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“WE WILL ALL SURVIVE TOGETHER”: Lessons from the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride

This article is adapted from a conversation that took place among three participants on the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, a twelve-day bus ride from September 20 to October 4, 2003 originating in nine American cities and ending in Washington, D.C.¹ The four main goals of the ride were to advocate for the right to a path to citizenship, the right to be reunited with families, the right to justice in the workplace, and civil rights for all. Over 900 riders participated nationally, and the bus from Seattle included riders representing 22 countries and 14 languages. The Seattle IWFR Steering Committee included over 23 local community organizations and was co-chaired by Pramila Jayapal, Executive Director of the Hate Free Zone Campaign of Washington,² and Steve Williamson, Executive Secretary of the King County Labor Council (AFL-CIO). Three of the riders on the Seattle bus gathered at Seattle University School of Law on October 28, 2003 to reflect on their experiences with the Seattle Journal for Social Justice. The Editors wish to thank the Hate Free Zone for its help in coordinating this conversation.—Eds.

SJSJ: Why did you decide to go on the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride?

Negin³: I went on the ride as the daughter of immigrants and as a person committed to social justice. On one level, the ride symbolized my parents’ struggle and the fight for civil rights of everyone who has been affected by racial profiling post 9/11, including Muslims and members of the Iranian community. On a broader level, the ride was an opportunity for me to support everyone else’s struggles, because my fellow Iranians’ stories exist in so many forms in other immigrant communities and communities of color.

Ahmed⁴: Back home in Somalia, I was studying world history; that’s when I learned about the 1960s Freedom Rides. They struggled at that time. I learned about how the rides happened, how they changed the situation, and

how the government responded. I wasn't thinking this was the same ride when I said I would go. I knew it was a demonstration, but I didn't think about the connection between that ride and this one.

When I came to America, I saw a big difference from what I had imagined when I was back home. I decided to go on the Freedom Ride because of my experience with immigration. I wanted to let the American people know what immigrants are going through. I wanted the government to listen to us when we went to Washington D.C. The way I see it, whether I am Somalian, or Russian, or Iranian, immigrants are in the same boat concerning civil rights, family separation, and justice in the work place. I asked the organizers of the ride if there were any other Somalians going on the ride, and they said no. I decided to participate so that the Somalian community would be represented.

Mako⁵: I hate to admit it, but I almost didn't come along. The Freedom Ride was for immigrants, and I'm not an immigrant, so I wished them well and didn't think I was a part of it. I admire what the Hate Free Zone is doing, and so when they called me and asked me to join, I said, "But I'm not an immigrant." They said, "Well, your story is still a part of what we're after." I was worried I would get motion sickness, but after they asked, I decided, "Well, maybe my story could be helpful." I thought about when we had our dark days, when my parents and I were put in the concentration camp. There were so few people who stood up for us. Those few people who did, we have their names etched on our hearts for taking the courage to stand up for us at such a time.

My friends thought I was crazy, but I went anyway. I heard everyone's stories and they were so fresh—no buffer. My story had a buffer of sixty years. My story still hurts after sixty years, but my fellow bus riders were experiencing these hardships now.

Negin: I also went on the ride because of Mako's story. I learned about the internment camps in eighth grade. I took a trip earlier this summer, a couple of months before the ride, which set the tone for me. My partner and I drove down to Colorado Springs to meet my family. In Western Idaho we saw a sign about Minidoka Internment Camp. We were running late, but I thought, "When are we ever going to have a chance to visit the site of an internment camp?" They're so far removed from any living soul that you can't easily take those types of trips. I bet more Americans have visited the sites of German concentration camps than have visited the sites of American internment camps of Japanese Americans. So we went. All that's standing is some of the rubble of one of the welcome buildings. That's all there is because the living quarters were not permanent structures that would have provided warmth or anything else for the internees. That trip touched me and spoke to all the fears that our communities are having, even if we're scared of talking about them. Then I heard Ahmed's story and I knew I could not say no to going on the ride.

SJSJ: Would you talk about your personal experiences following the events of September 11?

