

2023

Cecilia Prado's Comments - Phase 2

Cecilia Prado

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.law.utk.edu/tennesseelawreview>



Part of the [Courts Commons](#), and the [Legal Profession Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Prado, Cecilia (2023) "Cecilia Prado's Comments - Phase 2," *Tennessee Law Review*. Vol. 90: Iss. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://ir.law.utk.edu/tennesseelawreview/vol90/iss3/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Legal Scholarship Repository: A Service of the Joel A. Katz Law Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tennessee Law Review by an authorized editor of Legal Scholarship Repository: A Service of the Joel A. Katz Law Library. For more information, please contact eliza.boles@utk.edu.



DATE DOWNLOADED: Mon Aug 12 13:42:05 2024

SOURCE: Content Downloaded from [HeinOnline](#)

Citations:

Please note: citations are provided as a general guideline. Users should consult their preferred citation format's style manual for proper citation formatting.

Bluebook 21st ed.

Cecilia Prado, Cecilia Prado's Comments, 90 TENN. L. REV. 579 (2023).

ALWD 7th ed.

Cecilia Prado, Cecilia Prado's Comments, 90 Tenn. L. Rev. 579 (2023).

APA 7th ed.

Prado, Cecilia. (2023). Cecilia prado's comments. Tennessee Law Review, 90(3), 579-586.

Chicago 17th ed.

Cecilia Prado, "Cecilia Prado's Comments," Tennessee Law Review 90, no. 3 (Spring 2023): 579-586

McGill Guide 9th ed.

Cecilia Prado, "Cecilia Prado's Comments" (2023) 90:3 Tenn L Rev 579.

AGLC 4th ed.

Cecilia Prado, 'Cecilia Prado's Comments' (2023) 90(3) Tennessee Law Review 579

MLA 9th ed.

Prado, Cecilia. "Cecilia Prado's Comments." Tennessee Law Review, vol. 90, no. 3, Spring 2023, pp. 579-586. HeinOnline.

OSCOLA 4th ed.

Cecilia Prado, 'Cecilia Prado's Comments' (2023) 90 Tenn L Rev 579

Please note: citations are provided as a general guideline. Users should consult their preferred citation format's style manual for proper citation formatting.

Provided by:

University of Tennessee College of Law Joel A. Katz Law Library

-- Your use of this HeinOnline PDF indicates your acceptance of HeinOnline's Terms and Conditions of the license agreement available at

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/License>

-- The search text of this PDF is generated from uncorrected OCR text.

-- To obtain permission to use this article beyond the scope of your license, please use:

[Copyright Information](#)

CECILIA PRADO'S COMMENTS – PANEL II

CECILIA PRADO

“If we cannot agree on the root causes of the problems our communities face ... we will not be able to move as one ...”

Hi everyone, my name is Cecilia. Thank you so much, Fran, for inviting me, it is such an honor.

I'm going to talk directly about my experience. I heard a lot of people talk about NAFTA in the first panel. I am a third-generation organizer from Northern Mexico, raised in a Kickapoo family of militant steelworkers. My family belongs to one of the only locals in the country that were able to challenge the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (CTM) during their heyday; a massive and powerful national labor confederation with a long history of collaboration with employers to suppress worker activism. Their fight was not easy, but it resulted in significant benefits to the workers' lives; benefits that I got to enjoy one and two generations later. That taught me so much about what collective struggle can do. The local was eventually targeted by Carlos Salinas, the Mexican President who drafted NAFTA.

I came to the US around 2009, which is a time when the Drug War in Mexico was reaching the peak of its violence. Similar to the economic consequences that NAFTA created for the Mexican people, the violence generated by the drug war in Mexico was a direct result of United States foreign policy. These experiences brought me to the United States with an understanding of imperialism and its complexities.

