

# THE *Final Straw*

A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world.

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Mutual Aid At The Border  
with El Comedor Comunitario



**The Final Straw Radio**  
**May 25, 2023**

This week, we're sharing a recent chat with Devi Machete, an anarchist involved in the Tijuana mutual aid project known as Contra Viento y Marea Comedor which distributes clothing, medical supplies, hot meals and shelf stable food throughout the week on the border with the USA. The project, known for short as El Comedor Comunitario is launching a free school and art laboratory in June. For the hour, we talk about the migrant caravan in 2018 that gave rise to El Comedor Comunitario, the self-organized work around the project and resisting the dehumanization of the border through solidarity and community.

Since the US allowed the Trump-Era Title 42 Covid-based restriction on immigrants entering the country to expire and has moved back to Title 8, so in a post-script Devi talks about concerns of a surge at the border and the further difficulties this change creates for migrants and refugees seeking asylum in the north.

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 GoFundMe: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/migrant-organizers-of-tijuana-need-covid-support>  
 soon-to-be-relaunched website: [www.contravientoymareatj.com.mx](http://www.contravientoymareatj.com.mx)

You can also check out our prior interview (online) with Elements of Mutual Aid directors Leah & Payton to get some visuals of El Comedor Comunitario, which is a featured project in that docu-series.

Search for this interview title at <https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/> to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

grants from being able to even apply for asylum, which is the same intended effect of Title 42. We're not seeing a shift for the better in terms of this new announcement with Title 8 and the new immigration rules that have just been announced to replace Title 42. We know that there are infinitely better ways to treat migrants with dignity. This is not what we're seeing at the moment.

We wanted to be very clear that we are going to continue to see the number of migrants coming to seek asylum rise as it has been for the past two decades. What we know is that at the root of the problem is that migrants are not able to live in their home countries because all these different factors are forcing them to leave in order to save their lives or their children's lives. It's imperative for the migrant justice movement as a whole to work on building networks of solidarity across the different migration route points, in order to better support the migrants and to adapt to the new realities of the migration crisis that will inevitably continue to escalate, as the factors that drive migrants from their homes are not mitigated. We are hopeful that there can be changes that come through organized resistance and we are very proud to be part of those efforts.

a pathway legally to seek asylum will turn to human smugglers who are part of the network of drug cartels. They make money from crossing migrants over. They've been able to reap huge profits from Title 42. This empowerment of organized crime groups has led to increasingly violent outcomes. We are seeing more kidnappings, extortions, disappearances, rapes, robberies, homicides, all of the gamut of human rights violations imaginable. The migrants that are coming to seek asylum are reporting that their journey north has been much more dangerous than in previous years and that it is increasingly becoming more hostile and impossible. Not to mention that when they arrived, they are received by border patrol in the most inhumane ways possible.

What we are doing here at Contra Viento y Marea to support migrants is providing them free hot meals, providing them access to the resources we have – clothing, medicines, and everything that we offer to the public, and we will continue to do so. We also feel we have to report what we are seeing on the ground as migrant organizers and migrants ourselves who are part of this mutual aid project. We believe that policies like Title 42 will never serve to deter migrants, they will only create situations where more migrants are killed and disappeared. We stand against Title 42 and other policies like it.

The Biden administration has announced that Title 42 will be replaced with Title 8 and with additional anti-migrant rules. Title 8 is a policy that will allow asylum seekers to present their claims of asylum when they turn themselves into the Border Patrol, but they will be kept in detention centers. This policy Title 8 will further criminalize migrants, forcing them to be in detention centers for longer periods. That in turn makes profits for the private prison industry that is also operating these migrant detention centers along the border and elsewhere in the country. What we know from what's been happening with migrants who are attempting to cross is that the wave of deportations that began under Title 42, which was expedited deportations, is going to continue under Title 8. People who are allowed to present asylum claims are very quickly expelled from the country if they don't have certain documentation or if their asylum claims cannot be verified.

There's a whole gamut of reasons why people are excluded from being able to present their asylum cases effectively. We expect the record number of deportations to continue. It's been extremely difficult seeing how Title 8 is part of this broader push to criminalize migrants, further militarize the border, and overall increase the number of migrant deaths that happen, and we are firmly against Title 8 and these new Biden rules that, for example, say "Migrants have to seek asylum in countries along the route." So that would be Mexico in most cases, and if they do not do that and present themselves to Border Patrol without having first gotten asylum in Mexico, for example, they will be deported. The other way in which these new rules are going to continue to lead to mass deportations and death is that migrants are now required to seek asylum using an app called CBP One which is riddled with technical errors and makes it so the majority of migrants cannot navigate or use the app effectively to claim asylum. The purpose of the app is to deter mi-

**Devi Machete:** My name is Devi Machete and I am a migrant organizer in Tijuana with the collective Contra Viento y Marea – El Comedor Comunitario. We go by El Comedor in the community. I've been a migrant organizer for 18+ years. I use they/them, but any pronoun is fine with me.

**TFSR:** We're here to talk about Contra Viento y Marea. I wonder if you could translate the name and the meaning behind it, and explain what a Comedor is.

**DM:** *Contra Viento y Marea* translates roughly into "Against all odds" or "Against the wind and tide". *Contra Viento y Marea* was the name of the caravan that came to Tijuana from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. That's where it originated. It came to the US-Mexico border. The only caravan to do that. It arrived in Tijuana in November and December 2018. The name of the caravan *Contra Viento y Marea* was then the name of a bodega that was near the Benito Juarez Sports Complex. It was a bodega where folks from the caravan lived. The caravan had about 5000 migrants primarily from Central America. It also had a contingency of LGBTQ+ migrants. When they arrived at the border, a lot of them were living on the streets and in apartments near this area in the Zona Centro and Zona Norte. Some of them were living in this bodega. That was also the name of the bodega, *Contra Viento y Marea*.

