

Toward a Left without Borders: The Story of the Center for Autonomous Social Action-General Brotherhood of Workers

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A unique left organization of Mexican and Mexican-American workers emerged in the 1960s whose story still waits to be told. Meanwhile, these brief notes on its history by a former member should at least help to show why it was such an important, pioneering project.

Over a brief ten-year period (1968–1978), Centro de Acción Social Autónomo-Hermandad General de Trabajadores (CASA-HGT), the Center for Autonomous Social Action-General Brotherhood of Workers, went from a traditional *mutualista* or self-help center providing legal and other services as part of organizing undocumented Mexican workers in California, to a national organization rooting itself in broad working-class politics. Those politics were based on Marxism-Leninism, third world revolutionary theories, international solidarity, civil rights, and antiracism in the United States. CASA focused on an issue that remains decisive to progressive social change: organizing with and by the undocumented for equal rights. CASA-HGT was one of a few socialist-led groups that took head-on one of the unforeseen impacts of capitalist development: the creation of multinational communities and migrant workers living at the crossroads of changing nation-states and international working classes.

The number of people subject to different types of involuntary migration across the world has been growing dramatically in recent decades, now numbering 150 million—more than twice the number of people displaced by the Second World War. This includes internally displaced persons, people forced to flee their homes due to socially and politically generated strife and ecological ruin within their country, refugees fleeing repression, and migrant workers crossing international borders in search of work to survive. The roots of involuntary displacement and labor migration lie in capitalist

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restructuring and the creation of multinational labor pools, the draining of resources, and the frayed social fabric left behind in the aftermath of colonialism and imperialist “underdevelopment.”

The communist movements and parties have always prided themselves on internationalism. However, when it came to workers crossing international borders, the political and theoretical underpinnings of internationalism did not keep pace or generate leadership with a shifting working class. This is a general problem of Marxism and Leninism, which lacks a theory and analysis of internationalism and working-class organization adequate to a situation where capital's national borders have become porous; and which is therefore not well-equipped to struggle on behalf of a working class which is multinational, multilingual, multicolored, and multi-legal, that is, holding the varying statuses of recognized citizenship, legal residency, guest worker status, and the undocumented.

U.S. working-class movements have especially excluded nonwhite, lower-strata workers from their organizing purview and from membership in their institutions, organizations, and agenda. The demands of working-class organizations and left formations of color have never been perceived as representing the interests of the whole class. These theoretical exclusions by the left flowed from the political marginalization of workers of color. Instead of trying to analyze and understand the national, racial, ethnic, and economic stratification of the U.S. working class as a result of the globalized nature or imperialist roots of U.S. capital, the left most often tried to minimize the significance of this segmentation for the goals and leadership of the working class.

Demands that served people of color were labeled “minority” demands and we could hear such theoretical formulations from left and communist sources as “the working class and its minority allies,” as if “minorities” were something other than a majority sector of the working class. It took a long time for the left to understand this and even today many of its segments still do not understand the theoretical dimensions or political ramifications of the intersection of class, race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and nation.

During the period between 1950 and 1965, the Mexican and Mexican-American community in the United States underwent dramatic changes in its composition. This signaled the start of the demographic revolution that has transformed the United States in the last thirty years. Overwhelmingly working class in composition, the Mexican and Mexican-American community included foreign- and native-born U.S. citizens, legal residents, and the undocumented. During the Second World War, the United States began the Bracero Program to fill the labor shortage caused by the military mobiliza-

tion. This had a direct impact on the Mexican and Mexican-American community in the United States and also contributed to new forms of racial and labor stratification in general. In fact, migration of undocumented workers into the United States was at an all time high during the Bracero Program, underscoring the centrality this sector of the working class played and continues to play in the U.S. economy. After the Second World War, the United States institutionalized the importation of temporary guest workers, even as a permanent part of the labor force in certain industries.

Responding to this changing climate, in 1951 the *Hermanidad Mexicana Nacional* was founded in California with the aim of organizing Mexican workers—a precursor to *CASA-HGT*. There were other various failed attempts to do this and they included Japanese and Filipino as well as Mexican farm workers. The 1950s were also marked by the rise of the African-American civil rights movement, the Chicano and indigenous peoples' land rights struggles, and other social movements.

