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# Women's Grassroots Revitalization of South El Paso: La Mujer Obrera's Challenge to Gentrification and Urban Neglect

**Joel Zapata**

*In 2007, La Mujer Obrera, a grassroots workers coalition, presented Plan Mayachén to the El Paso City Council and the El Paso community at large. Plan Mayachén was meant to spur the economy of South El Paso and the surrounding communities at a grassroots level, harnessing the local Mexican and Mexican American culture to create markets and art spaces. It aimed to develop the community without gentrification or corporations entering South El Paso. However, La Mujer Obrera lacked the funds to implement their plan. Moreover, the city government and the local economic elite developed their own economic plan that called for gentrification and corporate takeovers in South El Paso, causing a wide range of individuals and organizations to challenge gentrification in the area. Amidst this story, the history of La Mujer Obrera is narrated as a basis for the organization's fight against gentrification and community neglect. Also provided is an analysis of the obstacles La Mujer Obrera has had in implementing Plan Mayachén as well as a limited political analysis of El Paso.*

Mexican origin women laborers in El Paso, Texas have traditionally been geographically isolated, politically ignored, and have been subordinated by deeply rooted patriarchy and ethnocentrism. Government and unions have often allowed the city's employers to abuse such laborers. More so, economic neo-globalism<sup>1</sup> has hindered the ability of women to gain suitable employment, thus further isolating them in a second-class status—due to the few jobs available to them—within an already poor and ignored border community. However, El Paso women laborers have acted to end their second-class status. From the aftermath of the 1972-1974 Farah Strike, El Paso women laborers and organizers founded La Mujer Obrera (The Woman Worker) in 1981 as a grassroots coalition that advocates for workers' rights inside and outside the work place.

La Mujer Obrera came into existence to combat labor abuse and indifference towards <sup>2</sup>border women, working to holistically address border women's issues. After advocating to improve the lives of women workers in El Paso's textile plants during the 1980s, the grassroots organization transformed in the late 1990s to work for women workers' self-determination in response to the North American Free Trade Agreement's dismantlement of El Paso's already ailing textile industry and therefore the disappearance of thousands of textile jobs. One of La

Mujer Obrera's latest struggles in building self-determination among border women has been fighting government-led gentrification efforts in which the city government and the region's elite have sought to redevelop/gentrify/colonize South El Paso for young professionals, the military, privileged shoppers from both Mexico and the United States, and multinational retailers. In such efforts, little concern has been given for Mexican origin workers who make up the majority of South El Paso—much less working-class women workers of Mexican descent.

### **Origins of La Mujer Obrera in the Farah Strike**

As textile manufactures began to expand in the “cheap” labor market of Southwest cities with large Mexican origin labor pools after World War II and through the 1960s and 1970s, the garment industry quickly grew in working-class and traditionally Mexican American South El Paso to become the nation's third largest garment manufacturing center and its largest jeans producing center. Textile manufactures mainly employed Mexican origin women, perceiving them be the most easily exploitable workers out of an already marginalized labor pool (Paredes). Farah, Incorporated, a locally founded and publicly traded textile corporation, personified labor abuses suffered by El Paso's Mexican origin women workers (Coyle, Hershatter, and Honig 6-7).

Through the 1960s and early 1970s women employed by Farah, Incorporated endured unrealistic quotas, sexual harassment by an all-male Euro-American managerial staff, dismissals with no rationale or to avoid giving workers retirement benefits, unpaid sick and maternity leave that could also lead to unjustified firings, pressure to take birth control pills in order to avoid pregnancies and thus absences. Abuses also included cultural and ethnic discrimination as well as verbal and physical violence. Further, the corporation's managerial staff punished workers for “transgressions” ranging from workers taking too-long bathroom

breaks to female workers becoming pregnant (The San Francisco Bay Area Farah Strike Support Committee 3-5).

In response to labor abuse, Farah, Incorporated employees began attempting to organize in the late 1960s. Under the supervision of the National Labor Relations Board, workers from the cutting department of Farah's El Paso Gateway textile plant, the corporation's largest manufacturing center, joined the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union October 1970 (Acuña 336). They stood against Farah, Incorporated's "virulently anti-union" Chief Executive, William F. Farah (or Willie Farah), "who swore in the time-honored manner that he'd rather be dead than union" (Coyle, Hershatter, and Honig 6-7). William F. Farah was so obsessed in maintaining control over his employees that he would often ride a bicycle through his textile plants, watching over workers while they labored and assuring high quotas were met (Steinhauer).

In response to continued abuse, workers went on strike May 1972 (Coyle, Hershatter, and Honig 6-7). Women quickly became the "backbone of the strike" and "created their own group called *Unida Para Siempre* (Unity Forever)." To put in perspective the importance of women workers in the strike, 85% of Farah's 9,500 workers were female, mainly of Mexican origin. These women workers also led in calling for a national boycott of Farah textile goods in July of 1972 (Acuña, 336).