The migrants that were living there organize themselves autonomously. They created their own kitchen crew, their own security crew, and their own donations crew to accept and give out donations. Without having any previous organizing experience, the migrants in this bodega organized their living situation as best they could. They carried with them the legacy of the caravans' resistance. The bodega then welcomed organizers from the US like myself, I came down to Tijuana with a collective called Hacate Society – queer artists femmes. We went to live in the bodega at the request of the migrants that were living there. A lot of the migrants were youth. It was an interesting dynamic because we were working with a lot of migrant youth. The bodega was under a lot of repression from the municipal government – I can get into that later on.

To make the long story short, when that Bodega was closed down by the municipal government after a long battle – the migrants held their ground for two months and used all kinds of successful direct action tactics in order to avoid the forcible eviction – once they decided that they were going to go to a shelter, relocate and close down the bodega. The migrants that had been organizing the kitchen crew and the others wanted to continue doing their work, wanted to continue serving meals to a lot of migrants, pregnant women, children that were living on the streets that had just arrived with the caravan, and others from the community, like the homeless population here, others with disabilities that live on the streets and drug users. We managed to collect the resources that we needed in order to open up this space, which is also called *Contra Viento y Marea*. There is a commu-

nity kitchen, and a Frontline Resource Center. It also has very recently become a kitten rescue operation [laughs]. We also have a rooftop community garden. In a few months, we're planning to open a free school as well. And it's all under Contra Viento y Marea's name. The migrant organizers that were the founders of this space chose that name.

**TFSR: That's awesome. there's so much there in that story. The current incarnation and the affiliated projects continue to be autonomous, they aren't connected to the church or any NGOs, or anything like this.**

**DM:** They continue to be autonomous. Yes, there have been times when we've had to have a fiscal sponsor in order to be able to receive certain financial benefits. There have been times when we have had a fiscal sponsor. At one point we were sponsored by Switchboard Traders Network, which is a radical group. We recently got a fiscal sponsorship again, from a theater in San Diego for the Latino community, it's called Tu Y Yo. They are a good partner. But ultimately, it's temporary. We don't plan to stick with them forever, we're looking to continue to find ways to resist autonomously without being in this relationship with the nonprofit, even though it's a very beneficial one for both of us.

At this time it's something that we're doing because we had to think about alternatives for fundraising given the pandemic. We started applying for grants. Small grants, nothing huge, in order for us to be able to sustain the project in the post-pandemic world, we had to diversify our revenue stream to include some grants. There have been moments like now when we do have a fiscal sponsor, but for the most part, the project out of its four years has been completely autonomous.

**TFSR: There's no shame, I wasn't asking about it for a purity reason. You're operating under capitalism, it makes sense that you have to find funding sources. Also, it sounds like it's important to you all that you keep your independence, mission, and values. The major fear that I hear people represent when they talk about fiscal sponsorship is that they'll be tied down to not the people that directly benefit from and participate in a project, but down to where the money's coming from.**

**DM:** Those are valid concerns, I definitely understand them from a firsthand point of view. We definitely value being a project that is mutual aid-centered and that leaves the decision-making in the hands of the volunteers who do the labor. At this moment, that's still the case. We did get other offers from other fiscal sponsors where they would be much more hands-on, and we rejected them outright. We've gotten offers from nonprofits that have wanted to literally buy our project out. And we have rejected them even though they have offered us 1,000's of dollars. Being a mutual aid project that's autonomous, comes with a lot of financial penalties. Literally, your donations are not tax-free, your donors cannot get tax write-offs,

**MD:** Devi Machete, Contra Viento y Marea – El Comedor Comunitario, Tijuana, Mexico, May 17th 2023. Statement about the end of Title 42.

I wanted to briefly touch on the news lately getting a lot of attention regarding a surge of migrants coming to the US-Mexico border to seek asylum now that the anti-migrant policy Title 42 has been effectively lifted. Title 42 was a public health care protocol that was passed under the guise of fighting the spread of COVID-19 under the Trump administration. It was put into effect in March 2020 and has been lifted now on May 11. The facts of Title 42 have been to mass deport almost 3 million migrants who would otherwise be asylum seekers that could have legitimate claims processed at any other time.

How Title 42 played out is that it effectively eviscerated the legal pathway to seek asylum at a port of entry along the border. Many migrants who came in previous years have been waiting for Title 42 to be lifted in order to seek asylum. There have also been some newcomers that have recently arrived from their home countries and are also making their way to present themselves to Border Patrol to be able to start their asylum claim. What is true is that there is not a surge of migrants coming right now to seek asylum. Instead, what we know from being on the ground and seeing how the trends of migrants over time have played out is that there has been an increase in the number of migrants coming to the US border overall, but that has been a gradual trend over time. This is nothing new or out of the ordinary what we're seeing right now. It's part of a continuum of migrants coming to the border in greater numbers because of climate change, because of political instability, and violence associated with gangs or cartels.

One of the things that are important to mention is that there's a group of about 100+ migrants who are waiting to be processed by Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) who are being kept in between the two border walls and have been in makeshift camps there, some of them for a week, some of them for a few days. While they're waiting for CBP to process them, they don't have access to water, food, medical care, medicines, or all of the necessities. The reason why Border Patrol is taking longer to process them isn't because there has been an exponential increase in the number of folks waiting who are now presenting themselves. It's more based on the image of people waiting and fits into this broader narrative that more people are coming here.

In Tijuana that has not been the case. What we know is that in Ciudad Juárez there have been more people arriving and also presenting themselves after having been waiting for the past three years along the region, waiting for Title 42 to be lifted. They're now just starting to claim asylum. What we also know is that the migrants who are there are folks who didn't decide to come to the US border because they wanted to take advantage of Title 42 being lifted or any other reason related to US policies. The reason that people are coming and seeking asylum is due to the conditions that are happening in their home countries. And these policies do not serve as a deterrence. They only make the journeys more harrowing and dangerous. They further empower organized crime because migrants who don't have



up within the next week or so. We have a Facebook: Contra Viento y Marea Comedor. The Instagram is @contravientoymarea\_elcomedor. On those two pages, we upload photos of our servings, flyers, and announcements. Folks can contact us through DMs on the Facebook or Instagram page. We also have an email [contravientoymareacomedor@gmail.com](mailto:contravientoymareacomedor@gmail.com). Then we have an email for the free school [escuelalibretijuana@gmail.com](mailto:escuelalibretijuana@gmail.com). We have a Venmo, where folks can donate funds for either the Comedor in general or for one of our projects, it can be for the community garden, it can be for the free school, or it can be for the community kitchen. Our Venmo is @tjrefugee-support. We have a GoFundMe page that is linked to our website. It also has the name of El Comedor [01:08:51] in it. Folks can find us on their mass surveillance platform of choice. We just started at TikTok as well, but we haven't fully promoted it. We just uploaded some videos to it that we finished and we'll have that out soon.

