

TO THE POINT



By Gihan Perera

A QUESTION OF POWER

Urbanizing the human rights framework.

IN 1964, Malcolm X pressed the need for the civil rights movement to expand its scope and adopt a human rights framework:

"... if they would expand their civil rights movement to a human rights movement it would internationalize it. Now, as a civil rights movement, it remains within the confines of American domestic policy...whereas if they expanded the civil rights movement to a human rights movement then they would be eligible to take the case of the Negro to the United Nations....our African brothers and our Asian brothers and Latin American brothers can place it on the agenda at the General Assembly ...and Uncle Sam has no more say-so in it then."

Malcolm's comments were at the height of a national civil rights movement that had hit the limits of its ability to seek redress within the racist and exploitative liberal democracy of the United States. The United Nations was an alternate body outside the purview of what Malcolm and others viewed as the non-reformable U.S. government.

Another compelling use of the human rights framework was more recently put forward by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Kentucky. CIW has successfully built an organization of migrant farm workers who are challenging large and powerful corporations for better wages. They have been successful in their fight against Yum! Brands, Inc., the parent company of Taco Bell, winning significant wage increases. They got that victory by strategically depending on people who weren't directly

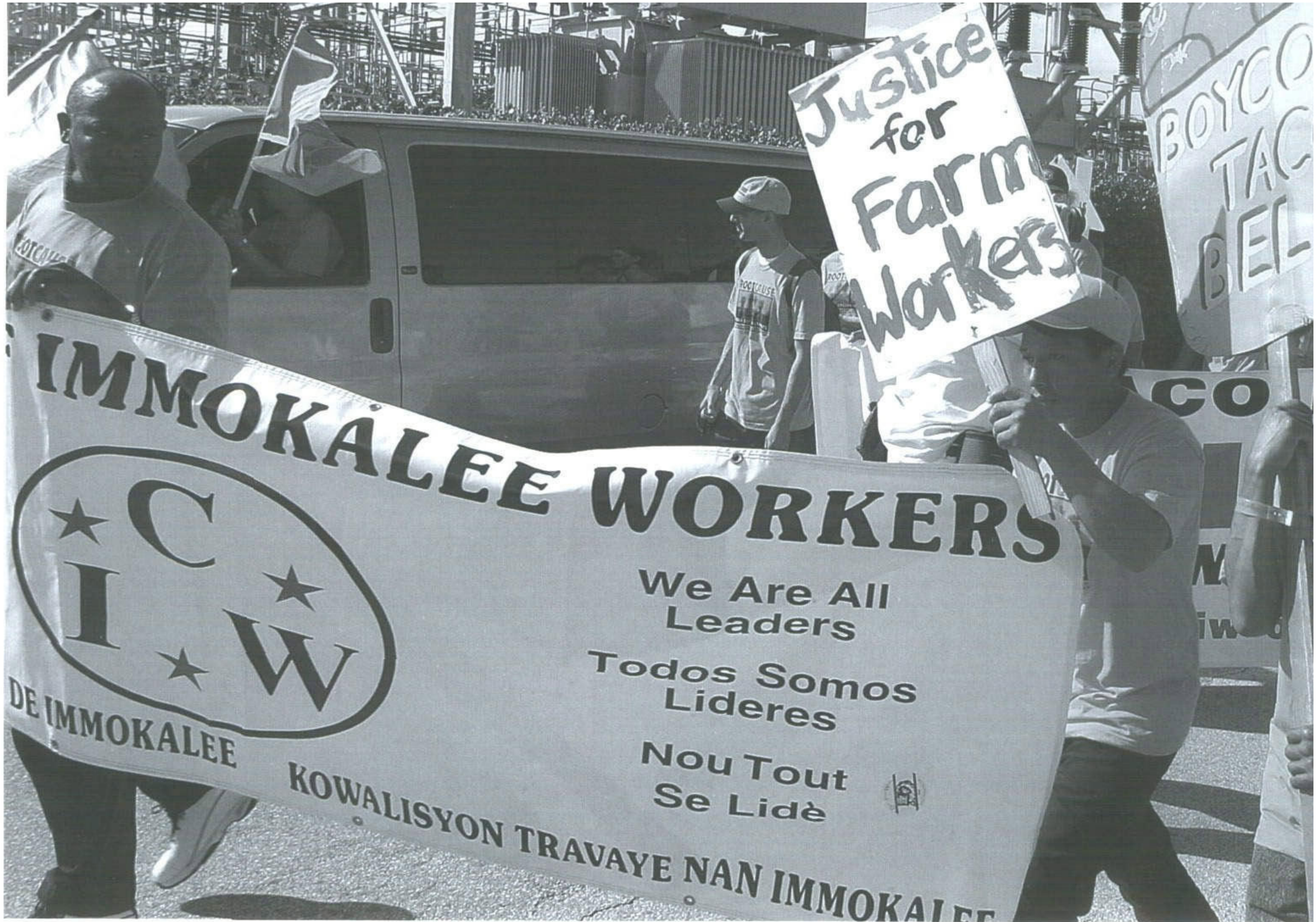
affected (i.e., farm workers). CIW uses a human rights perspective to nationally engage students and faith-based groups, and it seems to be working. They are winning and mobilizing a large movement in support of rural workers.