Ahmed: I believe there was a connection to 9/11 when I was arrested. I had an immigration court date on October 24, 2001, and the judge denied my case for asylum. I said I would go back home. I was telling the truth, and I was prepared to give up everything here. I asked them how much time I had to get ready to go, and the judge told me between thirty and sixty days. But only fourteen days after the court date, on November 7, the INS came to my house and woke me up in my pajamas. I had never been arrested or cuffed before. They terrorized me—I was scared to death. They handcuffed me and put shackles on my legs. At first, I didn't even think of immigration. I asked what I had done, and they said they were going to deport me. I had already told the INS I would go, and I wasn't running from them, so I said, "Don't cuff me." But they said it was procedure and

they had to cuff me. On that day they were looking for a terrorist; there was a terrorist alert. I believe there was a connection with my arrest because I am Muslim.

After that, one of the other Somalians heard about Hate Free Zone and he called them. Hate Free Zone talked to some Seattle lawyers, and the lawyers volunteered their time to help us. The judge decided that we couldn't be sent back to Somalia because it hasn't had a government since 1991.⁶

Since I got released, I am still having a problem finding a job. Nobody says, "You are Muslim and we aren't going to hire you." No, they don't say it that way. The employers are smart and they [discriminate] in other ways. On the applications they ask you if you have ever been arrested. I say no, because immigration law is not the same as criminal law. Then when I get to the interview, they ask me why I left my last employer. I have to tell the story that my employer terminated me because immigration arrested me. Then they think, "Oh, immigration arrested you, and you are a Muslim." They make a connection with terrorism. They say they will call me within two to three days, but they never do. It's still going on. I can't get a job.

Mako: I went on the bus to tell my story. I've been fighting racism all my life. When the Oklahoma City bombing happened, my immediate response was, "I hope someone of color is not responsible," because if someone of color was responsible, I knew it would be like it was for us during World War II—an enemy race. Then we learned that it was Timothy McVeigh who was responsible, an individual white guy—not an enemy race.

We were relieved that it wasn't one of us. But when September 11 happened, we knew immediately that someone was going to have to duck; whether you were a culprit or not, you would have to duck. I expected to hear stories about kids on the playground getting harassed because of their skin color or the way they dress. I expected to hear about people getting

hysterical and going after people in collective groups. It's happened to us before. I keep hearing over and over again from my own community, "Don't let it happen again." It's going to happen all over again.

When the commissioners came around and studied the reasons behind the Japanese American internment in World War II, they identified three main causes: first, racism; second, hysteria; and third, a lack of political leadership. All three exist today. Racism is alive and well. Certainly there is hysteria over the threats—you hear "Muslim" and "terrorist" like they belong together. "Muslim-terrorist." Lastly, there is a lack of political leadership, and I'm very concerned about that. The ride addressed the hysteria and the lack of leadership. It raised awareness that we should go after culprits, not a whole group of people. September 11 has affected me because the Japanese American community says, "We know. This happened to us." We want the legacy of our experience to be that this never happens again to any other group. We're very serious about it. There are people being detained without due process, and it's shaken up my community terribly.

When the ride reached Boise, we saw a wonderful, brand new park there, called the Anne Frank Human Rights Memorial. It's a beautiful park with waterfalls, benches, and walls with quotations from Martin Luther King Jr., Sojourner Truth, Chief Seattle, and Mahatma Ghandi. But as I went around looking at the walls, I kept thinking, "This is in Boise! This is where I was incarcerated, but there is no reference to that in this human rights park!" I couldn't believe it. People said, "No, Mako—it's there." So I went back and looked. There were two sentences that said something as benign as, "When the children were in the camps, they sang 'My Country 'Tis of Thee' and said the Pledge of Allegiance." What the hell was that?! This is how watered down it gets. If that's how little people remember about what happened, how can we address today's problems?

Negin: If you remember there was an EgyptAir crash a few years ago.⁷ After that, the first thing in the news was that the Muslim pilot had been reciting an invocation, *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim*. They suggested that this was evidence he had purposely downed the plane. It was ironic, because I say that prayer every time before I take a car trip or any kind of journey. When we undertake any kind of act, we begin it with a solemn invocation to God, “In the name of Allah, most gracious, most merciful.” I fly every now and then, and at the time of the crash I immediately thought, “Am I going to be able to say this prayer?” So now I quietly say my prayers and hope that nobody panics.