If people want to learn, they can reach out to us and we can talk and that's the best way to engage. What we want is for folks who are interested in whatever ways they want to plug in and have conversations and learn from each other and find ways to organize on a basis of friendship. That's the most important. We're not here for you to come to wash dishes and then leave, that's not what we're about. We're about hanging out, talking to each other, and sharing great food. Giving out great food and making our work mean something, not just in terms of productivity goals, but making it mean something for us as volunteers, and as friends. We welcome folks who are interested in supporting us in any way they want to. If you have access to a certain kind of resource, we welcome that. If folks are interested in driving down donations or interested in coming and volunteering, we can support you in all the ways that are required so that you can be here with us and feel good, feel safe, and feel embraced.

**TFSR: Awesome. Thank you, Devi. I really appreciate you taking the time to have this conversation and your project sounds amazing. Are you all going to be featured in the Elements of Mutual Aid series, too?**

**DM:** Yeah, we are.

**TFSR: Awesome. At the beginning of one of the recent previews, before I spoke to the directors, I saw that there was a project in Tijuana. I wasn't sure if that was y'all or someone else. That's exciting.**

**DM:** Yeah, we're featured in the documentary. We love Leah and Payton, they're awesome. They came down and hung out with us for a little bit. It was really fun and we're looking forward to the film.

**TFSR: I really appreciate you taking the time to have this conversation and your project sounds amazing.**

and you can't get grants. There are a lot of ways in which the government punishes those that are outside of the nonprofit industrial complex. To navigate those complexities, we've had to be creative about our strategies for working and the ways that we accept or decline donations.

**TFSR: That sounds like the carrot side of the carrot and stick. You mentioned that the municipal government in Tijuana was trying to shut down the project or change the way it operated. Can you talk a little bit about that? I'm curious.**

**DM:** That was before we had this space. That was in the first bodega that the migrants had themselves. There were some organizers like myself and my collective and others from anarchist groups that were inside the warehouse, living and supporting the migrants. When the group of 500 migrants was living in the bodega near the Benito Juarez Sports Complex, the municipal government tried to shut down that bodega. They used tactics that are from a common playbook that they use against all other migrant camps that pop up along the US-Mexico border. Those tactics would be, for example, they took away the porta potties that were outside the bodega, and they told the trash collectors to stop coming to pick up the trash. The trash would pile up on the streets' corners, and the neighbors would start to complain that the migrants were leaving a lot of trash. That was a strategy created by the municipal government to get the community to turn against the bodega and the migrants themselves. Other tactics included not allowing water or food to enter the bodega. At the end of the long struggle towards the last month, they had a line of riot police standing in front of the entrance of the bodega, so that if you stepped a foot out, you couldn't be let back in. Even if all your belongings were there, and you showed up one day after work, you were no longer allowed to go in. The municipal government created this system where folks needed to get an ID to be in the camp. They'll only come in the middle of a day, and then whoever is there, gets their photo taken and they get the ID. But if you're off, for example, going to a doctor's appointment, and you're not there, when you try to come back to enter the camp, if you don't have that ID, you can't get back in. They would deny people entry, and they put a lot of pressure on the families with children to leave, arguing that the children were unsafe and that it was too dangerous there. When the children and the families would leave, they would get much more violent with the people that remained. That was a tactic to try to push the families with children out. Other tactics as well.

This is at a time when there is a municipal government-run camp that they started, called El Barretal, which was 20 kilometers outside of the city, in a rural area. It was very unsafe, they wouldn't distribute any of the donations that they had, and people were going without tents, without sleeping bags. They barely distributed any of the food. It was really unsafe. There they didn't have adequate bathrooms, they didn't have electricity, or had electricity shortages when they had

it. It was a disaster. About 3,000 migrants were living there. They were constantly leaving because it was so unsafe. They would lock them in at night so they couldn't leave, and they had barbed wire set up. There were a bunch of these tactics that the municipal government used. This is what they do across other migrant camps that have existed. There was one more recently that happened here at the border crossing El Chaparral. They did a similar approach to try to vacate that camp. That camp as well was not run by the government, it was autonomous.

When we were nearing the end of the struggle at the bodega, there was one night when they sent about 200 riot police, fully armed, to go evict the warehouse. The migrants locked themselves down in the warehouse, closed down the entrances and chained themselves to the door, and barricaded. The police were humiliated because they were not able to evict the warehouse that night. It was around five in the morning. The migrants successfully executed direct action tactics to keep themselves from getting evicted and were very successful at their campaign of direct actions overall. They used a ton of really creative strategies to bring in water when it was denied, to bring in a birthday cake for someone. These are migrants who have no previous organizing experience. They were able to come together and use a lot of anarchist tactics and strategies in very impressive ways that show that our tactics and strategies are viable in the most extreme situations and that others who are coming from communities outside of the anarchist community are ready to deploy direct action tactics. It's a really beautiful example of seeing how migrant autonomous resistance is happening despite all the repression and it works, and it's been effective at combating the state.

