their tactics, a direct reaction to the victories of the forces fighting for immigrant rights. Despite the massive plastering of his image across the nightly news, Arpaio truly looked like an idiot and the marked absence of United for a Sovereign America or the Minutemen or any others made them look ill-prepared.

The following week, the Know Your Rights Campaign held their press conference on July 2<sup>nd</sup> as planned. It took place in Cesar Chavez plaza in downtown Phoenix and a good number of people turned out. It was presented in both Spanish and English by individuals involved in the campaign and a lawyer from the ACLU. It was covered on the major Spanish language channels (the local Univision and Telemundo affiliates) and one talk radio station. They also have the resources of the ACLU (lawyers, materials, meeting space, etc.) at their disposal. The mayor of Guadalupe wants a forum as soon as possible, and there are already a couple of other groups ready to host. At this time, there are two forums scheduled already and plans and places to move many more along. This could be the base-building tool that Phoenix needs to get people moving and to get more people plugged into the struggle not only against the MCSO, but also against the white supremacist ideologies that underlie all anti-immigration groups and politicians, and the ideologues who profess it.

Right now it remains to be seen what will happen next...

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