On October 12, 2011, five undocumented Latino youth wearing graduation caps staged a sit-in at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) offices in downtown Los Angeles. The sit-in was meant to urge the Obama administration to stop deporting undocumented youths. It also launched the national Education Not Deportation (END) Our Pain campaign, undertaken by a network of immigrant youth organizations and allies demanding an immediate moratorium on deportations of youth eligible for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. If passed, it would grant conditional legal status to those brought here under age 16 if they attend college or join the military.

Despite recent announcements from the Obama administration that it would ease up on non-criminal deportations, U.S. officials continue to deport undocumented immigrants at a record-setting rate. Federal programs such as Secure Communities, are at least partially responsible, essentially turning local law enforcement into de facto Border Patrol agents. Tony Ortuño, one of the participants in the sit-in, explained his reasons for risking arrest:

“We . . . were hopeful that the recent announcements by President Obama would bring relief to DREAM Act-eligible youth . . . However, due to programs like Secure Communities . . . the numbers of undocumented youth who are incarcerated, shackled, and deported to countries they barely know continues to rise.”

The civil disobedience reflects how the undocumented youth movement has transitioned and transformed—from a movement that was initially focused on building support for the DREAM Act to one that has increasingly used direct action to bring attention to broader issues of immigrant, civil, and human rights as a strategy for social and policy change. The tactical shift has been in response to a changing political context in which the will to pass immigration reform has waned in Washington, deportations are on the rise, and anti-immigrant ordinances and laws are being considered in an unprecedented number of localities and states. Laws banning undocumented immigrants from renting homes, penalizing employers who hire them, and barring undocumented youth from universities are part of a larger trend in which immigration law and enforcement is transferred to the local and state level within the context of neoliberal restructuring. Over the past several decades, the United States has implemented two contradictory policies: It has liberalized the economy—enabling the free movement of capital—and increased border enforcement and the criminalization and surveillance of migrant workers and their families. These broader neoliberal agendas have fundamentally and strategically been implemented in cities, whose residents have consequently faced changing demographics and economic restructuring. The local and state government anti-immigrant policies, have largely been in response to the cities’ anxieties and impulses to counteract demographic and economic changes with exclusionary and restrictive covenants that target undocumented workers.

For the last four years the number of states that allow undocumented students to receive in-state tuition has plateaued. Only 10 states now offer in-state tuition to undocumented immigrants. Instead, many states are now looking to roll back in-state tuition or pass laws preventing undocumented immigrants from attending. The most recent punitive measures have been passed in new immigrant destinations such as South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, which have gone so far as banning undocumented youth from universities.

This is despite the fact that international free trade agreements and current U.S. laws have been largely responsible for transforming circular migration patterns into largely undocumented migrant settlement, in which immigrant children are largely affected. In other words, while the United States has actively recruited, relied on, and imported Mexican migrant labor that was seasonal, temporal,
and largely unregulated, current immigration laws and neoliberal trade agreements have combined to produce an undocumented, settled labor force.

In a 2009 report, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that in 2008 there were 1.7 million undocumented youth between the ages of 18 and 24 living in the United States and that Latinos represented 78% of this population. The increasing numbers of undocumented migrants who have decided to stay in the United States has contributed to the larger numbers of undocumented children that are growing into adulthood. Unfortunately, their legal status, poverty, and poor schools conspire to make political, social, and economic incorporation into society extremely complicated. The current moment represents a critical juncture not only in the undocumented youth movement, but in shaping policies that will continue to affect the incorporation patterns of immigrant youth for years to come.

Since 2001, Congress has been considering a version of the DREAM Act, bipartisan legislation that would provide an opportunity for undocumented students with “good moral character,” who have lived in the U.S. for a certain period, to obtain legal status. The latest version was introduced May 11. If passed, it would change current law in two major ways: (1) It would permit certain immigrant youth who have grown up in the United States to eventually obtain permanent legal status and become eligible for U.S. citizenship if they go to college or serve in the U.S. military. (2) It would eliminate a federal provision that penalizes states that provide in-state tuition without regard to immigration status.

Due to several compromises to secure bipartisan support, the DREAM Act has undergone significant changes. The military option—which replaced the community service provision in earlier versions—incited criticism among some who saw the new version of the bill as a military recruitment tool (see “Letter to the DREAM Movement,” page 18). When the DREAM Act was included in a Defense appropriations bill, VAMOS Unidos Youth, an organization of street vendors and their children in the Bronx, New York, withdrew support, saying it was “a de facto military draft, forcing undocumented youth to fight in unjust wars in exchange for the recognition as human beings.”