Before moving to Tennessee, I worked as a Microbiology researcher in Western Massachusetts and organized as a volunteer with regional restaurant and farm workers. Then, in 2019, I traveled to Mississippi to help coordinate emerging community-led committees in towns directly impacted by the worst ICE raids in history. ICE kidnapped about 800 people on the first day of school. They did not follow proper guidelines and detained both or all the guardians of an overwhelming number of children. You might imagine the chaos that erupted when suddenly hundreds of children had no one to look after them upon returning from their first day of classes. I was one of approximately 50 Latinx, Spanish-speaking organizers tasked with supporting the creation of community-led committees in the towns impacted by the raids. We quickly realized it wasn't enough that all of us spoke Spanish because most of the families affected by the raids were Indigenous Mayan from Guatemala and Central America with

many not speaking Spanish. We encountered youth in their early teens working at the poultry plants— something more and more common every day across the United States despite our American Exceptionalism making us think those kinds of things do not happen here. But, yes, children do work dangerous jobs in the United States. Your food was likely produced with child labor. If you live in the South, the buildings you frequent or inhabit likely used child labor.

My experience in Mississippi was the deciding factor that led me to leave Massachusetts to organize full-time in the US South. My people—Indigenous people, and immigrants from the Global South—are highly concentrated in Southern states, working in industries like agriculture, manufacturing, hospitality, and construction; playing essential roles in the region's economy yet oftentimes struggling to survive. While I was organizing in Mississippi, it became extremely obvious, if it wasn't already, that as political workers we need a full understanding of the people we are organizing and the terrain where we are organizing.

We must break the cycle of reaction that many of our organizations often get stuck in. We must understand our people's problems and their root causes. We must understand the conditions in which we are organizing. We must guide our work with a bold vision that speaks to the material reality of our people. Additionally, to build long-lasting transformative change, we need more than one organization to have a correct structural analysis and commitment to rigorous evidence-based practices. We need an ecosystem.

During the last four years, I was the Executive Director at a worker center based in Nashville, Tennessee, one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States. To understand the implications of organizing in this context, we first need to ask ourselves the question: "What does it mean to be a rapidly gentrifying city?". It means that there is a large influx of capital into the area, accompanied by the institutions and structures in place to protect it, such as policing. An additional factor to consider is that this rapid gentrification is happening in one of the most hostile political environments for working-class people, a scenario that is becoming far too common in cities across the US South.

Nashville's exponential growth came with a booming construction industry. Additionally, Nashville is one of the most dangerous cities in the country to work in the construction industry. The construction workforce is composed of a highly exploited workforce primarily consisting of Indigenous immigrants from Latin America and Black, unhoused, or formerly incarcerated temp workers hired by staffing agencies. As a sector, staffing agencies are known to have highly

predatory practices. Due to existing barriers to employment, some workers can only find work through these agencies which take away their bargaining power and often expose them to some of the most unsafe working conditions. In the South, staffing agencies are ubiquitous on construction projects.

A significant percentage of the workers we were organizing were Indigenous immigrants from Latin America, specifically Maya Achí and Maya Q'eqchi. As immigrant and worker rights organizers, we asked ourselves three key questions: 1) “Who are our people?”; 2) “Why did our people migrate to this region?”; and 3) “What is our people’s leverage?”.

We learned that Mayan peoples are fleeing their places of origin because of the impact of multinational corporations moving to their regions to engage in the dispossession, exploitation, and extractivism of Mayan peoples and their lands. Western industries engaged in activities like mining, palm oil production, and the construction of hydroelectric plants are destroying whole Mayan communities along with their local ecosystems— exacerbating the effects of natural disasters in the region. So, a large number of Mayan people have relocated to Nashville to find work in the booming construction industry. They are the workers building the town that I live in.

Political workers talk obsessively about “building power” .In our context, we had to ask ourselves “What does it mean to build political power when the majority of our people cannot vote?”; also, “How do we build working-class political power in one of the most pro-capital states in the country?”.

We cannot have an immigrant rights movement without a labor movement. As political workers, we must be able to identify what is our people’s main source of power or leverage. We know that immigrants are here because it is in the interest of corporations to have them here, to steal the surplus of their labor. Through this framework, we identified the construction industry as a strategic industry to organize in the state of Tennessee. Construction in Tennessee is characterized by massive profits, connection to the region’s power structure, and a highly exploited workforce composed primarily of people of color.