In both these cases, the human rights frame provided a number of advantages. The United Nations is an avenue outside the control of the U.S. government with accountability (at least in theory) to the vast majority of the world's population who are poor and of color. It also establishes a universal humanist set of moral assertions that go beyond particular issues and provides a foundation of moral credibility. In doing so, the human rights frame means we can engage people beyond the ones who are directly impacted.

Despite these advantages, the human rights framework is scantily in use among U.S. activists who are organizing people for social justice. Whereas it may seem to be a good tool for international cases where human rights standards are established and potentially enforceable by law, the framework hasn't been as relevant for day-to-day politics and issues here. While the assertion of universal rights may be important for documenting and exposing where those rights are trampled, it is of little importance unless it leads to a strategy of making those rights real on the ground.

Why has it been of such little use? Because the human rights framework has been rooted in moral assertions and has not addressed the question of power.

Frederick Douglass laid out the basic axiom that, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did



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and it never will." These simple words hold most all of the theory any political organizer will ever need.

The first word in Douglass' axiom is a recognition that the ills of oppression and exploitation are rooted in unequal power relations. There's a struggle between the interests of the powerful to deny rights and the power of the oppressed to assert them. With a human rights framework, who is the target?

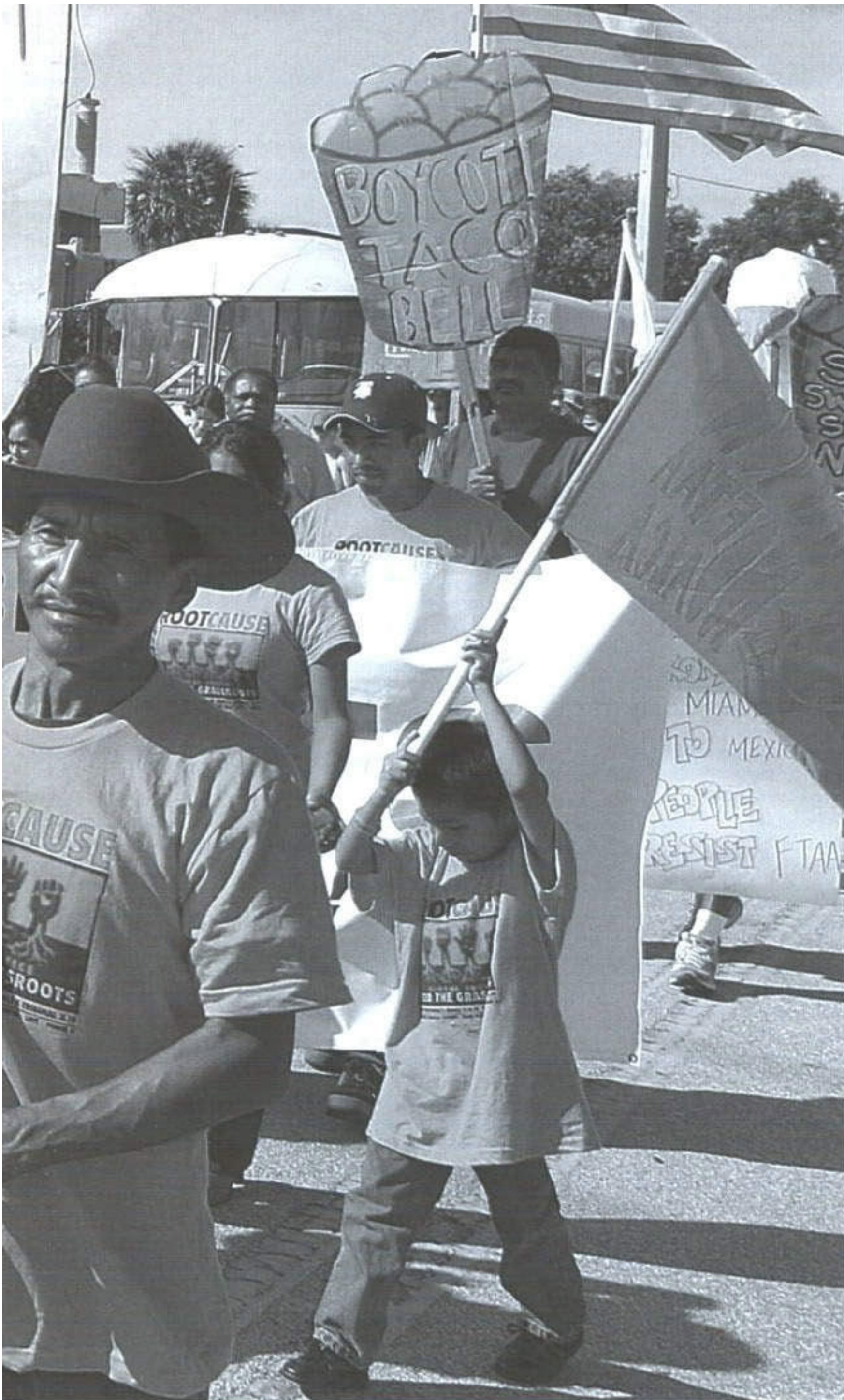
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Systems of power do not change unless they are forced to. The question for me in organizing has been how do we actually translate a moral assertion of rights into a practical demand on power? Effective demands do two things. They weaken the power of existing systems of inequality and strengthen the rights and conditions of those whose rights are at risk. The difference between universal assertion of what's right and practical demands is that ultimately, organizing demands are based on a recognition of current power relations. The demands must reflect some present or future possibility for the forces we are organizing to make those demands a reality, and for the target of the demands to be able to take action on them.