Various leaders have fanned the flames of fear and because of that innocent people—immigrants and people of color—suffer. Take, for example, Los Angeles. A million Iranians live in L.A., the largest population of Iranians outside Iran. When Special Registration⁸ began, hundreds of Iranians were arrested and told they were going to be deported. Several of them have been deported, and this poses a lot of dangers to them if they return, given the state of politics since [Iran’s 1979 Islamic] Revolution. It’s not quite the same death sentence that deportation is to Somalians, but it is still a very real possibility depending on who the person is. So, after twenty-three years of living in this country as a resident alien, my dad decided that he needed to become a U.S. citizen. My parents never wanted to become citizens. They came here twenty-three years ago never intending to stay. But then Iraq invaded Iran, and their homes became war zones. So even though they appreciated the opportunities that this country gave to their children, their hearts were always in Iran. They never felt welcomed in this country, or that this could really become their country because of the racism and the sentiment against Muslims that exists here. When I went on the ride, I was framing it in terms of my parents’ story. Then I heard the stories of the people on the ride who want to become citizens and have devoted so much of their lives to making a better future for themselves in this country. This irony wasn’t lost on me.

SJSJ: What did you learn from the ride?

Mako: I learned some things about myself that I never expected [to learn]. I never expected to get so caught up in it. I just thought I was there for an intellectual purpose—to speak out. I never expected to get so close to these people and get so caught up in their stories. There was a little bit of magic that happened on that trip, and everybody on the bus acknowledged that. It showed when we got off the plane on our return to Seattle. We sang songs in the concourse, we took pictures, and nobody wanted to disperse. And I came to the conclusion that if everyone had that kind of experience, then we wouldn't need another Freedom Ride, because we would see everyone as real people, with real stories. And we won't have to explain when we meet the next stranger; we will meet her as a human being, rather than looking at the color of her skin or seeing her as a threat. I wasn't prepared for that little magic. I learned that even at my age, I can still grow and learn.

As far as politics go, I have been to D.C. and lobbied, but this was a different experience. What an adventure it was; what an opportunity it was. I heard a lot of people telling me how committed they are. You can get jaded, but I learned to see their thrill in it. They were so positive. But we always go one step forward and two steps back. The reality is, there are a lot of Americans out there who haven't heard any of our stories and have very bigoted ideas about what should be done with us. I do somewhat worry about over-optimism. Progress comes in little drops at a time. I want to protect people who get over-excited, almost like a mother. I cannot describe this trip—it was an experience, an education, and it was emotionally uplifting.

Ahmed: I had never left Seattle since I came to America, so I learned a lot on the Freedom Ride. I learned about geography. When you see this country, then you know how beautiful it is.

Before the trip, I believed that Americans were guided by media, and that they only did what they saw on T.V. This trip changed my mind. I met a lot of nice people, people who know what's really going on.

In Omaha, I stayed with a family—a beautiful couple, almost sixty years old, very nice people. The woman had been a part of the 1960s Freedom Rides. She'd been beaten, raped, and arrested. She asked me the hardest question of all, "Are you committed to this ride? Are you committed to losing everything?" I said, "What do you mean by that?" She said, "You're in a bus with forty people; some of them might be arrested or beaten. Are you willing to go all the way?" I said, "I think so." I felt that I was ready for it. At that time, I was committed to facing anything that happened, even if they came and beat us. I was ready to go all the way.

Then I witnessed something in D.C. I heard Congressman John Lewis speak. He was on the original ride and had also been beaten. I said, "Oh, my God. Am I really as important as he is?" From that day I realized that this was the most important thing I've ever had to do. Not for myself, but for all immigrants in this country. From day one to the last day, I never stopped learning.