Some of their concerns are substantiated by the relatively limited number of youth who would be able to access higher education in the current economic climate. Currently, only 26% of undocumented youth enroll in college; compared to 56% of 18-24-year-olds who are U.S. born. In other words, the bill would primarily benefit those willing and able to afford college or serve in the military as an option for legaliz-
In a July 2010 report, the Migration Policy Institute noted that while over 2 million unauthorized youth could be immediately eligible for the DREAM Act, only 33% may benefit from the educational path in the bill.

Despite these changes in the law, the DREAM Act has inspired political participation and activism of undocumented youth in unprecedented numbers. Before the DREAM Act, immigrant rights activists had primarily focused their organizing efforts on class action lawsuits to defend the right to education for undocumented students at the state level. While youth have been historically active in these issues, the immigrant rights mobilizations in 2006 opened opportunities for broader youth participation.

Undocumented and immigrant youth participated in unprecedented numbers in the mobilizations of 2006 and 2007, albeit with some initial resistance from some sectors of the movement. Initially, student issues were not a prominent part of the immigrant rights movements’ broader agenda. Many of the youth groups that were involved in the marches nationally had to assert themselves and fight for inclusion. Yet, despite the energy and enthusiasm of the 2006 mobilizations, Congress failed to enact a progressive immigration reform that year. When the DREAM Act came up for an important vote in October 2007, it failed to garner the 60 votes needed to proceed to a debate on the Senate floor. While a sector of the organized immigrant rights movement responded by focusing on pursuing an electoral strategy—including voter and citizenship drives to increase Latino/a voter turnout in key states—undocumented youth began to organize a national movement that could push the DREAM Act as a standalone bill. National coalitions emerged such as the United We Dream network, which coordinated undocumented youth organizations across the country. During this time, undocumented youth leaders also began to question the pace of change working primarily through the Democratic Party and long-established civil and immigrant rights organizations. Their mounting critique of these institutions led some sectors of the movement to opt for forms of grassroots organizing that prioritized undocumented youth leadership and new strategies.

“Until we organized this movement, we had been caught in a paralyzing stranglehold of inactivity across the country. We were told that the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act, or CIRA, was still possible. Yet we continued to endure ICE raids,” wrote several undocumented Latino youth in an open letter in September 2010. “We stopped waiting . . . We organized ourselves and created our own strategy; used new tactics . . . At a moment when hope seemed scarce . . . We declared ourselves UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID!”

Throughout 2009 and 2010, in the spirit of the slogan “Undocumented and unafraid,” youth activists organized sit-ins at Congressional offices, hunger strikes, marches, and symbolic graduations, while amplifying their voices through the sophisticated use of blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media. In June 2009, the founders of DREAM Activist, an online undocumented youth advocacy network, along with United We Dream, organized 500 youth to participate in the National DREAM Act Graduation in Washington, which combined a symbolic ceremony with legislative lobbying. Solidarity graduations took place the same day in Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and Texas. In another widely publicized campaign, on January 1, 2010, four undocumented youth from Miami Dade College began a four-month, 1,500-mile-trek to Washington to advocate for the DREAM Act. In what they aptly called the Trail of DREAMs, the youth documented their walk with active blogging, Facebook, YouTube, and twitter, and gathered 30,000 signatures to bring to President Obama along the way. Throughout these mobilizations, undocumented youth became increasingly willing to “come out” to their peers, teachers, and friends. Using blogs, podcasts, and user-generated video, undocumented youth declared their legal status openly, many for the first time. The prominence of the Our Stories section in DREAM Activist’s blog, for example, is evidence of how the practice of coming out, a repertoire used by the LGBTQ movement decades prior, has been a fundamental mobilizing strategy and collective identification tool among undocumented youth.

In December 2010, after years of lobbying, legislative visits and phone calls, hunger strikes and sit-ins, the DREAM Act failed to gather the necessary votes to avoid a Republican filibuster once again. Falling a few votes short, the crushing defeat marked a turning point for the undocumented youth movement at a time of economic crisis and anti-immigrant backlash. Obama’s enforcement-first immigration policy, the ascendancy of the right-wing of the Republican Party, and the anti-immigrant legislation at the state and local level has forced the movement to re-scale and reconsider its goals and tactics. While the DREAM Act is still a high priority, undocumented youth have now focused on resisting the effects of mass deportations and defending their right to education gained decades before in the 1982 U.S. Supreme court decision Plyer vs. Dow, which ruled that public schools could not deny immigrant students access to public education. The Dream Is Coming, an undocumented youth initiative that organizes direct actions across the country, attributes the change to a growing frustration with merely electoral or legislative strategies:

“We are compelled by our frustration and the fierce urgency of our dreams . . . We have worked for years on a path
to legalization. We are at a point in our movement where radical action has become necessary."