**TFSR: I do want to talk about the organizing that you all are doing now, but even the collective method of movement across those borders.**

**As I've understood, it's pretty unsafe to be in a territory that you're not familiar with, speaking with a different accent, assuming that you even speak the same language, and not necessarily knowing the rules. Transiting as a group, as a caravan seems like a good way of gaining publicity for the question of people's safety and ability to transit across borders, but also to be able to provide mutual defense in those circumstances. That caravan was really impressive, what I saw of it from afar.**

**DM:** It was very impressive. That's why it's important to talk about the caravan when we talk about our mutual aid project because we inherited that grand legacy of autonomous migrant resistance that continues in this project. To understand the work we're doing, it's imperative to go back to how we started and how it is that we've met. This project is a nexus between anarchist organizers that were local from Tijuana, from other places in Mexico, from the US, and from other countries coming together in alliance with migrant youth from Central America. We started this project together and we continue to run it together. I don't think there are other projects like ours in this region, but I could be wrong. I hope I'm wrong, but

The risks are there, but also the rewards. You get to bond with people that have so much incredible talent and are inspirational in their bravery. You get to immerse yourself in a different way of being and seeing the world that ultimately will allow you to grow and understand from firsthand experience, why it is that migrants are leaving and coming to the US and it has a lot to do with US imperialism. It has a lot to do with the US invading countries in Latin America and arming right-wing death squads and overthrowing democratically elected presidents and installing puppet military dictators. These are the reasons why Latin America is fucked. It's not because the US has played some non-interventionist role. It requires folks in the US to wake up to that – our own government is responsible for the “migrant crisis,” and our own government is responsible for the cartels. We were responsible for deporting the gangs into Central America that are now controlling parts of the country, and those things come from the US.

It's incumbent upon us to wake up to those realities and take action to mitigate the harm that our government has caused, actively so. To show that we are part of the movement for migrant justice and that we are here in solidarity. Not to be part of their exploitation through the business of the border, not to do “poverty tours”, but to actually mitigate the harm that has been actively caused by our government, not just in the past, but continues to do so. There is hope for the future, that we are all able to come together in alliances and work together towards a common cause, across all sectors, across all different types of groups and movements, that we find a common cause and we support each other. Through that transnational solidarity, we can begin to bring about the structural changes that we need for there to be a future for all of us.

Climate change has put a timer on our ability to organize and has made it so that there are going to be many more climate refugees coming in the coming years. If we don't figure out strategies by which to embrace migrants and support them, this crisis is only going to grow and its mortality. As anarchists, we share a lot of the same values that migrants and refugees share. They don't trust the state. They wouldn't call the authorities for support. They are willing to risk everything for their dreams, willing to hop trains, ride bikes, walk-in caravans, traverse borders, and confront the full force of the state. Migrants are the ultimate anarchists in a lot of ways. We share the same values and the same perspectives. It makes it so that it's a very natural alliance, a very organic alliance to work together in solidarity.

**TFSR: That definitely makes sense. You mentioned giving support, and possibly showing up where you're at. How can people in the listening audience learn more about the Comedor and the free school and how to plug in or send donations?**

**DM:** We're getting ready to revamp our website, our website might not be up right now. The volunteer that was doing it for the last four years is stepping down. We're currently working on that. Our website is [contravientoymareatj.com](http://contravientoymareatj.com). It should be

compete with the nonprofits in terms of being able to survive in this landscape. We are here in order to prove that there is a future in which anarchists and migrants can collaborate, to bring about the world that we need, a world that's possible and within our fingertips. We are doing the work of revolutionaries. We are the revolution, we're living the revolution ourselves. Instead of waiting for it to come to our doorstep, all our projects are aligned with that goal, of making the world a better place for everybody, regardless of their background, regardless if they're sober, regardless if they're good or bad person or migrant. We don't fall into those tropes, we believe everybody has a lot of complexity in their lives. Some things that people do to survive are not something they're proud of, and people have to do things that they don't want to do in order to survive. Sometimes we have to do rational decisions based on our own self-preservation. We understand that that doesn't define who we are and that we can also learn from the experiences that we have and be better people. The project itself is a representation of the world in which we want to live and imagine that world and then create it for ourselves.

**TFSR: I want to ask where people can learn more and how they can make donations. But first, I wanted to ask, because it's in the back of my head. Because a) you have mentioned that there's increasing violence in the area in the neighborhood, and b) because of the perception north of the border of what Mexico's like, how do you think people who would be interested in going but are a little concerned about safety? What are some good ways to approach that concern?**

**DM:** Yes, it is. The border is a dangerous area. Of course, there's no way to sugar-coat that. Other places in the US are also very unsafe. There's places in downtown LA that are unsafe, there's places in neighborhoods that are rough, and that are starved economically on purpose to make people desperate. Intentional poverty is created on purpose to exploit people, to control them.

In this area where we are, there are high levels of crime, and all kinds of horrendous things happen. There's mass graves found here. There's 30 mass graves that they found in 2022 here in Tijuana and in Baja, California. There are extreme cases of mutilation and decapitation of migrants. A few blocks from here there was a migrant from El Salvador that was decapitated. We've seen people murdered on the street. One time we were going to the grocery store to get stuff on our way to our serving. A man was lying on the parking lot floor on the ground, who had just been killed as we pulled up, a few seconds before. We're constantly surrounded by the violence, we're not immune to it. Those things are here, but we keep each other safe. We take care of each other, we look out for one another. We do all kinds of things to ensure that we're safe. We do the best we can.

It's about the community that you're with. For us, everyone who comes to volunteer with us, we make sure that they're good. We do take all kinds of precautionary measures, we do have very rigorous security culture protocols in place.

not that we've come across. We feel that we stand out for these reasons in terms of what we represent and how this history informs our current work.

**TFSR: Would you go into a little more detail about the ins and the outs of the project? What the programs are that have been running, who participates in them, and the neighborhood that you're situated in?**

**DM:** Sure thing. Let's start with the last part of your question. We're located in the Zona Centro, just two blocks away from Zona Norte. We are a block away from the border wall. This area is heavily militarized and over-policed. We have the National Guard patrolling the streets with armed assault rifles and other weapons of war. We have the Mexican army patrolling the streets, armed soldiers walking around in patrols. Then there's of course the Baja California State Police, there is the municipal police. Other agencies span the gamut in terms of being part of the military or other police forces. This area feels like an open-air prison or can feel like a war zone. There's an escalating number of homicides, rapes, kidnappings, extortion, disappearances, and everything in between. All of these things happen because we're living in an area that has concentrated the number of migrants that live here. After all, it's a low-income neighborhood, it's an impoverished neighborhood. People are living on a few dollars a day. The cost of living is extremely expensive for the local people.

