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how leadership can ruin its grassroots character

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Advocacy groups are scrambling to lead and channel the energy
sparked spontaneously by immigrants in marches across the
country. They risk ruining the intimate, familial nature of the
movement. Raj Jayadev is the editor of Silicon Valley De-Bug, a
project of New America Media.

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SAN JOSE, Calif.—When people say of the recent immigrant rights marches, “Everyone and their mama was there,” they mean it literally. The mass demonstrations held across the country have been remarkable not only for the astonishing numbers — 30,000 in San Jose, 50,000 in Atlanta, 100,000 in Phoenix — but for who is represented in those numbers: mothers, fathers, teenagers, grandmothers pushing grandchildren in strollers. This is a movement of families.

Now organizers and advocates are meeting to figure out how to channel this social dynamite. There is a sense that spontaneous social action can last only so long; that “somebody” needs to step in for it to be sustained, and the energy directed. As Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles, told the Washington Post last week, “Our challenge

is to transform this massive movement of people in the streets into a massive movement of people to the polls.”

No offense, but really, who asked her? It is in fact the lack of identifiable leadership and direction from above that is sustaining this new movement. That’s what has already taken it further than the advocacy groups trying to “transform” it ever dreamed possible.

The huge turnout at recent marches was not the result of traditional organizing — strategy sessions, tactic-evaluation, door-knocking by organizers. Rather, it was a spontaneous outpouring by children who wanted to honor their parents’ labors; by parents moved by the kids who walked out of class for them. The sustainability of this movement lies in those voices determining what’s next, and in their ever-growing acknowledgement of their collective power. The corralling of this energy by traditional organizers may in fact be the only thing that can threaten it.

The second round of marches bore the stamp of professional organizers much more than the first, but those organizers ought not to take credit for the turnout. People came out on April 10 not because they were told to, but because they had felt their collective power on March 24. On that day, the people holding the signs and pushing the strollers were the same ones who called for the protest, decided which streets to take, and chose who would speak. In San Jose, people came out of their houses because they heard the crowd from their homes or got calls from family members. The subsequent student walk-outs were the result of teenagers text-messaging each other and posting messages on MySpace. The sense of celebration at the marches arose when people who had previously been told only of their limitations in this country decided their own fate, if only for a day.

Without the ability to vote, without a single lobbyist, a disenfranchised people in America have changed bills in Congress and set the terms for a national political conversation. The momentum of this movement is intimate and familial. People are looking out

for their relatives, not dreaming of becoming a voting bloc. “Today we march, tomorrow we vote” actually minimizes what is happening. This is bigger than the ballot box. It is a reshaping of what active citizenship in America means.

If organizers really want to help out, the best thing to do is to get out of the way. The energy and vision is coming from within the movement anyhow –from people knowing and trusting each other. This is what was most amazing about the march in San Jose – people hop-scotched from side to side during the march, calling out to uncles, aunts and neighbors.

It provided a sharp contrast to the last major protest I had been to, at the World Trade Organization gathering in Seattle. There, no one knew anybody and everyone wore face masks. After breaking a whole lot of stuff, 70,000 protestors left Seattle, never to speak to one another again. After today’s immigrant marches, everyone walks back to the same homes. The infrastructure of sustainability is built in.

The next big protest, planned for May 1, is supposed to be a “Day Without Immigrants” – a job and economic boycott. If the media and politicians really want to know what to expect on May 1, they shouldn’t be going through their Rolodex of executive directors or union communications departments. They should be asking the day laborer in the parking lot of Home Depot in Los Angeles, or the grandmother on her way back from church in Phoenix. Regardless of what advocacy organizations decide to do, the success or failure of this effort will come down to families sitting down at dinner tables on April 30 and deciding whether or not they’re going to work the next day.

On April 10, when the thousands had reached City Hall at the end of the march in San Jose, while the organizers were busy trying to get their political speakers lined up and getting the audio equipment working, everyone was patient with them. All heads were turned in another direction anyhow, watching and clapping

along with a spontaneous dance circle that erupted around a single man with a drum.