In response, Farah, Incorporated employed company spies to break the strike and obtained a court order stating striking workers had to stand fifty feet apart when picketing Farah textile plants. Under order from the local Justice of the Peace, the El Paso Police Department began arresting workers who broke the court order. El Paso's media omitted labor abuses by Farah, Incorporated when covering the strike. Then, local banks, one of which included William F. Farah on its board of directors, began denying striking workers loans (The

San Francisco Bay Area Farah Strike Support Committee 5-7). Despite the anti-worker efforts by part of Farah, Incorporated and its above-mentioned allies, the strike and boycott forced Farah, Incorporated to recognize the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union February 1974. Validating workers' efforts, the National Labor Relations Board concluded that workers' rights had been violated by Farah, Incorporated. However, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union leaders ended the national boycott before all the workers' demands were met and accepted a weak contract with little impute from workers, particularly women workers. Subsequent contracts diminished the gains made by the strike until Farah Incorporated closed all its El Paso plants and was eventually bought by a larger corporation (Alaniz and Cornish 113).

The strike was not fruitless, though. Activists and writers Yolanda Alaniz and Megan Cornish describe the impact of the Farah Strike had upon participating women's psyche. They describe women being intellectually and physically liberated beyond the workplace. In *Viva La Raza: A History of Chicano Identity and Resistance*, Alaniz and Cornish recount one woman worker's transformation: "For years I wouldn't do anything without asking my husband's permission . . . Good grief, having to ask to buy a pair of underwear! . . . [The time of the strike was] when it started changing, all of it, I was able to begin to stand up for myself, and I began to feel that I should be accepted for the person that I am" (257-258).

### **Founding of La Mujer Obrera and its Historic Timeline**

Such liberated women, both workers and organizers like El Paso native Cecilia Rodríguez, founded La Mujer Obrera as a grassroots workers' coalition in 1981 while the textile manufactures began to leave El Paso for "cheaper" foreign labor markets, or for labor pools that without choice accepted lower wages, with less labor regulations than that of the United States (Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez 234, 260). La Mujer Obrera's founders realized what Chicana

historian Vicki L. Ruiz has documented, that Mexican origin women have had little success within long-established national unions like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Unions (Ruiz 131-132).

La Mujer Obrera launched as a multifaceted organization that established it as a workers' advocacy organization as well as a community organization—holistically addressing South El Paso's needs. To do so, the organization aimed to further liberate and politicize women workers. For this, La Mujer Obrera established seven fundamental human rights to work for: education, health, employment, housing, nourishment, peace, and political liberty (“About Us”).

In the 1980s La Mujer Obrera started popular education programs, or adult education programs, that emphasized critical thinking skills based on workers' needs. These education programs were centered on leadership and organizational skills such as Spanish-English translation and grant writing in order to move women towards mental and economic independence (Kamel). La Mujer Obrera also provided South El Paso residents with notary and immigration law services and distributed a workers' newspaper in textile plants (Paredes). Among the many services the organization provided for women workers were free health screenings, literacy and English classes. Additionally, La Mujer Obrera addressed homelessness, hazardous work conditions, and deportation threats (“Fellows: Cecilia Rodriguez”).

Though La Mujer Obrera broadly advocated for South El Paso residents, much of its work still remained within the textile industry. Labor conditions in El Paso's textile plants were much the same as before the Farah Strike. By the 1980s, though, an increasingly global economy meant textile manufactures could easily move across the border to Ciudad Juárez. Meaning, workers were less apt to protest abuses knowing their employers could simply close

shop and find a “cheaper” labor pool across the Rio Grande (“Fellows: Cecilia Rodriguez”). Therefore, textile manufactures continually practiced various forms of labor abuse like wage theft without consequence (Staudt).

To counter labor abuse and wage theft, La Mujer Obrera organized textile workers, who were still chiefly Mexican origin woman. Workers began to strike textile manufacturers and at times began hunger strikes to garner media attention towards workers’ plight. While some success was reached through the Texas Legislature making wage theft a punishable crime, the 1993 signing and 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement caused the El Paso textile industry to abandon the city at an hastened pace towards Mexico where wages were far lower and labor regulations were less. Neo-globalism had taken the jobs La Mujer Obrera’s members had strived to improve, leaving women workers on the border with few sources of sustenance (Chávez Leyva). Indeed, according to the Labor Department by 1998 at least 10,000 workers in El Paso lost their jobs due to NAFTA. Unemployment in El Paso reached two to three times the national average (Verhovek). In all, El Paso lost over 35,000 jobs because of NAFTA’s economic repercussions on the border (Paredes).

With the El Paso textile industry greatly diminished by the late 1990s, La Mujer Obrera transformed from mainly advocating for textile workers to seeking complete economic independence, aiming towards self-sustainment and self-determination for women on the border (Andrade). In 1997, La Mujer founded a daughter organization called El Puente (The Bridge). El Puente began bilingually retraining workers. El Puente sought to build self-determination for women workers while conserving El Paso’s Chicano and Mexican cultural roots (“El Puente”).

El Puente's goal was job creation through micro-enterprise development and small business support. Local women began learning how to create their own jobs through education focused on mental and economic independence. Women were provided with basic skills training like reading, technology training, and most importantly entrepreneurial training ("El Puente"). Therefore, women could become independent of multinational corporations who had no allegiance to workers and moved their operations according to the greatest possible profit.