The period 1960–1968 was crucial to the formation of the idea of *CASA*. The black civil rights movement was in high gear and Mexican-American organizing was reaching new levels in urban, labor, student, farm worker, land, and civil rights issues. Chicano student organizations, such as the Mexican American Youth Organization (*MAYO*), the United Farm Workers (*UFW*), the Mexican American Political Association (*MAPA*), and others began gestating by the early 1960s. Amidst this political upheaval, the “newest” political subject in the United States was the immigrant of color, especially the undocumented immigrant. How were the different social and nationality movements to address this far-reaching development, whose significance was unperceived by the majority of people-of-color movements?

The left continued suffering deep-rooted color, racial, and nationality blindness. It failed, as it often does today, to see how U.S. capitalist socioeconomic development has depended on immigrant labor. The importation of labor is a permanent aspect of U.S. capitalism. Its exploitation was indispensable to the U.S.'s original accumulation of capital. From indentured labor and racial slavery to contemporary migrant workers, the integration of imported labor has been consistently framed by nationality and racial stratification.

This deep-seated theoretical and political problem and complexity arises in a different and more intense way when the left faces so-called illegal or undocumented workers, especially migrants. Few working-class and left organizations, if any, understood the issue or addressed it in substantive ways during this period. Neither the *UFW*, which led the farm-worker organizing movement, nor other Chicano movement organizations and institutions

wanted to take up the issue. The undocumented were seen as potential or actual strikebreakers by the UFW at the time and its members would often call the INS on the undocumented during their organizing work in the fields. (The UFW adopted a policy at an early 1970s convention, which Bert Corona addressed, recognizing the importance of organizing all farm workers regardless of their immigration status.) As for some Chicano movement groups, their tendency toward narrow nationalism belittled or totally ignored the *mojados mexicanos* (wetbacks).

The formation of CASA-HGT was the result of the years of political, community, and labor organizing experience of its founders, Bert Corona and Soledad "Chole" Alatorre along with others, and reflected concern about the undocumented sector of the working class. Alatorre had been a founder of the Hermandad Mexicana Nacional. Corona was a political and organizational innovator with deep roots in the labor movement and with ties to the U.S. left. Before CASA, Corona helped found MAPA, which focused on education, civil rights, and voting rights issues, including political empowerment. It was a pioneering effort that gave political voice and direction to Mexican-American community activists during the 1950s and 1960s. But it did not prioritize workers' rights, especially those of the undocumented.

An organizational and political vacuum existed. No organization was addressing the rights of undocumented Mexican immigrants, and the implications for organizing or for politics generally of this growing phenomenon. The issue of Mexican workers in the United States brought to the fore questions of nationality and class in unprecedented ways. Immigrants, especially the undocumented, were not finding a place or voice in the broader left, Chicano organizations, labor unions, and in farm worker organizing. Building on the experience of the Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, Corona and Alatorre brilliantly identified a strategic grassroots organizing opportunity and moved on it. CASA-HGT emerged to fill this vacuum.

Launched in 1968, CASA-HGT was originally a *mutualista* organization, a self-help social service agency that was also utilized as an organizing strategy targeting undocumented Mexican workers and their families. During the first five years, it included the merger of various Chicano and Mexicano groups and provided legal services to undocumented workers assisting them in regularizing their immigration status. CASA also provided politically oriented rights education. Taking place in the ferment of the 1960s, different radical and left tendencies, including nationalists, were attracted by CASA's conjugation of a class base with social justice and liberation aspirations. CASA's original program reflected the distinct challenges and obstacles that Mexican immigrants, especially the undocumented, faced. CASA began

growing, chapters, local committees, and nucleos (or units) were formed in different parts of the country. It provided a venue for protecting the rights of the undocumented and also organized them as workers.