This project serves people that are the most marginalized: we serve migrants, refugees, deportees, we serve folks that are living on the street, the disabled, sex workers – the Red Light district is a few blocks away, – we serve LGBTQ folks from shelters and that live in this community. We serve street vendors, other types of day workers, construction workers. There's a shelter next door to where we serve, so there are folks from that shelter. We serve outside of a free medical clinic, there are patients from that clinic that come eat with us.

El Comedor used to serve here at our space before the pandemic. After the pandemic, we started serving outside of the clinic and Espacio Migrante. We serve outside for safety reasons because we're serving around 200 to 250 people per serving. Having that many people grouped during the pandemic was unfeasible. Before the pandemic, we were serving around 500 a day. Now we're serving 200-250 a day. We used to serve lunch and dinner Monday through Saturday, now we only serve lunch Monday through Thursday. The pandemic has been very challenging in many ways, but we continue to strive to do the best we can with the resources we have.

In addition to the free food program, we have two bodegas that we've built on the rooftop of the kitchen. We store donations of clothing, shoes, hygiene products, things like toothpaste, shampoo, soap, towels, sleeping bags, diapers, tents, and all the things that people need to live. That includes vital medications, such as Narcan, or naloxone. It's a medication that's used to reverse the effects of an overdose of an opioid. We're struggling with an opioid crisis that is driven by fen-

tanyl in this community. We give this medication out for free no questions asked, in addition to all the other goods and meals that we give out. We give boxes of food staples with rice and beans, stuff that we have in sacks – we'll split it up, whatever veggies we have in the fridge – we'll split it with people and give them boxes for those that have stoves or refrigerators. We give out hot meals, we give out boxes of staple goods, and we give out clothing and medications.

We also put on events. We have an acupuncture clinic with a group called Acupuncturists Without Borders. We used to do it once a month, but we're preparing to open the free school this month, in a few days, we have stopped doing them so frequently. Before the pandemic, we had a free medical clinic every other Saturday here at the Comedor. We had doctors from that clinic where we serve now, where we serve meals outside, they used to not have a space. They would go to the shelters and they would come here, and their doctors would do the clinics here. But now we refer folks to that clinic, and then we serve outside of that clinic. We continue to support each other, but it's a little bit different now.

Aside from events, we have a community garden that comes and goes with the seasons and with the volunteers. The majority of our volunteers are migrants, refugees, and deportees, and most of them are youth. Because migrants don't come to Tijuana to try to live here, they're all seeking to cross to the US, we constantly have volunteers leaving and volunteers coming in. We also have volunteers that come from the US who are students, or who live in the communities nearby or have friends in common with us. They come down and hang out and support. The garden also lives off of that energy depending on who's around. We do try to keep a lot of herbs and things like chili peppers, shallots, kale, those things. We used to have a lot of tomatoes, but the heat up here isn't adequate for them and they require a lot of water. We might bring them back during the free school if we're able to build vertical shelves where we can have them stashed up in a way that recycles the water. We have plans to expand the garden in the free school.

Last but not least, we have started rescuing kittens [chuckles]. This was not something we planned. We found a couple of kittens on the street that were alone and needed help. They were hungry and cold, and we brought them into the space. Then we had a cat who showed up and started living here in the bodega. Eventually, she got pregnant, and she had kittens, we have those kittens as well. We love the cats, we feel like they are an important part of our space, and they are very supportive of our projects. They bring a lot of joy into our lives. We are trying to give some away as we rescue some. Others come and eat here that live in this neighborhood that are street cats. We feed cats as well. We've become a community kitchen for cats [laughs].

The last thing I'll mention is that we're opening a free school here at El Comedor on May 26th. This free school is part of our vision to continue the work that we're doing. All the programs that we have grown out of the necessity that the communities that live here have. They emerge from the volunteers and from the people we serve. For example, when we open the community kitchen, people would

that do migrant support. If you are a photographer, and you want to come down and do an exposé on migrants and show the resistance of migrants to contrast all the negative stereotypes and depictions of death that exist about refugees and migrants in the media, you can do that. It can be in whatever you're already doing, you can find a way to plug in your work into being in solidarity with migrants and refugees, and those of us that are organizing migrants and supporting the community.

### **TFSR: That's a great answer.**

**DM:** If you're a doctor, you can come to be a volunteer here. If you know how to make recycled clothes, fashion designer or something, you can come down and do that with our donations of clothing and make some of them that we wouldn't otherwise give out usable. There are a million ways that people can plug in with what they're already doing. It doesn't require you to create a whole new skill set. But of course, if you are feeling adventurous and you'd like to come down, and you have access to a passport, or want to try to get a passport, we would definitely support those volunteers that need to get passports with that so that they could come down and hang out and visit and learn about what it is that migrants are facing. It's important to listen to them and leave the US because anarchists need to leave the US to see what other struggles are like outside. It's very important and eye-opening. We get to be immersed in all these different struggles that people have been fighting and learn from their strategies and tactics and that way, enrich our own movements back in the US, but also enrich theirs in these other countries.

In Tijuana, you get to meet all kinds of people from all over the world with all kinds of backgrounds. It's a very diverse city. It's one of the busiest border crossings in the world, if not the busiest border crossing in the world. A part of it is that a lot of the people that we talk to regularly have terrible stories of tragedy that they're facing, and are going all kinds of duress. It's very common to find out that people are living these incredible nightmares. We are making a concerted effort in this project to create the utopia that we deserve to live in. We are trying to create a mutual aid economy in which we all get everything we need to live for free. It doesn't matter what your immigration status is or where you come from. Nobody should be denied hot food and not waiting for the revolution to come or not waiting for the state to collapse.