Once establishing its mission in post-NAFTA El Paso, La Mujer Obrera began expanding physically. Spaces in South El Paso were renovated to train women and provide employment opportunities while revitalizing the area in a non-gentrifying manner. La Mujer Obrera opened Café Mayapan, Rayito De Sol Daycare, Uxmal Apartments, and the now closed Mercado Mayapan ("El Puente"). La Mujer Obrera built various grassroots community businesses with valuable social purposes, but the organization's flagship community-based business was Mercado Mayapan. Opened in 2009 (closed in 2012 because of budget shortfalls<sup>9</sup>) in a former 40,000 square foot textile plant, Mercado Mayapan harnessed Mexican cultural heritage as an economic engine. It enclosed a Mexican styled market, a local farmer's market, artisan booths, and a stage for performing arts. Mercado Mayapan also included a cultural museum—Museo Mayachén—and a technology center—Chicana Media Center. In effect, Mercado Mayapan provided South Central El Paso, and the community's women workers, with a safe space where it could practice its Chicano and Mexican culture. The market was a space where local small vendors, such as women workers who launched their own small enterprises, could sell their goods ("Mercado Mayapan"). Moreover, Mercado Mayapan's Chicana Media Center provided the surrounding community with technology access and was a space for afterschool education as well as adult entrepreneurial education ("Chicana Media Center").



## **Challenging Gentrification Efforts and Developing Community Centered Revitalization**

La Mujer Obrera, as demonstrated above, has provided alternatives for a community commonly deprived of choices. When the City of El Paso decided it wanted to erase a large swath of South El Paso, including the historic and largely marginalized *Segundo Barrio* (Second Ward), La Mujer Obrera developed a community-centered alternative to gentrification and historic marginalization of South El Paso: Plan Mayachén, which had Mercado Mayapan as its prototype. The plan was presented to the El Paso community and to the city government during a City Council Meeting on October 23, 2007 (El Paso City Council). Since then, La Mujer Obrera has continued to combat the demolition of El Pasoans' homes, small businesses, culture, identity, and history by the region's economic elite.

The *Segundo Barrio* is a poor community in South El Paso made of families who have often called it home for generations. Residents live among or in deteriorating historic buildings. Indeed, the neighborhood is one of the oldest Mexican origin neighborhoods in the country. The movers of Mexico's 1910 revolution lived, planned, and sought refuge in the *Segundo Barrio*. This enclave along the Rio Grande has been the Ellis Island for Mexican immigrants on their way to Albuquerque, Denver, Chicago, and almost any other corner of the U.S. where Mexican origin people make their homes (Welsome). Additionally, other immigrant groups have also passed through it, such as Chinese and Japanese origin immigrants. The *Segundo Barrio's* historical and cultural significance continued with it being the epicenter for one of the most radical wings of the Chicana/o Civil Rights Movement. The neighborhood presently remains as a center of Chicano culture and a center for the remaining breaths of the Chicana/o Civil Rights Movement.

The *Segundo Barrio* had a population of 8,003 according to the 2000 Census,<sup>4</sup> out of which 62.1% lived below the poverty line compared to 22.2% of El Paso, 15.4% of Texas, and

12.4% nationally. From those living below the poverty line in the *Segundo Barrio*, women made up the majority, accounting for 55.3% of those living under the poverty line. The percentage of women living under the poverty line compared to men in the *Segundo Barrio* outweighed the percentage of women living under the poverty line in the rest of El Paso and nationally.

According to the same census the median income of the neighborhood was \$10,240, but 41% of households made less than \$10,000 per year. Due in large part to the poverty of the area, the high school dropout rate of the *Segundo Barrio* was 22.5% compared to 8.8% for El Paso as a whole, 12.5% for Texas, and 9.8% nationally. In fact, only 21% of residents older than twenty-five had a high school diploma, and only 3% of residents had a college degree (Cook and O'Rourke).

Latinos/Hispanics made up 96.2% of the *Segundo Barrio*, most of whom were of Mexican origin, compared to 76.6% of El Paso as a whole. Of the 8,000 plus population, 50% were U.S. born, 14% were naturalized citizens, and 36% were non-U.S. citizens (Cook and O'Rourke). Although, this number can be skewed considering that many non-citizens, particularly individuals not recognized as authorized immigrants by the government, are often undercounted in censuses. The reasons for such undercounting range from language barriers to fear of government entities (Romero; O'Dowd). This undercounted population is also a population that tends not to live in an idealized Euro-American family, economic, educational, and social lifestyle. Meaning, they are often yet to be Euro-Americanized and thus seen as an "other" who is socially undeserving to be considered in a positive light when making government policy—becoming easily marginalized.

Although this impoverished community has historically been ignored by the federal, state, county, and city governments, its "mom-and-pop shops...d[id] roughly half a billion dollars in business a year" in 2007, proving that the neighborhood's local businesses were

thriving economically through their own efforts. However, the Paso Del Norte Group<sup>5</sup>—a taciturn group that the *Texas Observer* categorized as an “organization of wealthy oligarchs, industrialists, real estate developers, and politicians from both sides of the border”—drew a plan for the City of El Paso to redevelop the historic and culturally unique community “with an arena, parking garages, condos, lofts, town homes . . . and an ‘urban retail’ outlet rumored to be a Wal-Mart or Target.” Under the plan—drawn up in secret over two years—325 acres of the most marginalized neighborhoods of El Paso, if not the nation, could be up for demolition (Welsome). The plan was built as an effort to spur economic development in El Paso, particularly South El Paso and the neighboring downtown area. Left out, though, were the working-class Mexican origin residents of South El Paso.