CASA's development helped forge political organizing that reflected the multinational nature of the U.S. working class and focused on the undocumented. In many ways, CASA resembled the contradictory nature of this period: workers, students, leftists, political exiles, trade unionists, and veterans like Corona, identifying and converging on a critical problem impacting primarily the Chicano community and its social movements. All agreed that this had broad ramifications that could not be resolved by various political initiatives addressing either working class or nationality rights separately. CASA combined these two issues in a new way.

In the early 1970s, CASA-HGT began participating in the immigration legislation debates of those years. A national immigration coalition was formed and a part of its leadership eventually joined CASA. Many of the new members joining CASA were activists who saw in third world revolutionary movements, especially Cuba, and Marxism-Leninism, models and strategies that could be emulated in the United States to transform our world.

The CASA-HGT bilingual newspaper, *Sin Fronteras* "Without Borders," (its masthead also proclaimed, "We are One because America [the continent] is One") had national distribution and printed thousands of copies at its peak. Originally published in San Antonio, Texas, *Sin Fronteras* had been the newspaper of the National Coalition for Fair Immigration Laws and Practices, promoting its work and focusing primarily on immigration issues. *Sin Fronteras* was later moved to Los Angeles as part of CASA-HGT's transition into a left-wing national organization. By 1973, CASA-HGT as a result of some of its newer members' work on national immigration reform issues, began engaging the left, developing notions of the "national question," and posing broader questions of political power and organization. By 1974, Bert Corona and Chole Alatorre resigned mainly over differences in political organizing strategies. The founders insisted on solely continuing the local organizing of undocumented workers; while the emerging new leadership, headed up by Antonio Rodriguez and others in Los Angeles, saw in CASA the kernel of a movement-building process that was part-national liberation, part-Marxist-Leninist, and part *Magonista* Mexican working-class organization (after the Flores Magón brothers, anarcho-syndicalists leaders of the 1910–1920 Mexican Revolution). Corona and others re-adopted the name Hermandad Mexicana Nacional for their organization and allowed the new leadership to retain not only the name CASA but to accept responsibility for the legacy of legal work it had embodied. The full name, CASA-HGT, was

retained, signaling the dual nature of the vision that guided the organization's further development until its demise less than four years later.

After Corona and Alatorre left, membership shifted, in part due to the separation between CASA and the new HGT offshoot. The Hermandad continued with CASA's original mission of organizing locally and serving the needs of immigrant communities and workers, with Corona as its head. Meanwhile, the new CASA began developing radical political perspectives on a broad range of issues—international solidarity, the nature of the Mexican nationality in the United States, and a redefinition of the U.S.-Mexico border as a politically enforced division imposed on the Mexican people especially impacting working class sectors in the United States. CASA defined its base as “Mexicans in the United States” (which included Chicanos/Chicanas, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans) and identified the undocumented worker as strategic to fighting for democracy, equal rights, labor rights, and liberation. The new CASA leadership particularly developed close relations with the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP), including organization-to-organization exchanges and trainings. Some CASA members spent time in Puerto Rico, while PSP members worked with CASA members in their locales. Others had ties with leaders and parties in Mexico's communist and left movements. These influences helped CASA further develop its orientation towards Marxism-Leninism, pushing it towards a party-building model of organization and a different and maybe even more mature internationalist approach to the U.S. working class anchored by its view of the centrality of the undocumented, not only in the United States but in the entire hemisphere.

The period 1976–1978 was one of decline for CASA and the Chicano movement as a whole. CASA lost membership and unity of purpose. Various estimates put CASA's membership between 10,000 to 15,000 members at its peak. CASA finally died before 1979 set in. The reasons for the various divisions, splits, and declining membership call for an in-depth analysis by those directly involved. Here we can just suggest a few. There were, first, growing differences over the politics of the organization. Questions arose: Are we a socialist organization or just committed to defending and promoting the rights of the undocumented? Do we just organize Mexican workers or are we a multinational organization? How do we develop organic Marxist-Leninist positions on various issues facing the left and the Chicano movement? A major split in the movement developed in the wake of the 1977 national conference on immigration held in San Antonio, Texas; its roots certainly preceded this period but flowered in the aftermath of this important gathering. Maybe the conference was the last opportunity of the ebbing

Chicano movement and for various left and socialist forces attempting to influence it for their own purposes—just like previous radical elements saw in CASA the kernel of working-class political organization. Many questions have to be asked as to why CASA almost came to a halt during the summer and fall of 1977, when it launched into internal assessments that affected its external work. By December 1977, the national leadership was divided along at least three lines. Then key members, some responsible for the *Sin Fronteras* newspaper—also representing key ideological and political leadership as well—resigned at one of the final national coordinating committee meetings.

