Sanctuary: In a Great American and International Tradition

written by Dan La Botz | July 18, 2017

Author's note: "I was asked at a recent New York City Democratic Socialists of America meeting of the Immigration Justice Working Group to say a few words to put our work in historical context and then asked to write up my brief talk so that it might be useful to others."

Our sanctuary work is in a great national and global tradition of humanitarianism and it is consistent with our international socialist principles. Our work, while fighting for the reform of the immigration system, has as its goal the abolition of the capitalist system that causes involuntary mass migration. And while using existing law to defend immigrants and fighting for better laws, we stand opposed to the concept of the national state, which will never respect and defend immigrants as equals in our society.

We are at present working with the New Sanctuary Coalition in New York City. New Sanctuary's method is—while never telling anyone to do anything illegal—to organize immigrant communities, the documented and the undocumented, to protect each other. In each community a place of worship is identified (a church, temple or mosque) as the local safe place. While places of worship have no special legal protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is reluctant to raid such places because it will outrage the community and lead to bad publicity. Other places such as local business are also asked to become sanctuaries in an emergency and to refuse to open their doors except if there is a judge-signed warrant.

Working with the community, we in New Sanctuary, some of us immigrant ourselves, teach immigrants methods to protect themselves such as always showing a New York City ID, declining to offer information and avoiding revealing one's birth place, speaking in one's native language, and going inside one's home and locking the door, opening it only if the authorities present a warrant signed by a judge. We ask: If you don't need to have a passport, which is evidence of foreign birth, why keep it? If at some future date a passport is needed, one can go to the consulate and apply for a new passport. Legal techniques like these protect immigrants. Teaching these techniques we build community organization, political consciousness, and a movement of resistance to injustice.

A Great American Tradition

As I said, in doing this work we in the Immigrant Justice Working Group (IWJG) are in a great American tradition. We can find the roots of a sanctuary movement in the Undergound Railroad organized by people such as Harriet Tubman which rescued black Americans from slavery and moved thousands of them to the North and then to Canada and to freedom. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, abolitionists lobbied for and passed personal liberty laws and activists organized to rescue runaway slaves from slave-catchers and federal marshals. The Supreme

Court's *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision (1857), upholding the right of slave-owners to take their slaves in and out of free states only further enraged abolitionists, who continued to resist the U.S. government's unjust laws.

In the 1980s, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the United States government, working with rightwing forces in the region, carried out a war against the left in Guatemala and El Salvador and worked to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. The war displaced tens of thousands. Rightwing paramilitaries issued death warrants and carried out the assassination of leftist organizers. In Guatemala entire indigenous communities were targeted for extermination and thousands were killed. Thousands, then tens of thousands, fled to the United States, but not all were welcome. In response American churches, both Catholic and Protestant, organized a new underground railroad that brought undocumented immigrant activists or victims into the country and hid them, moving some on to Canada later. One of our Brooklyn DSA members provided sanctuary to one such person in that period.

A Great International Tradition

Our sanctuary work is also in a great international tradition. New Sanctuary's method could be characterized as "non-cooperation," that is, declining to cooperate with the immigration authorities. Non-cooperation, which may also become civil disobedience, has its roots of course in American Henry David Thoreau's famous essay "On Civil Disobedience," an essay and an idea that was taken up by Mohandas K. Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement from the 1920s to the 1940. Indians refused to cooperate with the British in any way, while calling for independence. A movement at the origin of the non-cooperation tradition.

Non-cooperation was taken up in 1960 by Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (as well as by the rival Pan Africanist Congress), which organized an anti-pass campaign against the government's requirement that black people carry passes. Mandela himself publicly burned his pass, for which he was imprisoned for five months, only part of his longer struggle and later decades long imprisonment. In doing our sanctuary work, we put ourselves in this tradition.

A few years ago my wife Sherry and I visited France and met with activists of the *Rêseaux de éducation san frontières*, the Education without Borders Network. Leftist high school teachers at the Jean Jaurès publc high school in Paris were the original organizer of the network. (Jaurès was, by the way, the principal leader of the Socialist Party in France at the beginning of the twentieth century.) They began to organize to protect the African and Arab and mostly Muslim children of their schools from deportation. They were not the first children be snatched from schools.

In France on many older school buildings you will see black marble plaques with gold lettering that remember and honor the Jewish students who were taken from the schools by the Nazis during the World War II occupation of France. The plaques typically say something like, "To the memory of the children – students of this school, deported from 1942 – 1944 because they were born Jewish." The teachers of the network said, "Never again," and organized to protect their Arab and African students. In France at the time the local prefect of police was responsible for the deportation of the children, so when the teachers got word of a possible deportation they would speak to the parents, offering to hide and protect their child until the network could pressure the local prefect not to deport the child. We joined them at a rally in Versailles to protest against a French airline for having fired a pilot who refused to fly such children back to their countries. We in the IWJG place ourselves in this tradition.

Capitalism the Source of the Problem

We work in the New Sanctuary Coalition with Latino or Haitian churches and other community groups who may not share our socialist analysis. As over time we get to know the leaders and activists in these communities we should let them know that we are socialists and what socialism means for us. We should be frank that we see capitalism and the capitalist government as the problem.

Capitalism is the cause of migration. For the last 150 years or more capitalist economic development and capitalist booms and busts have ruined the lives of millions of peasants and worker, forcing the to leave their countries in search of jobs and higher wages elsewhere. Capitalism and its imperialist wars have been another major cause of migration, though more recently drug cartels (the capitalism of contraband) and their violence have been perhaps a greater contributor to migration. And, finally, now we have climate change with rising waters in lowlands and higher temperatures everywhere making it impossible for some—and soon for many—to stay home.

We in DSA see immigrants simply as people who like ourselves who need a place to live, a way to make a living, and a decent life. We see most of the immigrants as coming to form part of our increasingly ethnically diverse working class. We are proud to join them in the fight for reforms to protect their communities from attack. As socialists we welcome them to join us in the struggle to end capitalism and in the fight to create an altogether different kind of government, a government of and for working people. We are happy to join with them and we welcome them to join with thus. That too is part of our great tradition.

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