Democratic Texas State Representative Paul Moreno (1967-2008), who grew up in the *Segundo Barrio*, stated that the plan “does not pass my smell test. It's too heavily slanted toward a few wealthy families in El Paso.” Dallas Lawyer Stuart Blaugrund, who at the time represented a group of Downtown El Paso businessmen and who also originated from El Paso, called El Paso Del Norte's redevelopment plan “the ‘largest land grab’ in recent Texas history.” Blaugrund saw the plan as a scheme to shutter vibrant small local businesses and transfer the land once occupied by them to another private owner—that is, to corporations and the region's elite. One such member of the El Paso Del Norte Group is billionaire William “Bill” Sanders (father-in-law of former El Paso City Councilman turned U.S. Representative Robert O'Rourke (D), who as a politician has appropriated the Mexican name “Beto” O'Rourke). O'Rourke staunchly supported the El Paso Del Norte Group's redevelopment plan and did not abstain from any votes the El Paso City Council cast regarding the redevelopment plan. To exemplify O'Rourke's ties to the El Paso Del Norte Group, he was once a member, along with his wife and mother. Not surprisingly, O'Rourke opted to favor demolishing, or “redeveloping,” at least

part of the *Segundo Barrio*, which was in his council district (Welsome). In fact, when the El Paso Del Norte Group presented their plan on March 31, 2006 to the El Paso City Council, O'Rourke made the first "motion to begin the process of adopting the plan" (Rojas).

Clearly, O'Rourke was not seriously considering those who would be displaced by gentrification. Though no direct personal economic gain for O'Rourke would come from El Paso Del Norte Group's plan, O'Rourke was positioning himself to be seen as favorable by the region's elite. Those who would benefit from gentrification, those belonging to El Paso Del Norte Group, would be inclined to make political campaign contributions to O'Rourke.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not this was O'Rourke's intention in supporting El Paso Del Norte Group's plan, in doing so O'Rourke continued the political tradition of ignoring the best interest of South El Paso and the city's Mexican origin population.

But the plan lacks a vital detail: where would the *Segundo Barrio's* residents go? They were not consulted about the destiny of their neighborhood. Many residents, if not most, cannot afford to live in another area of El Paso. Many residents do not have the credit to obtain a home mortgage loan or know how to work the rent system outside of the *Segundo Barrio*. Some residents are not U.S. citizens. Other residents do not have the immigration status needed to have credit or a social security number for a home loan or to rent in greater El Paso. Moreover, the way of life of the neighborhood was ignored. Residents of this unique and historic neighborhood do not live an idealized Euro-American lifestyle. Homes are often composed of extended families and are multigenerational. The idealized and unrealistic nuclear family lifestyle, which the El Paso Del Norte Group and city government have attempted to impose upon *Segundo Barrio* residents, simply does not fit. Instead, the way of life of residents is devalued; "progress" and "redevelopment" is seen as more important, and ghettoized and restrictive government projects or displacement are seen as the answer (Chew-Smithart).

Micro-historian and El Paso native David Dorado Romo has positioned the above point in perspective to El Paso's past. During the 1870s and 1880s four new rail lines connected El Paso to the rest of the nation. The rail lines brought a substantial Euro-American population, which placed El Paso's Mexican origin population under its largely racist control. Romo asserts, "they moved quickly to erase the city's Mexican identity" (Romo 215-216). By "the early 1880s, the Anglo press carried out campaigns to tear down all the adobe structures in downtown and replace them with brick buildings for aesthetic and hygienic reasons" (Romo 216). When the demolition of downtown buildings was completed, "the local press called for all the 'mud hovels' in the Segundo Barrio to be demolished as well. It would take a couple of decades for the local Anglos to carry out this second phase of the 'de-Mexicanization' of the city architecture" (Romo 216).<sup>7</sup> Although, after this phase was complete, the *Segundo Barrio* remained a Mexican American neighborhood with a distinct culture and locally-driven economy. It was not completely "de-Mexicanized."

Yet, the specter of destruction for working-class communities of color has never been far away since World War II and the passage of the Federal Housing Act of 1949, which was meant to clear out impoverished urban areas and downtowns to make way for gentrification, and subsequent Federal legislation. National public policy re-cast community destruction as "revitalization" so outside businesses and the middle-class—words that in our society equal Euro-Americans or at the least those who hold Euro-American ideals and culture—could occupy what were once government-neglected, working-class neighborhoods of color (Otero 101-103). What the El Paso Del Norte Group and the city government were attempting to do—gentrification without consideration towards a traditionally marginalized community—was nothing new. It was an all-too-often-repeated action seen in New York City, Los Angeles, Tucson, Dallas, Austin, El Paso, and many more cities throughout the nation for over half a

century. The end result has been to benefit a few wealthy elites who are for the most part Euro-American.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Catholic Diocese of El Paso Responds**

Knowing the hardships *Segundo Barrio* and South El Paso residents have historically faced and continue to face, the Catholic Diocese of El Paso, which holds a strong presence in the *Segundo Barrio* by providing religious services along with community building, wrote the following in an open letter to the El Paso City Council:

Downtown and South El Paso do need re-vitalization. The outcome of re-vitalization should take into account the hopes, dreams and desires of all the affected, including the poor. There is a rich heritage, a unique culture, a true sense of neighborhood and historical architecture in the affected area. The plan should consider all of these as valuable realities and not focus only on economic benefit and tax revenue. It was disturbing to learn that the present plan was conceived without any consultation with residents, area businesses, and key institutions. We are in disagreement with a re-vitalization program that was planned without public backing or the input of those affected. A planning process typically places consultation and input prior to drawing-up a plan; just the reverse of the Paso Del Norte Group's way of proceeding (Ochoa, Stowe, and Garcia).