In this project, if it is only this project that does this, we are going to do the best we can to create a world in which we all live with dignity and have the things we need at our fingertips. We know we're not alone, and we work in solidarity with many other groups, people, and collectives that do adjacent and complementary work, or that do things that are different movements of justice, but we support and stand firmly behind. All of us together are trying to build this new world in which all the things that are missing from this one in this dark dystopia of a capitalist hellscape, we're building this world here for ourselves and for our community. Of course, we're not immune from any of the violence and outside pressures. We



**DM:** That's a great question and a very timely one at that. All of us are capable of being in solidarity with migrants and refugees, whether some are living in our cities and towns, who are our neighbors, and are undocumented or are documented, but need support in other ways. We can help them there. We don't necessarily need to come to the border to find migrants to help. Migrants are living all across the US that need help with rent and accessing health care, accessing childcare, accessing all kinds of services. That's one way to plug in.

But then we also can support collectives and groups that are anarchists, that are doing humanitarian aid, or are supporting migrants through collectives on the ground. We constantly need donations of food, if you're near the border, and clothing. Or if you have condoms or Plan B or whatever it is that you can send them to us, so that we can distribute them in the community. In the case with Narcan, we have a collective on the other side that supports us with Narcan. That's how we have access to it for free and give it out for free here in the community. There's a lot of ways for folks to plug in besides donating money and goods. You can come down and support as a volunteer for as long as you need, want, or can. If folks aren't physically able to come to the border, there's ways for folks to be in solidarity by providing commissary to folks that are in detention centers or supporting those that are inside detention centers, as well.

If we were to talk about the landscape of the Migrant Justice Movement, there's at least these three areas and they do overlap. They're not distinct categories. There's the pre-detention, detention, and then post-detention/deportation. We're on the pre-detention side, we get to work with migrants that are not yet in detention, that are on the Mexican side of the border, and that need all kinds of support. They've just traveled thousands of miles and they get to these cities without anything. Sometimes they need medical care, they need access to lawyers, they need access to housing, they need all kinds of things – food, and material goods. We fill that void, and the work we're doing is on the pre-detention side, but then some folks have crossed over, have been caught by border patrol and they're now in detention. We'll meet folks that we knew here and then now they're in detention and we'll pass over the names of those folks to those in the US in those states where they're located for them to track them and help them while in detention. Then folks will get deported and then there will be a need for folks to help them because a lot of them come back. They don't stay back home, especially if their lives are in danger, and they will attempt to cross again. There's a substantial amount of migrants that are continuously coming back from being deported, attempting to re-cross over and over and over again. There's a need for folks to help those that are facing deportation hearings, to have accompaniment in court, and to help translate documents for them.

There's all kinds of ways that people can plug in, and you can be really creative in the ways that you operate. It doesn't require you to do something new if you're necessarily not feeling that direction. If you're an artist, for example, you can make your art and sell it, and then some of the revenue you can donate to groups

start asking us, "Do you have a pair of shoes? I'm going to try to cross the border wall and my shoes have holes in them, I can't run in these shoes." We would be like, "Well, let's see if we can start collecting donations then, and giving out shoes and backpacks." We would put calls out into our networks. Then we would get donations down here. We started providing donations that way, based on what people were needing and asking us for.

The free school likewise began under that same kind of vision. Our compañeros, migrant youth who volunteer here, wanted to learn different skill sets that they felt we could muster the resources to have. They would ask, for example, to have classes of English, so they could learn to speak English. We would do them here and there, whenever we had time, whenever we could organize around to do it, but it wasn't very often and it wasn't systematic. The idea emerged that we should have talleres or workshops for the volunteers. We began working towards that. We were thinking about it before the pandemic hit. Then when the pandemic hit, we tabled the plans. After the pandemic now, the idea has reemerged in about a year now we've been organizing to try to open a free school that's not just for the volunteers, but for other folks in the community who haven't had opportunities to get an education or have lacked meaningful educational experiences in the education system that's currently in place. We want to start with a pilot version of the free school that's going to last two months from May 26th to July 21st. We're hoping to have around 15 to 20 students.

We're opening the free school as a different type of educational project. We want to center the students, the volunteers, the teachers or facilitators, we want to center learning and make it enjoyable and use this type of radical pedagogy called PAR, Participatory Action Research. It's called EOP en español – Investigación de acción participativa. In this line of radical pedagogy, I can give you a quick example of how it would be implemented. The role between teacher and student is not vertical, it's horizontal. The student can learn from the teacher, but the teacher can also learn from the student. The student can also participate, for example, as a volunteer in organizing the free school. The teachers can go to the other workshops and be part of them. All the volunteers and teachers have the opportunity to attend as many of the other workshops as they want. The students likewise can teach workshops, if they so choose to. All the roles are horizontal, and everyone can participate in as many of them as they want, based on capacity or interest. We believe that knowledge is produced by those in all kinds of different ways of living. It's not just something that happens in academia. We also want to see the talents, abilities, and skills that people have in this community be shared widely and for free with others in the community. Not necessarily just siphoned off into academia or the nonprofit sector, or the employment sector.

We want knowledge to be liberated from the skill sets of people in this community, and to share them with others in this community. A place for folks to come together and play with paint, learn about Zen meditation or Aikido, learn about harm reduction, come read Latin American poetry, and all kinds of different

skill sets that people are volunteering to teach. What we want is to create a school that is about the pleasure of learning and building community with each other. Building care webs, where folks will meet others who live in this neighborhood. Then, from there they can have a friendship that will allow them to have a person in their life who they can call in times of crisis or when they want to go get coffee and enrich the quality of life that's possible by bringing people together and having the space and resources for folks to share what they love, and for others to learn about those things, and also contribute to a space that values community and organizing on a basis of friendship and not for monetary exchange.

**TFSR: That's really impressive. Thank you for teaching me those things. That really fills out the possibility of building longer-term relationships with the more stationary community, that has lived in the neighborhood for a while, and that it's not passing through after some time. That seems really important, out of comradeship as well as for building these sorts of relationships among the folks that use the resources and partake in it. That's beautiful, I love it. Awesome, glad the cats are getting fed.**

**DM:** There's a lot more to the free school, but we can talk about any aspect of the work. If we want to touch on the free school, I can go into more detail or we can talk about it in a little bit.

**TFSR: Would you talk a little bit about the art lab? I'd like to hear more about the free school for sure.**

**DM:** The art lab is an essential part of the free school. The free school we're calling Escuela Libre y Laboratorio de Arte. The initials are ELLA, which is the Spanish word for "her". The art lab is a place for students to come decompress, heal trauma, play, enjoy each other's company, and learn new skill sets that could be a new potential source of revenue, if necessary.

