

# *Building Sanctuary City*

*NOII-Toronto on Non-Status  
Migrant Justice Organizing*

**Thomas Nail**

In 2006, Solidarity Across Borders, No One is Illegal, and the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty organized a march from Montréal to Ottawa calling for the end of all deportations, detentions of immigrants and refugees, and security certificates, as well as the full and accessible regularization of all non-status immigrants. Since that march, No One is Illegal-Toronto (NOII-Toronto) has launched the Sanctuary/Solidarity City campaign by organizing at sites of service provision to create a radical network of city service providers, non-status migrants, organizers, and allies who support access to all city services (school, medical treatment, shelter from abuse, food, etc.) regardless of immigration or citizenship status. In March 2010 NOII-Toronto organized their second annual event toward building a Sanctuary/Solidarity City. Thomas Nail interviewed four organizers with NOII-Toronto to discuss the origin, purpose, and future of this campaign.

*Fariah Chowdhury is an anti-racist feminist writer, student, and community organizer. She is co-founder and organizing member of the Shelter | Sanctuary | Status campaign and has been organizing with NOII-Toronto since 2006.*

*Faria Kamal has been a grassroots community organizer with NOII-Toronto since 2005 and with Health For All since its inception in 2009. She is a medical student at the University of Toronto and hopes to see a radical health sector emerge during her lifetime... or two.*

*Farrab Miranda is an arts maker, rabble rouser, popular educator, and community organizer living and struggling in downtown Toronto. She has been an organizer with NOII-Toronto since 2003.*

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**Tell us about NOII-Toronto's campaign to build Sanctuary/Solidarity City. Where did you find inspiration or models for this campaign?**

**Fariah:** The movement for a Sanctuary/Solidarity City is about access and justice for migrants with precarious status. But more importantly, it is a model of winning change and, we hope, an effective new form of anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial people-based organizing. Toronto's Sanctuary/Solidarity City movement is inspired by the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) campaigns across the US. It is based on the premise that all people, irrespective of immigration status, deserve equal freedom to access services, justice, and dignity. It challenges the notion that social provisions should only be entitlements to certain communities, i.e. those with citizenship status. If we can dismantle the everyday ideological borders that exclude people by allowing non-status people the same access to services as people with status, we can challenge the dominant discourses of migration and nationhood and work toward dismantling the larger borders that exclude people.

Sanctuary City campaigns began in major US cities in the 1980s when the American government refused to grant asylum to thousands of refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador. Since

the US backed the regimes in Guatemala and El Salvador, they refused to recognize the human rights violations that brought these refugees to the US; many Central American refugees were given deportation orders. Instead of seeking sanctuary in churches, refugee claimants, along with faith-based groups and social justice organizations, fought to apply the idea of sanctuary beyond the church to the entire city. Coalitions of community groups worked to counter the criminality associated with these migrants and called attention to the US government's complicity in displacing thousands of people in Latin America. Their efforts resulted in the "City of Refuge Ordinance," which prevented city resources such as police protection or health care from being used to enforce federal immigration policy. In passing the ordinance, several US cities articulated that the safety and security of the entire community was at stake if non-status people could not report crimes or illnesses. The movement to implement sanctuary policies has since grown to 45 cities across the US including New York, Seattle, and Houston.

In Toronto, we have taken the idea of the Sanctuary City campaign and created a new organizing model around it. Our work is premised on the fact that this is colonized land and that migrants are often from places recently colonized or facing capitalist exploitation. While some tend to blame undocumented migrants for being unable to maintain immigration status (thus justifying their subsequent exclusion from social services and city life), we work with allies to foreground Canadian corporate and state responsibility in people's displacement.

**Faria:** Migration is not a simple choice – people are displaced by forces of capitalism, war, occupation, environmental degradation, and poverty created by Western neoliberal policies. In wanting to build people power, we shifted the focus from charity and "Canadian benevolence" to Canadian and capitalist responsibility for displacing people through its global policies. Doing so created the potential for a campaign that enabled real material change (by creating access to services) while advancing a cultural and analytical campaign to challenge the state's displacement of people, the ongoing colonization of Turtle Island, and the exploitation of migrants.

**How and why did this campaign strategy emerge in Toronto? How does it build upon the four demands made during the 2006 march from Montreal to Ottawa?**

**Farrah:** Some NOII-Toronto women organizers worked as art therapists in a Toronto immigration jail. Behind the layers of plexiglass, fences, and barred windows, detainees told us various stories of how they ended up on the inside. We learned that only some of these detainees were found and apprehended by federal immigration enforcement officers directly. Many, if not most, were picked up because someone found out they lacked status and reported them to immigration enforcement authorities. The people doing the reporting tended overwhelmingly to be bosses, city cops, service providers, and abusive male partners. Many asserted that their most fundamental concern was the daily fear of detention and deportation. We learned that many undocumented people risked detention and deportation each time they enrolled their kids in school, demanded unpaid wages from their employer, and accessed healthcare or emergency services. The people that we worked with saw these acts of accessing services as an act of courage and resistance.