The open letter goes on to discuss the possibility of eminent domain for home and business owners. The open letter stated, "Eminent Domain should only be used for the 'common good' of the community as in the building of a public hospital, fire station, public school etc.; not for the exclusively personal and corporate profit" (Ochoa, Stowe, and Garcia). The Catholic Diocese also asked why the members of El Paso Del Norte Group were kept secret if the group

was receiving public funding, and why the names were not revealed until the El Paso City Government was forced to disclose the list under the Freedom of Information Act. The El Paso Catholic Diocese went on to inform the City Council:

[W]e want to stand in solidarity with the poor, with the immigrant, with the marginalized, and with the rejected one. There is a long history of neglect and decimation with regards to the *Segundo Barrio* . . . we are opposed to any plan that disregards and displaces the poor, that ignores the plight of the immigrant, that divides the community, that perpetuates injustice and inadequate housing, that diminishes low-cost housing; one that seeks to enrich a select group.

(Ochoa, Stowe, and Garcia)

The Catholic Diocese of El Paso has historically served the city's Mexican population. Chicano historian Mario T. García asserts in his study of Mexican immigrants of El Paso, *Desert Immigrants*, that "As an institution, the Catholic Church in El Paso pursued a bicultural approach in its treatment of Mexican immigrants" since the late nineteenth century; although, parish schools' curriculum in South El Paso included Americanization programs (García 213). Yet, the Sacred Heart School in the *Segundo Barrio* included "Spanish and Mexican cultural traditions. . . along with American and Mexican history" in its curriculum. Indeed, in 1919 the Italian pastor of Sacred Heart lectured the graduating girls of the school "to conserve the beautiful customs and traditions of *la raza*" (García 214). García concludes the El Paso's Catholic Church "helped transmit Mexican ethnicity and, at the same time, provided lessons in English and American culture in order to assist students adjust and hopefully succeed in the United States" (214). During the 1972-1974 Farah Strike, the Catholic Diocese of El Paso also supported the workers who demanded labor justice (Steinhauer). Today's diocese is doing much of the same. It offers social services as well as a recognized voice for the Mexican origin

community. In defending the existence of the *Segundo Barrio*, the Church also continued its attempt to preserve the community's traditions amid gentrification efforts and thus the physical erosion of Mexican American history and the disappearance of the *Segundo Barrio's* culture. In addition, Bishop Armando X. Ochoa, who headed the Catholic Diocese of El Paso from 1996-2012, advocated "social justice and the dignity of the person," which has been practiced through migrant and refugee services as well as social and legal services for the El Paso area ("Bishop Armando X. Ochoa").<sup>9</sup>

Not-for-profit institutions, such as the Catholic Diocese, realized the El Paso Del Norte Group and the City Council were standing against South Side residents to further enrich billionaires and millionaires from both Mexico and the United States such as Paul L. Foster, CEO of Western Refining, and Woodly "Woody" Hunt, CEO of Hunt Building CO ("Members"). Both the above-mentioned members, like others within the El Paso Del Norte Group, are well connected within various centers of power. For instance, Paul L. Foster is a current Vice Chairman of the University of Texas Board of Regents ("Current Regents"). Woodly "Woody" Hunt has also been a member of the University of Texas Board of Regents and was once the Chairman of the Texas Governor's Business Council (Hamilton).

### **Retraction**

In the face of overwhelming evidence of corruption and protests, which continues to go mostly unnoted by traditional media outlets, a plan entitled *El Segundo Barrio—Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy* was presented in 2010 by then Mayor John Cook and then City Representative Robert "Beto" O'Rourke. The city's Executive Summary of the plan states that the "neighborhood revitalization strategy is an initiative that is design[ed] for the empowerment of residents living within the neighborhood" through economic and educational opportunities. However, the Executive Summary of the *El Segundo Barrio—Neighborhood*



Revitalization Strategy has no concrete plan for improving the neighborhood or empowering residents. It simply states goals such as increasing homeownership and housing options, particularly single family housing, improving infrastructure, and increasing policing of the neighborhood, improving youth and adult education, and improving the employment opportunities in the neighborhood. However, the plan does not include the building of libraries or schools, increasing the funding of existing libraries and schools, or the funding of any alternative educational programs in the neighborhood. In fact, the *El Segundo Barrio*—Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy has no funding or concrete plans within it. The plan states a few vague goals that seem to be far in the future with no meaningful (or the actual real world improvement in residents' daily lives) immediate action. Instead, the *El Segundo Barrio*—Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy mainly presents the demographics of the neighborhood (previously presented in this study) and a simplified and ethnocentric history of the *Segundo Barrio* that manages to ignore the historical racism and discrimination residents suffered, and continues to suffer, from the city government and the El Paso Independent School District—just to name a few entities (Cook and O'Rourke).