Some of those differences hid other deep questions: what were the roles, direct and indirect, of the Mexican and U.S. Communist Parties, Trotskyists, and other U.S. left formations within CASA? I believed at the time that Carlos Vasquez, who was editor of *Sin Fronteras* and in the leadership of CASA's National and Political commissions, represented a nondogmatic position that said we should not become a Marxist-Leninist formation. He along with Antonio Rodríguez and others in the divided leadership had very developed theories of nationality and international solidarity, and they expressed a class analysis of the history of Mexicans in the United States, the Chicano movement, and other questions before the movements. Vasquez resigned from his positions. CASA members continued struggling with organizational, political and ideological issues rising from its turn to Marxism-Leninism and new issues such as party building and the "national question." I remember that our regional organization disagreed so strongly with some of the last issues of *Sin Fronteras* (after Vasquez left) that instead of selling it we paid for our assigned copies ourselves.

The period 1979–1985 saw these three trends emerge out of CASA and develop in various directions. Carlos Vasquez restarted his publishing house, Prensa Sembradora (with, I believe, a newspaper of the same name). Other leaders that split from CASA, José "Pepe" Medina, Felipe Aguirre, and Juan José Gutiérrez, and others, continued working on the international organizing of migrant workers. They had previously focused on building the HGT, and continued on this project after leaving, organizing Mexican migrant workers at their point of origin. The HGT offshoot developed a "Bill of Rights of the Undocumented" around 1982 that was quite progressive and farsighted. In the Midwest, ex-CASA members led in the formation of a coalition to develop a national movement in support of the undocumented. Rudy Lozano, a prominent CASA leader in Chicago, also played a leading role in electing Harold Washington mayor of Chicago by forging the black-brown unity crucial to Washington's victory. (Later, Lozano was assassinated,

possibly by drug dealers who resented his work to end that traffic.) Antonio Rodríguez and other CASA members in different regions of the country played key roles in organizing coalitions and support for legislation that would protect the rights of the undocumented.

The question remains: Why did CASA fall apart? A major reason was certainly disagreement at the center over party building vs. building a national organization focused on the undocumented. This problem intensified a general lack of clarity and purpose, combined with a lack of political experience with Marxism-Leninism, the left, international solidarity, and other areas. It was significant that this CASA emerged, taking on these issues, at the same time that broader social and left movements were also entering into a serious decline and we saw less movement, less interest in continuing the political struggles, and widespread exhaustion. The outcome might have been different if CASA-HGT had defined itself as a primarily political and Marxist-Leninist organization back in 1968 but it hadn't.

The rise and decline of CASA in the 1970s also paralleled the rise and decline of many other revolutionary organizations of color with strong left, antiracist, and internationalist orientations. By the early 1970s, this included the PSP, the Black Panther Party, the Congress of African Peoples, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, many sectors of the Asian-American movement and the American Indian Movement which, like many of its counterparts, suffered fierce repression and persecution. Some ex-CASA members also documented the impact of police infiltration that contributed to its demise.

When CASA-HGT transitioned into an aspiring left formation, it left behind the majority of its supporters and base. Bert Corona and Chole Alatorre continued the original work that had characterized CASA-HGT's unique contribution at its inception: local community-based organizing and defending the rights of the undocumented. Although the new CASA continued this work, too, its new socialist orientation did not help reconnect it to its original base. This was another example of political concepts without a social base. Again, that important lesson: social bases are not transferable.

To give an extreme example of the effects of these errors, there were cases of CASA nucleus expelling workers because the socialists in them thought the workers were backward. So not only did CASA in the last few years have a dwindling base but it was also expelling members who represented its natural social base: working-class people. In a parallel development, the content of *Sin Fronteras* at least in the last year became increasingly inaccessible and politically incoherent for CASA's base.

