

# BREAKING THE SYSTEM

## The History and Future of

By Roberto "Rob" Camacho

Barrio Logan is home to a variety of community-based organizations that work to serve its residents, from long time staples such as Chicano Federation to the revolutionary work of Unión del Barrio and the National Brown Berets de Aztlán. The neighborhood is home to a variety of organizations, groups and collectives who all contribute to bettering not only the living conditions of the residents of the barrio but communities all throughout San Diego. However, one of most the recent additions to this rich tapestry of homegrown activism is People Over Profits-SD (POP).

Founded in the summer of 2016, POP is an organization that is "committed to returning the power to the people, determined to challenge and overthrow the prison industrial complex, and building a future that values the people over profits."

While many people had a hand in the org's co-founding, its two most senior members Nadia Contreras and Francisco Mendoza detailed the humble origins of POP tackling issues ranging from mass-incarceration, homelessness and police misconduct here in San Diego. "We started off with protesting the private prison industrial complex because of the slave trade that's going through the government," Mendoza said. "We're taught in school that the thirteenth amendment abolished slavery, but it really didn't. It actually legalized slavery and it transferred it into the criminal injustice-system."

Prior to co-founding POP, both Contreras and Mendoza had prior experience in community organizing. Several years beforehand, Contreras helped found 'I'm My Own Blessing', a humanitarian group that specializes in homeless outreach while Mendoza worked both as a criminal justice consultant and a homeless advocate as well. Before long, POP began advocating for prison and criminal justice reform not just in San Diego but across the entire state.

For example, POP has worked on the 'Free the Vote' campaign, an effort to restore voting rights to people convicted of felonies after having served their sentence in the state of California; as well as the 'Time Done' campaign, an effort advocating for the expungement of criminal records for certain offenses



POP's Francisco Mendoza. Photo by Rob Camacho.

after people convicted of a crime have completed their sentences.

Mendoza highlighted the importance of which underscores the org's work, especially that which disproportionately targets working-class communities of color, "It's really important, there's no reason for them to take your voting rights other than to just further disenfranchise your community even more."

Despite POP's success advocating for criminal justice reform at the local and state level, both Contreras and Mendoza began setting a broader mission and expanding the org's scope. Contreras elaborated saying, "We quickly realized that we weren't just dealing with legal slavery, we quickly became aware of the lack of humanity that was happening around us. We decided that we weren't just going to expose local politicians that accepted money from private prisons."

Additionally, Contreras added, "People Over Profits went from only speaking about the abduction of our community members into this business to now exposing anything that chooses profit over human welfare...We expose anything that chooses profit over the welfare of humans and that can be any topic."

Needless to say, POP's fight for justice has not been fought alone. Both Contreras and Mendoza, highlighted POP's cooperative nature having worked with other local orgs in the region such as Unión del Barrio, the National Brown Berets de Aztlán, PSL San Diego and even the San Diego chapter of the Black Panther Party.

Mendoza emphasized the importance of learning from the mistakes of past groups and orgs. "Back in the day of activism in the 60s, everyone was fighting for themselves; everyone was fighting for their own gente and we saw what happened. They destroyed all of their heads, they killed everybody and threw everyone else in jail because nobody supported one another. So, we have to learn from those lessons, we have to fight for each other now, it can't just be for La Raza, that's how we're going to overcome this corrupt system."

The need for a disciplined multi-org coalition is particularly underscored in the fight against police brutality and misconduct, which has increasingly come under more scrutiny nationwide in recent years. Both Contreras and Mendoza lamented the trend of hyper-aggressive policing by the SDPD, which historically has been disproportionately applied to the neighborhood for decades.

Concerns regarding police brutality reached a fever pitch in June following the violent assault and arrest of Eddie Alvarez, Unit Commander of the National Brown Berets de Aztlán after filming the SDPD detaining a woman in Chicano Park. In light of Alvarez's arrest both Contreras and Mendoza believe overly aggressive policing by the SDPD will only continue to increase in Logan. It's a challenge of which the community must be ready to confront as demographics in the neighborhood continue to shift and fluctuate.

"Over policing in certain communities is one of the hallmarks of gentrification," Contreras said. "It doesn't surprise me that Logan is over-policed. It doesn't surprise me that the police go hunting in these communities. It doesn't surprise me that they try to make their quotas with the people of this community. And it doesn't surprise me that one of the Brown Berets and one of the park's gatekeepers were attacked and essentially targeted."

Contreras also explained how POP has hosted community workshops providing education on how to document aggressive/abusive police officers in the neighborhood. "We've had People Over Profits meetings on how to document cops, we firmly believe that it's necessary. Just like they have a data center with our names in it, as a community we believe that they absolutely need to be documented as well."

Conversely, every Wednesday POP holds open meetings at Border X Brewing, where community members and people from all over San Diego are welcomed to gather and be active participants in the org's latest efforts. "We always have a different theme or reason why we're meeting every week, but it's all in the theme of human welfare," Contreras said.

Every last week of the month the group meets at The People's Lot, a community multi-use park that lives up to its name serving as home base for POP and community space for events. Contreras and Mendoza hope that by providing spaces like these, along with the efforts put forth to better the neighborhood, younger activists will be inspired to take an active role in the community and someday continue the work that POP has begun.

Contreras stressed that while much has been done in just a few short years, the responsibility will ultimately fall on the youth of today to continue the work. "Our youth is definitely what inspires us to keep going...The youth are not only our future, they are our now. Francisco and I are not going to be around forever, we're looking for where the baton is going next. So, what inspires me is our youth."