Chicana historian Yolanda Chávez Leyva has noted that *Segundo Barrio* residents face high unemployment and low wages along with the lack of job training programs (Martinez-Bustos, Cantu, and Cornejo). These are all issues the city government has not addressed. These issues also do not exist in a vacuum; for residents of the *Segundo Barrio* suffer from government neglect and abuse since childhood. As previously addressed in this study, the neighborhood has a low educational attainment due to economics and the often-poor condition of its schools (physically and academically). Although, the neighborhood schools lack funding due to state and national politics, which contribute to their low student success rates, the El Paso Independent School District Administration has at times actively discriminated against *Segundo*

*Barrio* students and other students of Mexican origin. For instance, from 2006 to 2011 students from the local high school, Bowie High School, who did not score sufficiently in state standardized tests were pushed out of school by direction of the superintendent, Lorenzo Garcia. Hence, Bowie High School, which “had been on the brink of state intervention for years,” quickly began to turn in high test scores (Michels). Several individuals, including a formal school trustee and formal State Senator Eliot Shapleigh, protested for years to the school administration, the Texas Education Agency, and the U.S. Department of Education until charges were finally filed against school administrators. The *Texas Observer* reported, “Students had been given an array of justifications for their banishment. Some had been told they’d been absent too often to stay in school, and that it would cost hundreds of dollars to fight such truancy decisions in court.” Some students were threatened and spied on by school administrators, saying, “They’d been photographed crossing the bridge from Juarez as proof they lived outside the district. One boy said his principal threatened to report his aunt to immigration if he didn’t leave school” (Michels).<sup>10</sup>

This is an extreme example of mass discrimination that affected hundreds, if not thousands of students, in a system where school officials are pressured to make the grade. This study does not cover the array of discrimination, ethnocentrism, and lack of what many consider “true” or “substantial” education within Texas’s and the nation’s test based education system; however, this case does provide an example of what *Segundo Barrio* residents have to contend with on a daily basis. From childhood to adulthood, those who live in the *Segundo Barrio* face discrimination and lack of consideration by government officials and employees. In Bowie High School, school officials robbed local students of an education and of an opportunity to progress and improve their own lives, the lives of their families, and perhaps their neighborhood. They did so through the deceit and coercion of students and their families.

Returning to the *El Segundo Barrio*—Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy, the plan states that residents live within the *Segundo Barrio* due to its low rental rates and overall low cost of living. Yet, one of the *El Segundo Barrio*—Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy goals is to increase the number of single-family homes, which ignores the familial structure of the neighborhood and would mean the destruction of current low-cost housing in order to make way for new and more costly single-family homes. Moreover, no other infrastructure improvements were mentioned to be initiated through the *El Segundo Barrio*—Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy, and the few improvements that were cited were pre-existing projects such as water utilities and Texas Department of Transportation projects. The only plan that the city can implement as presented by *El Segundo Barrio*—Neighborhood Revitalization Strategy is an increased police presence, which can easily be turned into an oppressive presence in a poor neighborhood with few legal recourses for protection against police, or general government, oversteps.<sup>11</sup> Again, the city purposely failed to empower El Paso’s marginalized (Cook and O’Rourke).

### **Plan Mayachén**

Hence, La Mujer Obrera saw that the women they had worked to empower through labor defense in the textile industry, adult education, and entrepreneurial training after NAFTA along with their entire community and their way of life, had not been considered by the El Paso Del Norte Group or the city government. Both the El Paso Del Norte Group and the city government held heavy cultural, ethnic, and class bias that perceives border laborers in an unfavorable light when compared to or competing with corporate interests. Again, border women were ignored by those meant to work for their well-being like Robert O’Rourke and other elected officials. La Mujer Obrera has an answer: redevelop the community not with billionaires or faceless corporations in mind, but with the community members themselves.

Plan Mayachén is a grassroots redevelopment plan that seeks to enhance the quality of life of current South Side residents, not displace them. The plan seeks to rework existing power relations, building a thriving and empowering urban space for women of color. According La Mujer Obrera's outline of the plan, Plan Mayachén is "a comprehensive community-based regional development plan linking Southern New Mexico, El Paso County and Mexico, and is dedicated to creating 3,000 jobs and more than 100 businesses on the US Mexico border through green economy and development initiatives." La Mujer Obrera made it clear in the plan's outline that their goals for the border were the same goals as the Obama Administration's stated economic and community goals,<sup>12</sup> such as creating a sustainable and competitive green economy, creating redevelopment that included marginalized communities, and providing affordable transportation and housing for all ("Plan Mayachén").

Plan Mayachén seeks to develop El Paso County and Southern New Mexico by "building on the traditional assets of the border population (their cultural heritage, work ethic, work experience, and strong sense of family) to create sustainable economies and communities" ("Plan Mayachén"). The development plan focuses on Latinos, the vast majority of El Paso County and Southern New Mexico's population. At the center of the plan is Plaza Mayachén: "a six block area bridging the Chamizal and South Side neighborhoods (two historic immigrant barrios on the border now ranking amongst the most impoverished areas in the country), and adjacent to border crossings and Downtown El Paso" ("Plan Mayachén").