CASA also had a positive side to the second half of its history. Its Marxist-

Leninist study circles were exemplary and studied a mixture of third world revolutionary theory (Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, Amilcar Cabral, Cuban revolutionaries, the Mexican Revolution, and other Latin American, Asian, and African revolutionary movements). This grounding came from CASA's theoretical and political leadership which included Antonio Rodriguez, Nativio López, Felipe Aguirre, Pepe Medina, Carlos Vasquez, Rubén Solís, and a few CASA women including Evelina Fernández, Evalina Márquez, Isabel Rodríguez (Antonio's sister) and the brilliant, unforgettable Magdalena Mora, who died at age twenty-nine. This group of individuals, including others in different parts of the country and at different times in CASA's short history, provided the theoretical and intellectual grounding that guided CASA during more than half of its existence.

CASA's worldview was also advanced by such exposure as Carlos Vasquez's report back from a Middle East conference in the mid-1970s, when he came back blown away by the Palestinian struggle and their uncompromising militancy, which led him to write an "internal" document with very original thinking on the "national question." Another writer close to CASA was the noted scholar Juan Gómez Quiñones. In those final years, CASA also developed organizationally in some positive ways including a more precise division of labor, and greater accountability.

Some Conclusions

CASA struggled to build a national organization for "Mexicans in the United States" with left leanings, driven by a politics grounded ostensibly in Marxism-Leninism, the antiracist struggle, and third world revolutionary liberation theories and movements. Non-Mexicans were also members.

As a national organization CASA was present in Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Oregon, Texas, Washington State, New York, Mexico, and possibly other regions. Its total membership, peaking at about 12,000–15,000 in 1968–1973, declined considerably once Corona and his *compas* left, and still further to less than 2000 by the end of 1977, when CASA split into at least three factions or trends

Unlike other left formations of color, for example, the August Twenty-Ninth Movement (ATM), CASA did not join with other left and Marxist-Leninist formations in the next and final generation of party building that developed between 1976 and 1989. Individual CASA members went in several directions: into the U.S. Communist Party, Mexican parties and left unity movements; and regional immigrant rights coalitions and other civil rights and electoral coalitions at the local, state, and even national levels. Others successfully continued organizing projects begun under CASA. A fair

number of ex-CASA members went into the immigrant rights movement that began coalescing in the late 1970s.

In 1977–1979, there was a short-lived attempt at doing a critical assessment of CASA with a view to a possible regrouping, but it did not go anywhere nationally. The most important work of this closing period included *Prensa Sembradora*, which lasted until about 1982, seeking to continue the legacy of *Sin Fronteras* before CASA declined; the group around the Hermandad, and the contributions made by the other top CASA leaders and members that added significantly to the political maturation of Mexican-American and Latino working-class and left politics generally and helped give birth to the contemporary immigrant rights movement.

The issue that ignited CASA's rise, the undocumented, has become more central than ever to working-class rights and to people of color. It raises critical and yet to be resolved theoretical and political problems at capitalism's center: the nation-state, nationality, citizenship, race, and labor and capital mobility. The undocumented need more CASAs to rise and attempt to solve an issue that in hindsight has been at the heart of the development of the U.S. peoples and the working class. A protracted struggle and commitment will be required of all who enter into this realm where a left without borders—internationalist, multicolored, and led by women and men of all sexualities—is a key part of the solution.



America as Seen through the Eye of the TV Tube

1. Most people who work for a living (and they are few) are executives and/or work in some kind of office.
2. Sex is the basis of all psychological, economic, political, historical, social—in fact, *known*—problems of man.
3. Sex is very bad.
4. Sex is very good and the solution to all psychological, economic, political, historical, social—in fact *known*—problems of man.
5. The present social order is here forever and this is the best of all possible worlds.
6. The present social order is here forever and this is the worst of all possible worlds.
7. The present social order is all in the mind
8. Women are idiots.
9. Negroes do not exist...

—Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, pp. 225–26