As part of the art lab, we have several workshops that we're doing. One is a digital photography workshop, we have another that is murals, where folks will learn about in particular a little bit of the history of public art and how murals are part of a continuum of radical art, and look at examples of some famous muralists from the Third World. In México there's a rich legacy of muralists, the most famous probably being Diego Rivera, but there are also many others. Alfaro Siqueiros is another big one. Their artwork reflected communist themes, but also popular revolutionary themes depicting the indigenous side of Mexico and many others, the laborers, and a lot of the other struggles. Folks will learn about how to paint a mural and then actually paint one at the space.

Then, aside from this mural course that we're doing, we also have a couple of art therapy workshops and art workshops. The art therapy workshops will come from this collective in Mexico City called Huesos de Obsidiana. They do art work-

are necessary for folks to live and survive. The way that we work is much more in line with what the community is facing and needs.

A lot of folks come to the free food program, and they like the food and they like the atmosphere, and then they'll start volunteering. Shortly after they'll help serve, they'll come to cook, help wash the van on Sundays, and help take out the trash. That's how we recruit our volunteers from folks that come to our free community programs. They'll then like what they see and then they'll start volunteering. We have very much close ties with this community in Zona Norte, and the border is a huge part of this Zona.

Another friend of our collective says that the border is a business. Even some of the shelters are invested in that business because they're getting grants off of the migrants that they serve. Literally not investing any resources in community building, they'll let migrants come and stay for a few weeks or a month and then they kick them out, and that's it. They don't care if they have somewhere to go, if they are going to be living on the street, or if they need anything else. They literally churn them out after they stay there and have no concerns about helping them in other ways. That's part of it, that the border is a business that makes a lot of money for folks throughout the chain. That includes those that provide humanitarian aid. Some of these big charities and organizations are making a lot of money off of the migrant crisis and they're not invested in changing the conditions migrants are being forced to flee.

Our projects, our collective is invested in challenging the border as a business. We're not trying to preserve the structure by which migrants are being forcibly displaced, we are trying to actively combat it. Even though we might be doing similar humanitarian work, the vision behind our work is much different than other projects per se.

**TFSR: That leads me to the next question I was going to ask. It seems like the building of the community and the sharing of resources that you're doing saves lives and it enriches people's lives and builds relationships. That in and of itself is important. When I think about the border from this side – luck of the draw, or roll of the dice, or whatever – I was born on this side of the border, and haven't had to escape the situations that a lot of the people that are traversing these very dangerous routes are trying to get away from. When I think about the border, being on this side of it, I don't know what ways I can actively be in solidarity in a way that actually challenges the border itself. It's such a huge, as you say, business, but it's also a military exclusion zone between multiple states. There are instances every few years where US Border Patrol shoots across the border and kills someone on the Mexican side and there's no accountability for that thing. I wonder if you have any thoughts about how we can as anarchists, as autonomists, as people who believe in freedom of movement, can think about opposing the border and undermining it?**

of work on the border between US and Mexico.

AMLO – Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the current president of Mexico – has softened his rhetoric in terms of the way he speaks about migrants. But in reality, he's a continuation of the previous administration's hardline towards migrants. AMLO has agreed to invest \$1 billion in the northern and southern borders of Mexico, the border with Guatemala, and the border with the US. He created the National Guard, which is used as another military establishment in which they patrol the streets and they're used against migrants to target them for arrest and deportation. They're vicious. They do seem to be concentrated in the northern region and the southern region. But there's also some across the border, they've put in checkpoints all across the major highways and roads in Mexico so that there are migration checkpoints that you have to cross to get into the major cities. It's a huge issue because migrants avoid the cities where they could get free food or health care, or support in any other way, but because of the checkpoints they have to find other ways, more dangerous routes to get into the cities if they so choose. They can't travel on buses, they have to train hop, which is extremely dangerous. Migration officers will chase, follow and arrest people on the trains. A lot of folks are right on the tops of the trains, on the sides of the trains, or in the bottom hanging on, which is extremely dangerous. A lot of folks die that way. Some folks will travel on the Mack Trucks, they're called "rastras". In order to move from city to city, a lot of migrants walk for hundreds of miles. They'll have to hitch rides on the rastras or on the trains. And all of it is a gamut of dangers. And, unfortunately, migrants have to face these conditions simply because the governments of Mexico and the US and the other governments further south, in Guatemala and in Central America, all are working in tandem, at the request of the US to suppress migrants caravans, and migrants and refugees from being able to travel north.

The country of Mexico has become a border wall in and of itself. It has spread throughout the entire country. It's not just migrants coming from Central America and places like Haiti, there are a lot of Haitians here, but also from Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, and as far away as Russia or Cameroon. There's a lot of migrants from Jamaica, from all over the world that are here looking to get to the other side, and they've come through increasingly dangerous routes. There's also a lot of Mexicans that are internally displaced from states like Michoacán and Guerrero that are coming to the border now because the cartel violence is so strong in those states. They're literally active war zones. The shelters here in Tijuana are full of Mexican internally displaced refugees, in addition to migrants from Central America and such. Our volunteers come from these populations, they have experienced all these different terrible situations and firsthand understand what it's like to need a hot plate of food, to need a sleeping bag, to need a good pair of shoes, and a backpack. That's why our services and the way that we provide care for people are so close to what the community needs because our volunteers needed these things. Now they are providing them to others. From firsthand experience, they know what it's like to not have these types of support systems and these things that

shops all over the world. They've done some in Sub-Saharan Africa, they've done some in Europe. We also are getting a tattoo gun and we're going to have an intro to a tattoo art workshop. We have a makeup and body art workshop that's also part of the art lab. These are a bunch of different ones. We have Zumba classes, and we have Aikido, which is a martial art form that comes from Japan and it's meant to harmonize and purify the body, that's the type of ritual that it intends to do. There are a lot of great ones.