One of the key concerns has been the record number of deportations since Obama took office. Already in 2011, the Obama administration deported 400,000 people, totaling more than a million during his tenure in office, far exceeding the number of deportations under the Bush administration. The high figures are largely attributed to Obama’s aggressive implementation of programs such as Secure Communities, or S-Comm, a three-year-old partnership between federal agencies, such as the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI, and local law enforcement, which facilitates the sharing of information such as the fingerprints of arrested and detained individuals. Critics point out that it leads to racial profiling and gives local police rapidly increasing power to enforce immigration law.

Despite the administration’s insistence that it is focusing on immigrants with criminal records, of the over 1 million deportees, 46% have been convicted of crimes while 54% have not. Thus, undocumented youth continue to move through the deportation pipeline.

In the face of this crisis, undocumented youth have used a combination of direct action and media activism to shine a spotlight on immigrant detention and deportation, which has largely remained hidden from public view. They have staged rallies and sit-ins at detention centers, ICE offices, and have even targeted banks that invest in private prisons, directly confronting the institutions that are profiting from the immigrant detention and deportation system. An important complement to their direct action has been their use of grassroots messaging campaigns. Utilizing Facebook, Twitter, and microblogging, immigrant youth broadcast the stories of those who are in detention centers and fighting deportation orders. On the morning that an electronic monitoring device was placed on his ankle, Matias Ramos, an undocumented youth and co-founder of United We Dream, turned to Twitter, posting a photo of himself and announcing that he had been given two weeks to leave the country. They have staged rallies and sit-ins at detention centers, ICE offices, and have even targeted banks that invest in private prisons, directly confronting the institutions that are profiting from the immigrant detention and deportation system. An important complement to their direct action has been their use of grassroots messaging campaigns. Utilizing Facebook, Twitter, and microblogging, immigrant youth broadcast the stories of those who are in detention centers and fighting deportation orders. On the morning that an electronic monitoring device was placed on his ankle, Matias Ramos, an undocumented youth and co-founder of United We Dream, turned to Twitter, posting a photo of himself and announcing that he had been given two weeks to leave the country. They have staged rallies and sit-ins at detention centers, ICE offices, and have even targeted banks that invest in private prisons, directly confronting the institutions that are profiting from the immigrant detention and deportation system.

In a small victory in September, California passed a bill known as the California Dream Act. While the legislation doesn’t get undocumented youth any closer to citizenship, it does extend state financial aid to undocumented students, and Illinois and Florida have introduced similar bills.

"I know that it does not change my legal status . . . but the legislation changes how you feel about yourself and your future,” said an undocumented UCLA student, who asked to remain anonymous, at a recent community gathering to celebrate the passage of the Act. These narratives reveal that the vision for social change of undocumented youth extends beyond legalization to a broader agenda that includes social and economic justice for immigrant workers and their families.

It is a movement whose claims to national belonging fundamentally challenge the basis of inclusion into the national community at a time when the rights of both citizens and non-citizens are exponentially narrowing. If a test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members, then immigrant youth’s claims to citizenship have tremendous implications not only for the rights of immigrants, but for the quality and legitimacy of U.S. democracy for decades to come. ❇
Do It Yourself

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5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
11. Coates, “Q&A.”

Horizontalism

4. Ibid. 48.
5. Ibid. 58.

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2. AFP, “Policía continua desalojo de estudiantes que mantienen tomas colegios,” August 8, 2011.
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A Dream Detained

1. A research article was supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and USC’s Media, Activism, and Public Participation Project at the Annenberg School for Communication/Journalism; Leslie Berenstein Rosas, “Undocumented Student Activists in LA Get Audience With Federal Officials, Get Arrested,” MultiAmerica, October 12, 2011.
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11. Ibid, 231.
20. The Dream is Coming, “About Us,” webpage, thedreamiscoming.com/about/.
29. United We Dream, “Dream, History,” website, unitedwedream.org/about/history.

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6. Ibid.