Negin: What you say, Ahmed, reminds me that the mutual education that happened on the bus was really amazing. There was an opportunity for all of us to learn more about each other's history, and how it's a part of the history of the United States. To learn about the deep commitment of the Freedom Riders of the 60s and to see that activists have been carrying on the civil rights struggle for years, and they continue to be committed. I started out with more pessimism, but I was pleasantly surprised. In Omaha there were also many wonderful white allies supporting civil rights and immigrant rights. I never expected so much support in Omaha! And partnered with that was the warmth of the communities that welcomed us. For example, in Salt Lake City the Mexican community center, the Centro Civico Mexicano, hosted an amazing dinner for all of us. I'd like to see a

time when all these different ethnic groups and social justice folks open up their hospitality even more to one another. It was amazing to feel so welcomed by the members of the Latino and Eastern European communities and by the Polynesian dancers who danced for us. At the outset it seemed this support was on the surface, that it wasn't a deep commitment—they just made us food. But it *is* a deeper commitment. You know you are speaking to a lasting connection when you find yourself talking with members of these communities three days later.

All across the country, members of the Iranian community found me in the middle of huge crowds. They expressed their feelings of deep isolation and their surprise: first, to see me as somebody who identifies as Iranian involved in speaking out about other people's stories, and second, to see me with all of these different people. Not only did it give them the courage to open up to the possibility of doing social justice work themselves, but it also gave them the chance to see other people's social justice issues, which is very exciting to me.

The culmination of this learning was when we were lobbying Congressman Adam Smith. Richard, an African American man who was along on the ride, spoke of his experiences of racial profiling. And there was Ahmed, and there was me, and when we spoke, we drew connections to each other's struggles. We had a united message. We spoke about the importance of defending civil rights, not just for immigrants, but for all people of color in this country who continue to experience racism. That happened on a trajectory. We couldn't have done that on the fourth day of the trip. It required difficulties with each other and learning how to communicate. Learning to trust, listen, and open up our vulnerable selves to each other. We had to be willing to listen to one another and learn about our own stories before we could get to the point where we could communicate them to others. That gives me hope. I know you can't reproduce the Freedom Ride for everyone—it would be nice if we could—but this learning how to work with people from different cultural

backgrounds, including white people, and different social classes and religious backgrounds. . .we did it. We did it, and we were successful. We had difficulties, but they were important in learning how to move forward with each other.

SJSJ: What do you think it's going to take for this country to begin to embrace the principles you've talked about?

Mako: My orientation is education, and I think it worked so well because we gave each other the chance to educate us all. We started off with nice songs, but we also delved into the stories and the heart-wrenching experiences. I think the only hope is to understand that we can only make progress together. We have to put our barriers aside. This is what we have to learn. We don't have to go on a bus ride to learn it. We can learn it in church, school, or social justice organizations. We will all survive together. In small ways we demonstrated this on our twelve-day bus ride. Our only hope is to understand that we are all human beings and that we all understand loss. My father was taken away sixty-one years ago. I told that story, and it was amazing how many people could relate to the feelings of loss or separation from a loved one. Education isn't facts and figures—it's teaching people to be human beings and to care for other human beings on this planet. To me, our only real hope is education.

Ahmed: American people—whether they are white, black, or whatever [color] they are—they are not bad people. There are no bad people, there's only a lack of communication. Some people heard our message and understood it. They may respond, now or next year, by voting for [whomever] is going to support our ideas. If we start telling our stories, we begin to understand. The first point is talking to each other. Then you feel like you have someone beside you. When you talk, you get what you want.

Negin: I will add to what you both have said by framing it in terms of organizing. A lot of us talked about this as a beginning. Now we're at a crucial point where we are going back to our own communities. We need to spread the message in our own communities about what we saw, what we did, and where there are opportunities. For example, Mako wrote a letter that was published in the three Asian newspapers in town. We really do need to take leadership roles in organizing our communities. Everybody on this bus, even though we started with very different skills and experiences, had some kind of common experience with organizing. We had a common learning experience about what's necessary to build trust, and how to keep the faith during the really hard times. And that's the challenge right now as we return to our own lives and face potential deportation and separation from our families. It's a challenge for us to take leadership and inspire others to take leadership.

Last week I had the opportunity to speak at a Rolling Thunder⁹ event in town. One of the things I brought up at the event was the challenge of organizing in a segregated city like Seattle, where there is such separation of communities. I put the challenge out there to all the wonderful white organizers there to step outside their own communities. To learn how to follow the leadership of people of color who are organizing and doing amazing things. To start working together to build trust. I wanted them to see that we welcome our white allies. This is a partnership, not a separation that we want to divide us.