Plan Mayachén will be supported by green technology, which will include wind and solar energy and green construction and building designs. Such green technology, according to La Mujer Obrera, will power social enterprises and small businesses and thus job creation, workforce training, educational programs, public health initiatives, arts, community access to technology, and infrastructure development. Plaza Mayachén is to showcase:

restaurants and cafés; shops with quality merchandise from Mexico, local artists, and crafts people; a farmers’ market; bilingual exhibits, concerts, films and other recreational events; cultural celebrations; education and training activities; opportunities for applied research on Mexican heritage and the United States-Mexico border region (“Plan Mayachén”).

Plan Maychén is a holistic development plan that crosses generational lines, ethnic lines, labor fields, education levels, and borders, and is meant to support women and their families.

Importantly, it excludes land grabs by millionaire and billionaire capitalists whose ultimate aim is profit without human consideration. La Mujer Obrera intends to create an environment, as they have done with Mercado Mayapan and Café Mayapan, that is safe for women to build their own enterprises and express their culture without being oppressed by a labor and economic system aimed at dehumanizing them physically and mentally.

### **Obstacles to Fulfilling Plan Mayachén and Community Empowerment**

Plan Mayachén, however, faces an obstacle—funding. The El Paso Del Norte Group can easily find funding through its millionaire and billionaire members and through the support of the city government for gentrification projects that target the poor and people of color, which too often go hand in hand. La Mujer Obrera faces the challenge of being composed of minority women, including women who do not know English, have an unfavorable immigration status in the United States, and who are poor and do not have a college or high school education.

Like most non-profits, La Mujer Obrera has worked through the grant system. In 2003, La Mujer Obrera’s daughter organization El Puente was selected to receive a \$100,000 grant along with free business consulting from the Yale School of Management (Peregrino). In 2005, La Mujer Obrera received a \$500,000 state grant in order to assist displaced garment workers. According to Irma Montoya, the Director of the organization at the time, the funds were to be

used to begin a Center for Bilingual Development and Social Enterprise. However, the \$500,000 was \$2,000,000 short of the \$2,500,000 needed to fully fund the center. Montoya told the *El Paso Times*, “It’s a start, and we’re looking for more.” The funds were meant to begin providing services for over three hundred displaced workers, but the grant system is not permanent (Burge). The above-mentioned grants are only two of various grants La Mujer Obrera has received that have not been rewarded. This means that grants are not a sustainable means of survival since they are often canceled or are simply not renewed. Moreover, since the economic downturn of the 2010s private and public grants have become more and more scarce, forcing many non-profits to close or downscale. La Mujer Obrera is no exception.

For instance, La Mujer Obrera’s model for Plan Mayachén, Mercado Mayapan, closed its doors late 2012. The question of why Mercado Mayapan was forced to close must be asked. Outside funding was/is running short, and self-sustainment is yet to be reached. Yes, La Mujer Obrera has achieved what many non-profits nationally and globally never do—actual real world impact. La Mujer Obrera has positively affected the lives of border women and the border community as a whole, the law, and politics. Unlike most non-profits, such as health providers or anti-domestic violence shelters, La Mujer Obrera is not a service organization that sees the women it advocates for as “clients.” La Mujer Obrera seeks to incorporate women into its ranks and empower women through its emancipatory discourse and action. La Mujer Obrera has sought and continues seeking for women to become their own advocates who will challenge oppressive social norms stemming from racism, sexism, colonialism, anti-worker sentiment/classism, historical amnesia, and neo-globalism. Hence, border women will independently begin building their own communities, and to an extent they have already begun doing so through the small enterprises and then women-centered community La Mujer Obrera has formed. Noting so, journalist and social activist Gloria Steinem—after touring La Mujer

Obrera's Sol Daycare, Uxmal Apartments, and Mercado Mayapán in March of 2010—told the *El Paso Times*, “This is a rare organization that includes every part of the community . . . transforming a place with no jobs and a hopeless situation into a hybrid, creative community” (Rentería).

However, the organization has yet to make its business ventures and plans economically self-sustaining (a stated goal of the grassroots organization) through the non-profit industrial complex model.<sup>13</sup> Like many working-class people, living month to month, and living in danger of their physical spaces being lost means the women of La Mujer Obrera must focus their efforts on survival, leaving less time for implementing Plan Mayachén or any other large-scale social plan. What is left to ask is: how can La Mujer Obrera and other such organizations create self-sustainment? What actions can border workers, social activists, academic supporters, etc., take to ensure the continual existence, and most importantly, the success of La Mujer Obrera? What research into self-sustainment, non-corporate business models, or cooperative models needs to be done and implemented? Is a complete new economic model for the border region possible?

If such actions towards self-sustainment are not viable, then what actions should be taken? That is, if grassroots organizations cannot change El Paso alone, what can be done for government to respond? Should political lobbying and voter drives be implemented, or is the current government system too corrupt and outdated to respond to voters? If so, what kind of further political action is needed: political education to politicize working-class El Pasoans, sit-ins, hunger strikes, marches, lawsuits, or the introduction of third party candidates?