As organizers of poor people, workers, women, immigrants, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT)

people and formerly colonized and enslaved peoples, one of our most basic understandings is that we organize those who are most directly impacted by oppression to directly confront the powers that deny them of their rights. This is not just a reflection of an organizing method, but an indication of a political principle. It's a question of leadership of the oppressed, of the working class and people of color in particular. We're not just all humans. We are people, classes, races, ethnicities and genders with distinct and varied relationships to power. We believe that those whose power and rights are most crushed must be central to leading the fights for their own liberation. The struggle for human rights is then a struggle for them to directly claim their humanity against oppressive systems and institutions.

While the human rights framework's main tenet of universal humanity is incredibly powerful as a uniting force across nation states, class and race, it must be grounded in a theory of power and social change to be effective. Even if we look back at Malcolm's strategy of utilizing human rights to be able to get around the domination of the United States, successful execution is ultimately tied to the potential power of countries in the Third World and others to exert the power of the United Nations in relation



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to the power of the United States.

Malcolm spoke at a time when Third World liberation struggles were growing in power and the possibilities of overturning white supremacy and colonization were inspirational and almost definite. In the decades since, those movements have subsided and the United States has become the sole global superpower. As a byproduct, the United Nations and any other political bodies have lost their influence and power. The United States not only has veto power, but it can completely (and does) sidestep, overstep or step to the United Nations with its demands and generally wins. The point here is that internationally, nationally and locally, the tool is only as strong as the power behind it.

Ironically, with the historic slide of progressive power, the significance of human rights grows. Now, instead of a tool of power, its strength is as a tool for power building. For both Malcolm and the CIW, the importance of human rights is as a vision. Malcolm's vision of human rights challenged the legitimacy of the United States government as the arbiter of justice. CIW's use of the framework allowed them to unite farm workers, students and people of faith. In the dearth of progressive mass movements and in the context of a fractured political left, the human rights

framework provides possibilities of putting forward bold, radical alternatives while appealing broadly to a common interest in the future of humanity.

There are a number of important efforts underway in the United States to bring an organizing anchor to the human rights framework. The U.S. Human Rights Network, Poor People's Campaign for Human Rights, and the Mississippi Workers Center along with the CIW are all grounding the human rights framework in organizing struggles based in communities of color.

A recent addition to this trend in the United States is The Right to the City alliance. In January, 30 organizations from seven cities got together in Los Angeles and adopted a framework to urbanize human rights. The goal is to ground human rights in the real lives and struggles of communities of color in U.S. cities; it is to utilize the human rights framework to unite and elevate our organizing.

To do that, Right to the City is informed by a power analysis of what we're up against in urban spaces, recognizing the role of U.S. cities in the global economy. It puts working class communities as central to the fight for human rights in the city while embracing a vision of life and democracy for all city dwellers.

All of the groups assembled face huge pressures of displacement and gentrification in their communities. We explored the way in which neo-liberalism and privatization of land use have turned our cities over to developers. We discussed how we're fighting for housing, for use of traditional space and against predatory development. We discovered how putting forward a proactive and simple assertion of our rights made a huge difference in how we understood our work. And we quickly recognized that so many of the issues we're fighting for in our cities: housing, transportation, education, LGBT rights to space and cultural rights, are inextricably related. We just need a common way to talk about it, strategize and develop our collective power. Toward that end, we initiated the Right to the City alliance so that we can build local power toward a national agenda for our cities. And so that, one day, we can build enough power to stand with our brothers and sisters in the global South to demand justice for humanity. ■

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