

# NNIRR at 25: Committed to Bridging Communities and Breaking Down Walls

Dear Friends,

NNIRR is not the only one celebrating a 25th birthday this year—we share a silver anniversary with IRCA, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986—signed into law by then-President Ronald Reagan and enacted on November 6, 1986.

The National Network came into being out of the opposition to the passage of this sweeping immigration reform package, which provided, eventually, legal status to some 3 million undocumented immigrants, but which also set into place employer sanctions, a critical cornerstone of today's immigration policy. Employer sanctions—which criminalized undocumented immigrant workers—is today the anchor for punitive immigration enforcement programs and policies, which even today are continually expanding with proposals such as mandatory employment verification.

The immigrant rights movement of 25 – 30 years ago was very different from the movement today, and yet, the values and goals, towards human rights and justice, that we aspired to remain firmly in place.

The National Network was established in 1986 to facilitate national communication and coordination, to broaden the reach of our fledgling movement, to make it more inclusive, and to provide a space for long range strategizing and planning. Most of the regional and state coalitions that we recognize today came into being in the aftermath of IRCA, and many cities around the country had no immigrant rights organizing going on. We did not have the Internet and email at the time. We even typed our first funding proposal on an IBM Selectric typewriter, which we thought was pretty cool!

We are tremendously grateful to the consortium of national faith-based organizations who provided critical support to those first national consultations on immigrant rights. These efforts overlapped with the sanctuary movement and organizing to support Central American and Haitian refugees (whom Reagan dubbed 'the boat people'). And when the National Network was formalized, it became an alliance in support of immigrant AND refugee rights.

Throughout the last 25 years, the global backdrop to immigration has become increasingly present. Beyond recognition of an international perspective, the National Network has for more than 15 years played an active role in promoting the human rights of all migrants at the global level. We have aligned with key allies around the world who share our values and vision and together we are organizing and advocating for just social and economic policies so that migration becomes a choice and not a desperate act for survival of poor and displaced people and communities.

We celebrated our 15th anniversary shortly after 9/11 in 2001, and recognized that the political momentum that had been built towards reviving a new call for legalization of undocumented immigrants was shattered for any foreseeable future. The interests of "national security" continue to frame and rationalize punitive immigration enforcement measures, including the militarization of our borders. Ten years later, we are as committed



as ever to a broad and generous legalization program—but we are painfully aware that without an end to the strategy of criminalization and demonization of immigrants, a truly just legalization cannot be achieved.

Without a doubt, our movement is struggling with a strategy forward. We are frustrated and angered by dangerous and limited policy compromises that “insiders” promote and advance in Washington. The Right maneuvers—and wins—in many states with racist and mean-spirited proposals that escalate anti-immigrant hostilities and violence. And with so many issues on the table, we find ourselves going from one mobilization to another, without the difficult work of building long term capacity.

Still, we are excited by the expansion of organizing and advocacy in more diverse immigrant communities and particular sectors. Just over the past few years, organizing has expanded among domestic workers, African immigrant communities, and LGBT immigrants. Young immigrant organizers are leading local and national initiatives against deportation and for rights and equality. The fight against detention has escalated and now broadened with the exposure of the prison industry’s profiteering off of the incarceration of immigrant women, men and children.

We have another important national election in this next year, and the election campaign and outcome will no doubt set the tone and parameters of the fight for fair and just immigration reforms. Moving forward, as an institution and as part of a vibrant and ever-growing movement, NNIRR will continue to support immigrant community leadership and capacity-building, and forging much-needed alliances—among others who compose the “99%”—that are necessary to “shift the narrative” on immigration and the place and role of immigrants in our society. Immigrants have been and will continue to be vital participants and leaders in the struggle for a racially and economically just society, where human rights are not only defended, but expanded and ensured.

We thank all of you—our members, friends and allies—for your support and participation during these past 25 years and urge you to actively join us—to bridge our communities and break down walls—in this journey towards justice for all.

In justice and peace,  
and on behalf of the Board and Staff of the National Network,



Catherine Tactaquin  
Executive Director