The point of having the art lab is to have the time and space carved out for folks to engage in their creative abilities, process trauma, build up self-esteem, help have an outlet for emotions, and being able to channel those emotions into something creative and productive and not something destructive is really healthy. Our lab also helps folks create things that could lead them to, for example, get a job as a photographer for a newspaper or get hired by other community groups that need folks to come to do photography at their events. It could be a gig or it could be a full-time job eventually. We want to give people skill sets also that could lead them to have a different life, one that's less exploitative and more creative and beautiful.

**TF SR: That's great. I took Aikido for a bunch of years. If nothing else, there's a lot of self-defense stuff in there, in terms of using someone else's body weight to get them away from you or disarm someone. Useful for meditative purposes as well as to some degree for self-defense.**

**DM:** The Aikido workshop was gonna be taught in conjunction with the Zen meditation workshop. It's the same workshop teacher, and he wanted to teach both of them together.

**TF SR: You name this dynamic where there are people that are there for a longer term, and then there are the folks that are coming through and using the resources and engaging in these projects and hopefully will be engaging with the school when it starts up, but who are planning on moving through, and who don't necessarily consider the area home – but also this being an opportunity for engaging local folks in the community, too...**

**DM:** We have folks that are coming in that are migrants and youth refugees that we imagine are going to either move to another border city to attempt to cross somewhere else. A handful, very few will actually get asylum legally through the US, others will get asylum in Mexico and might decide to move elsewhere in the territory. Others will return home if they can't get asylum, and they see that they don't have any support here, no family, no friends, no resources, and no reliable income stream. Some folks that can – very few, too – will go back home, but others will try to different border cities to cross.

The school is also for those that are locally here though, we want folks that are from this community who might get overlooked because they're not migrants.

There are a lot more resources coming in to support migrants. We want youth that might not have access to educational opportunities because of their immigration status, their poverty, their gender identity, sexual orientation, or their race, being indigenous or Black. We want to give opportunities to folks that live here and might not have any formal education, some of the students might not know how to read or write. The idea is to give folks information, tools, and skills that are valuable for their well-being not just mentally, but physically, and spiritually – in all aspects so that folks can have a much more dignified and meaningful life.

**TFSR: How does this institution or series of interlocking projects that offer services and goods differ from charity? How does it become mutual aid? Is it because the people that are coming through are helping to shape the curriculums and participating in the operation of it as well as benefiting from it? Or how do you all view that, and is that an important distinction that is talked about a lot there?**

**DM:** It's a huge distinction and it's very important, and I'll tell you why. As a mutual aid collective, we the volunteers make the decisions about how we operate, we decide what programs and projects to do in conjunction with the community that we serve, which we're also a part of. We don't have an executive director, we don't have a board of trustees telling us how we have to operate, or what we have to do. We make decisions on a consensus basis. Sometimes that's having meetings where we just talk informally. Whoever is around, we'll come together, we need to make a decision, and we'll talk about it and then we make a decision. It doesn't require waiting for someone's permission who isn't here, who doesn't have their ear to the ground, who doesn't know this community.

The folks that are doing the work and are part of this community know best what needs to be done. We have the flexibility to adapt our programs as we see fit to better serve the community. It doesn't require a lot of bureaucracy and red tape that other organizations that are top-heavy might have to engage in. That includes the ways that we decide on how we spend our funds. We decide together if we need a stove, or if we need to compensate people or whatever – we make those decisions collectively. That's one distinction.

Another distinction that's related to that is that because we rely on small donors and small donations, we don't have just one foundation giving us all the resources. If that foundation were to decide that we're not doing what they like, or we're too radical, or their donors feel unhappy with anything that we're doing, and they decide to pull the funding, that wouldn't be the end of our collective. We have managed to bring in enough revenue from various sources so that if one source fails, we can still continue with the others until we find another way forward. What that effectively does in us having no one major donor is that we don't have to cater to the whims of the elite who give donations. We the volunteers decide. We're guided by the community, not by the donors.

Another way that we stand out as a mutual aid project versus a charity or part of the nonprofit industrial complex, is the way that we do the work, because we are volunteer-led, we can value the process by which we work differently. The people that we're serving are not just numbers. The measure of success for us isn't how many plates we serve, and if we served a lot, then that means we're more successful than if we serve less. That's not how we measure our effectiveness. We measure it by how we treat each other, and how well we do supporting the community. It's more about the quality of what we're doing and not the metrics game because our grants require us to have a benchmark of how much we do, therefore we then have to cater to them. It's more grounded in what we are capable of doing and feeling good, and the work we're doing. In turn, it allows us to give dignity to the people we serve. Because when you start looking at people as numbers and start considering migrants as "How many beds did we fill in our shelter" as the benchmark of success, then it leads people to easily become dehumanized. It leads people to forget that you're working with real human beings that are complex and have a wide range of needs. Being a mutual aid group allows us to have a little bit more dignity in the work we're doing as volunteers, but also in the ways we serve. Those are some distinctions. There's more, but you get the gist.

**TFSR: That's well put. You've mentioned the location of being a block away from the border and the militarization, and the fact that people who've been in the legacy of this project, including currently have been transiting North to get across yet another border. I was wondering – I'll read the thing that I wrote, and we can go from there.**

**The US control of the border has been militarizing and closing off other corridors for transit to the North since the 1990s. Although obviously there's prior existence of border patrols and different laws in the United States allowing for passage of people for periods or specific purposes. But this is accelerated since 9/11. The AMLO administration – like past Mexican presidents – has been increasingly militarizing the Northern and Southern borders of Mexico to, among other things, appease the gringos. Surely, alongside many other reasons. Meanwhile, it can be quite dangerous for people making the trek North to live in a strange land without the roots that they may have had at home. Can you talk a bit about the border, the role it plays in the life of the folks around Contra Viento y Marea, and the role of mutual aid in that?**

**DM:** The way that impacts the volunteers being that a lot of them are migrants, is that they traverse, some of them are coming from Central America, 3,000 miles to get here only to have their dreams dashed when they get to Tijuana and realize they're not able to get asylum and their options for finding an alternative route to get across require thousands of dollars, and the risk that you'll be kidnapped and extorted or disappeared or murdered outright. It's a challenge, doing this kind