My fellow panelist Sherley Cruz described Tennessee’s hostile labor laws. Tennessee has the worst concentration of preemption laws that limit nearly all avenues to improve working conditions for workers through local public policy.

I learned about the obstacles to passing local pro-worker legislation from personal experience. Between 2020–2021, the members and staff at the worker center I used to lead helped pass a

local ordinance to raise safety and workplace standards at construction projects funded by the city of Nashville. The ordinance was immediately preempted by the Tennessee State legislature, passing a state bill that removed the ability of local agencies to regulate construction projects.

After the local ordinance we worked so hard to pass got immediately preempted by the state, we had to assess whether it was worth our time to continue to spend our energy and resources on local policy campaigns, or if we needed to engage in alternative and/or experimental strategies to build political power.

We were posed with the challenge of building political power in an area that was not just hostile to working people at the level of its state government and laws. Tennessee is also an area with one of the lowest levels of union density in the country, a predictable factor given the rampant corporate power that exists in our region. Decades of targeted attacks by a consolidated opposition have caused labor unions in the state to adopt a risk-averse attitude. However, it would be irresponsible to solely attribute the current state of the labor movement in our state to the power of our opposition. As a movement, we must accept that while the corporate right has spent the last fifty years building the infrastructure to push its agenda, our movement has been engaging in ineffective strategies.

For the left to win again, it will require working people to build strong, resilient, and democratic organizations capable of seizing power from key industries and institutions to build the capacity to shape material conditions. It will also require that we build the necessary infrastructure to move a political agenda based on the reality and needs of working people. Therefore, as organizers or political workers, it is our responsibility to be in real community with working-class people to make all of this possible.

In our particular case, to transform an anti-worker political landscape with low-union density into fertile ground for labor organizing, we first needed to build trust with the community. Building trust between construction workers of color and the labor movement was quite the challenge, in part caused by the historic exclusion of workers of color from building trades unions. With that in mind, it occurred to us to reach out to workers outside of the workplace and start our organizing efforts focusing on the other side of gentrification: the lack of access to dignified and affordable housing.

Housing is a hot issue across Nashville and many other cities in the country. The Nashville housing crisis has reached a very critical point. You virtually cannot enter a conversation with a fellow Nashvillian without the topic of housing being brought up.

Resentment towards developers, Airbnbs, and “gentrifiers” has become a staple of our local culture.

In addition to the organic agitation that exists around the issue of housing in our local communities, we noticed that construction workers were often concentrated within specific housing complexes and neighborhoods around the city. Many newly arrived immigrants working in construction choose to live next to their coworkers in apartment complexes that target their demographic. Living next to their coworkers is highly convenient for newer immigrants, as it allows them to share a ride to work since many do not have access to cars or want to avoid driving without a license.

Our assessment led us to predict that supporting workers and their families to build tenant unions could be an avenue to build trust between them and the labor movement, develop their leadership and organizing capacity, and build political power. Ultimately, these are the same workers that we want to organize in the workplace. Engaging in housing work implied a major practice shift for our organization, which came with considerable risks. First, our worker center did not receive any grants to focus on tenant organizing. We had to convince our existing funders that this was a strategic move.

In 2021, we supported the creation of two tenant unions in South and East Nashville—the Mosaic Warriors and Dickerson Road United in Struggle (DRUS) tenant unions—primarily composed of construction workers of color. The tenant unions secured historic victories against out-of-state billionaire developers.

The Mosaic Warriors tenant union is based at an apartment complex in South Nashville that had a history of human rights violations against immigrant families. Over a decade ago, the landlord at the time collaborated with ICE to raid the complex as a tactic to evict residents. Years later, a different landlord hired private security to scare residents from their homes. Understandably, residents were wary of law enforcement, which up to that date had been used as an intimidation tactic against them. Through serious organizing, the Mosaic Warriors stopped 89 evictions, banned police from their premises, canceled rent for 2 months, secured long-overdue maintenance repairs, and secured a soccer field—the last being a victory of the tenant union’s youth committee.