Mako: I visited Tyee High School, near Seatac [Washington], and my goodness, what a diverse group. I told the student body that this is what the world looks like. I know that with all this diversity, there will be problems—it's inherent in racist America. But if you learn to value diversity, it will be a skill that will be valuable to you for the rest of your life. I told them to look at this opportunity that they have in front of them right now to listen to their parents' stories, their neighbors' stories. Look at

the differences, but also look at the commonalities. When we find both, then we can start building on something that is solid ground.

Negin: One of the other challenges is to expand the scope of what we're talking about in terms of social justice. In addition to civil rights for all, we also campaigned for creating a clear path to citizenship, for reunification of families, and for justice on the job. I think that we can do this, and I think that we can learn from each other and expand the scope of what we discussed on the ride, so that we truly build a committed and responsible social justice movement.

¹ The 2003 Freedom Rides were inspired by the original Freedom Rides of 1961, which were organized to protest illegal racial segregation on interstate buses in the American South. For more information on both rides, see <http://www.iwfr.org> (last visited Nov. 21, 2003).

² The Hate Free Zone Campaign of Washington is a community organization formed to respond to hate crimes and discrimination against communities of color in the wake of September 11, 2001. For more information on HFZ, see <http://www.hatefreezone.org>.

³ Negin Almassi is a masters student in public affairs at the University of Washington. She is a proud honorary member of Women of Steel (United Steelworkers of America) and a former director of Purdue Students Against Sweatshops. Inspired by her experiences on the Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, she looks forward to a life dedicated to social justice work.

⁴ Ahmed Noor was born into a big family in Somalia, where he grew up. He studied electronics at a technical college in Milan, Italy. After he returned to Somalia, civil war broke out. Ahmed was soon arrested by the rebel-controlled government and forced to work in labor camps for three years. He escaped to the United States in 1996 and pursued a career in electronics until his arrest by immigration officials in October 2001.

⁵ Mako Nakagawa was born in Seattle, WA and has always been an active member of its Asian American community. Mako is past president of the Seattle Chapter of the Japanese American Citizen League (JACL), member of the Asian Pacific American Educational Think Tank, and member of the Wing Luke Asian Museum. During World War II, she was interned with her family and thousands of other Japanese Americans from the west coast. As a result of that experience, she became a teacher focusing on multicultural education, and eventually an elementary school principal. She is an American citizen who is now enjoying being (mostly) retired..

⁶ *Ali v. Ashcroft*, 213 F.R.D. 390 (W.D. Wash. 2003) (granting an injunction against deportation proceedings), *aff'd*, *Ali v. Ashcroft*, 346 F.3d 873 (9th Cir. 2003). *See also* John Iwasaki, *Somalis Won't Be Deported for Now*, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Sept. 18, 2003, at B1.

⁷ Egyptair Flight 990 crashed into the Atlantic Ocean near Nantucket Island, MA, on October 31, 1999, killing everyone aboard. For more information, see <http://www.nts.gov/events/ea990/default.htm> (last visited Nov. 21, 2003).

⁸ "Special Registration" refers to an order issued by the INS that immigrant men over age sixteen from twenty-five countries were required to register at INS offices by December 15, 2002. The order came under heavy criticism after hundreds of people who voluntarily registered were arrested and held without charges. Although Special Registration occurred across the country, the large population of Iranians in Los Angeles was particularly targeted. See Megan Garvey, Martha Groves, and Harry Weinstein, *Hundreds Are Detained After Visits to INS; Thousands Protest Arrests of Mideast Men and Boys Who Complied with Order to Register*, L.A. TIMES, Dec. 19, 2002, at A1.

⁹ The Rolling Thunder Down Home Democracy Tour has been called a "county fair with guts." The tour's goals are to reinvigorate democracy by bringing together community organizations and constituencies that share a common goal of empowering people. "It aims, in short, to jump-start a movement of populist awakening." See <http://www.rollingthundertour.org> (last visited Nov. 21, 2003).