Political action must ultimately do more than simply demand for government to make a few favorable decisions or offer lip service and for the economic elite to make limited concessions. Political action must mean the permanent take-over of government for the

majority of El Paso, not a small elite as government currently stands. Hence, government would support an economic system keen on respecting workers and their families not maximizing profit for small stake holding elite. While some may consider this radical or even extreme, keeping border women and their communities marginalized and in poverty and with few opportunities is a far more cruel and extreme option. The stark realities facing border workers have not changed and seemingly will not do so without political intervention. The conundrum of how to change the economic and government systems is what border women face while attempting to build a future in an existing economic system, supported and seemingly at one with government, which insists on using their physical labor while belittling their mental capabilities then discarding them when not needed for profit.

That being said, those most capable of understanding the plight of the border's working-class would be those within this group. Perhaps what is truly needed in the border's political circles are not elite progressive individuals who occasionally sympathize with the border's working-class, but individuals who have lived and continue to live, and thus fully understand, the reality of poverty and its daily uncertainty. This of course would require politicizing border residents to think critically and deeply analyze their society and to maneuver towards defending their interests—something La Mujer Obrera has laid the seeds for since its establishment. Then, *fronterizos* will be better able to defend their communities from destruction and government neglect. Perhaps *fronterizos* can then gain enough political and economic power to determine the future of their communities, creating a more just world in a border that often exemplifies injustice and human suffering.



## Notes

1. Neo-Globalism, as used in this study, is the global economic system where increasingly unregulated private corporations owned by elite stockholders determine economic outcomes. Thus, private corporations choose what labor pools to use for manufacturing or management based on profitability for corporations and thus the stockholders of these corporations. Therefore, corporations will seek the “cheapest” possible labor, often with little regard to political borders, human rights, humane labor conditions, or their workers.
2. A portion of Mercado Mayapan was transferred in a downsized form to Café Mayapan, which is a social enterprise opened by La Mujer Obrera in 2001 (“Tidbits”).
3. It must be noted that communities of color, immigrant communities, and poor communities have historically been, and continue to be, undercounted by government censuses. According to the Census Bureau the 2010 Census undercounted 2.1% of the Black population, 1.5% of the Hispanic population, and 4.9% of the American Indian and Alaska Native population living on government reservations—all racial/ethnic categorizing terms used here are directly from the Census Bureau (“Census Bureau Releases Estimates of Undercount”). In all, the 2010 Census did not count 1.5 million minority members (Yen). Although, for Hispanics, which comprise most of South El Paso, this was an improvement of the 4.99% official undercount in the 1990 Census (El Nasser and Overberg). Census undercounting in El Paso is particularly problematic. Indeed, the *El Paso Times* reported shortly before the 2010 Census that El Paso County is one of the “50 counties in America with populations that are the hardest to count.” This is “because of language barriers, the fluid border and poverty in colonias and city neighborhoods” (Gómez). *Colonias* are unincorporated areas outside of cities and towns along the Texas border that usually have few to no government services.
4. According to the Paso Del Norte Group’s official website, the organization has been rebranded as the Borderplex Bi-National Economic Alliance after merging with the Regional Economic Development Corp (“Update: The Borderplex Bi-National Economic Alliance”).
5. During O’Rourke’s successful bid for Congress, the *El Paso Times* reported: “O’Rourke’s contributions have all come from individual donors. Much of his money has come from El Paso business leaders, particularly members of the Paso del Norte Group, which was founded by O’Rourke’s father-in-law, William Sanders” (“Challenger O’Rourke”). For easy access for specific donors and donation amounts the *El Paso Times* posted a “Search campaign contributions for Beto O’Rourke” page on its website. The webpage tracked donations made to O’Rourke during his 2012 bid for Congress.
6. The local Anglo or Euro-American press Romo refers to includes the still popular *El Paso Times*: El Paso’s only remaining English-language daily newspaper. Thus, it is also a newspaper that this study uses as a source.
7. For further reference regarding “urban renewal” in El Paso see *Smelertown: Making and Remembering a Southwest Community* (specifically 226–259) by historian and El Paso native Monica Perales, which studies urban displacement as a consequence of environmental injustice on the El Paso border.
8. The inclusion of the Catholic Diocese of El Paso’s relationship with the area’s Mexican origin community is strictly limited to confines of this study. In saying that, the diocese’s stance on various human rights issues such as women’s rights and Queer rights are not analyzed here.
9. For reference on abuse by Border Patrol against Bowie High School students and staff see “La Preparatoria Bowie versus la Patrulla Fronteriza” in *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 30.2 (2005), by Dennis J. Bixler-Márquez.
10. To gain a deeper understanding of the modern and historical policing of People of Color, particularly Latinos and Mexican-origin people, see M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing* (233–35), *Race, Ethnicity, and Policing: New and Essential Readings* (435–44), and Victor M. Rios’s *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* as a whole.

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11. Among President Obama's goals, which are readily available through BarackObama.com, is doubling the nation's green energy output by 2020, creating upwardly mobile jobs, raising wages, and assuring women equal pay for equal work (*BarackObama*). In various forms, these are goals La Mujer Obrera has set for itself through Plan Mayachén and goals La Mujer Obrera has been working towards since 1981.
12. This is the not-for-profit model relying on private and government grants and donations that has rapidly risen in popularity in the United States to provide social services that other private sector entities or governments do not provide.

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