The DRUS tenant union was composed of mobile home residents who were facing a sudden eviction. Despite owning their trailers, they lacked the same protections as traditional homeowners because they did not own the land underneath their homes. Through similarly rigorous organizing, they were able to delay their eviction, cancel rent for 3 months, secure support with relocation, and around \$9,000 in

financial compensation per family— allowing the residents to remain in the neighborhood they were rooted in.

Through these campaigns, we engaged hundreds of construction workers and supported them through the process of learning how to organize within a structure for the things that they and their people need. Also, we intentionally engaged labor unions in the campaigns, who supported our efforts by helping with door-knocking and phone banking. Our pitch to them was basically, “Hey, workers are not responsive to you at their workplaces. This could be an avenue for you to build trust with them and shift the narrative that they have internalized about what a union is.”

In addition to material wins for working-class people, our worker center solidified its reputation as a serious organization, and our strategic and tactical alliances multiplied. In 2022, in collaboration with our strategic partners, we had built enough influence to convince the city’s affordable housing fund to allocate \$7 million in their 2023 budget for housing cooperatives projects built over community land trusts for residents under 50 percent Area Median Income regardless of immigration status. In 2022, we also built a large coalition of congregations that were interested in partnering with nonprofit developers and donating their land to build affordable housing.

In conclusion, our prediction that we could build political power and organizing capacity by engaging in housing work turned out to be correct. We showed how to get things done in a hostile political environment by building social power through issues that matter to our target constituents, instead of spending most of our time talking to local or state representatives in a legislative arena controlled by the opposition.

In addition to successes, my experiences supporting worker-led campaigns—whether targeting the workers’ housing or workplace—and leading a worker center were accompanied by key lessons.

The first lesson I learned is the crucial role that transformative leadership development plays in the success and sustainability of political work. I recognize that developing the kind of leaders that are ready to develop strategy and hold real authority within our spaces is quite a difficult task, and yet it is our historic responsibility. We cannot just romanticize worker leadership. We must spend the necessary time and effort required to develop serious leaders who understand the root causes of oppression, are prepared to hold the responsibility of the work, and can guide their direct communities towards freedom. Developing leaders of this caliber from within the working class requires us as political workers and organizers to go beyond teaching organizing skills or conducting Know-Your-Rights

workshops. We must go deeper. We must take the time to bring political clarity around the structure, history, and function of the system that oppresses us. We must take the time to support the development of emotional intelligence among our people, fostering spaces where working people can speak assertively about issues and strategies, and take and receive feedback.

The second lesson I learned is the importance of organizing not just our target constituency, but any sector necessary for our people to win. It became evident that construction workers alone were not going to win their demands for safe and dignified workplaces alone, which led us to engage once again in power analysis and identify key sectors of people that could support our members' fight for change. Through this assessment, we identified students as a strategic demographic to organize, particularly students connected to institutions that hold a significant portion of the local construction market.

Finally, the third lesson made clear to me is the importance of struggling for strategic alignment in our efforts to build strong and sustainable movement infrastructure. No single organization will transform society. We must have a powerful ecosystem on the left, if we truly aim to change these entrenched exploitative systems. In addition to identifying the right alliances to ensure we have all the forces necessary to win and to successfully consolidate our efforts, the different players must share a structural analysis of the systems of oppression. If we cannot agree on the root causes of the problems that our communities face, or the structure, function, and history of the systems of oppression, we will not be able to move together as one. There is no separate patriarchal class. There is no separate white supremacist class. There is only one capitalist class that is both patriarchal and white supremacist. We do not have to share the same strategies or tactics, but we must share a correct structural analysis to land on the right priorities to move our agenda forward.

I am convinced that if we can fulfill our collective responsibility to struggle for political clarity, engage in power analysis and deep assessment of our practices, and develop transformational leaders within our class, the prospect of realizing dignified lives for our people will be possible. We can change the narrative around who can win demands, who can bring forward a political agenda, and ultimately, who gets to shape common sense.