In light of this, we launched a DADT campaign in 2004, which soon became the Access Without Fear (AWF) campaign. The stated goal was to ensure that residents seeking services in Toronto were not required to show proof of immigration status (“don’t ask”) before receiving the needed service. The second part of the policy requires that municipal service providers who find out that someone does not have status be barred from sharing that information (“don’t tell”) with immigration authorities or other branches of federal government. We imagined the AWF campaign as a means to organize in places where people gather to build a stronger, more organized migrant justice movement that would effectively fight and win status for all.

As years passed, we saw heightened immigration enforcement in the city. Students were arrested in schools, workers were arrested at factories, and survivors of violence were arrested at women’s shelters. The AWF campaign began to branch out into various sites of service in the city and form vibrant and autonomous sub-campaigns. These sub-campaigns currently include: Education, Not Deportation (in schools and universities), Shelter | Sanctuary | Status (in anti-violence against women spaces), Health For All (at sites of health provision), and Food For All (at food banks). Organically, each at their own pace, these sub-campaigns have waged struggles to liberate hospitals, food banks, schools, community centres, workplaces, and neighbourhoods from border enforcement.

Through conversation, collaboration, and coming together, these campaigns have grown the seeds for a Sanctuary/Solidarity City.

**Fariah:** Sanctuary/Solidarity City is a way of organizing as well as a goal. It is a way to get access to services for non-status people right now, and to involve people in the control and organization of the places they work, live, and receive education, healthcare, and basic services. It is a way to reorganize and politicize spaces where power has historically been taken away from communities and people. At its core, it is about building a city where marginalized voices with precarious status reclaim power, where we reclaim different sites for our communities to access, control, develop, and engage. We know that this is only possible when all grassroots movements in the city collaborate, connect, and commit to a politic based on autonomous power that is separate from state power.

**What are the Sanctuary/Solidarity City's sub-campaigns working on, and what challenges do they face?**

**Farah:** In 2006, teachers, students, and community groups were furious when Kimberly and Gerald Lizano-Sossa were arrested in a Toronto school. Fear spread in families with precarious status. We received reports of entire ESL classes being absent from school in the weeks following the arrests. At this time, NOII-Toronto worked with parents, students, and teachers with support from trade unions and community groups to mobilize intense political pressure against Canada Border Services Agency, forcing them to apologize for the arrests and issue a directive stating that they would refrain from using this specific enforcement tactic in the future on or near school grounds.

Then we organized within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the largest school board in Canada, and forced them to adopt a DADT Sanctuary School policy. However, this policy did not do enough to alleviate the fear that lingered in school hallways, since teachers and administrators knew very little about it. Even after the policy passed, we continued to receive reports of students being denied access to school or being deported. To respond to the situation, NOII-Toronto joined together with the Ontario Teachers Federation and Downtown Legal Services to launch the Education Not Deportation campaign. We set up a committee of teachers, students, and community members. Now, if teachers hear of students facing deportation they can come to the union and mobilize a response. We continue to pressure the TDSB to honour

their policy. In September 2010, we were able to get every school in the city to put up a poster welcoming students without full status.

We are also focusing on the Toronto Catholic District School Board and working with university students, professors, and non-status students to organize in Universities. In 2008, we organized, fought, and won a stop to the deportation of Sarah Leonty, a York University student. This struggle won status for her and electrified campuses. We are continuing to organize in post-secondary and adult institutions to develop ways to turn them in to safe spaces for non-status people. These victories challenge the tide of anti-immigrant xenophobia that has emerged in the wake of the financial crisis.

**Fariah:** The fight for Access Without Fear moved its way into the anti-violence against women (VAW) sector in 2008 with the launch of the Shelter | Sanctuary | Status (SSS) campaign. Women's shelters, drop-in centres, rape crisis centres, anti-VAW and feminist organizations gained immense interest in the campaign. From its inception, the campaign and its organizers have worked to collectivize the experiences and struggles faced by many women and trans-folks living with precarious status. The initial focus was to ensure that all non-status survivors of violence were able to access shelters, drop-ins, and other anti-VAW services without fear of detention and deportation. The public campaign focused on gaining status for particular women and their children while demanding an end to deportations, the regularization of status for survivors of violence, and for shelters to open up their doors to serve and support survivors of violence without status.

We were able to work with a broad community of feminist activists, shelter staff, and residents to strengthen our relations. Staff and residents at various anti-VAW spaces enacted formal and informal strategies to make these sites more safe and accessible to all. We did dozens of workshops to build the organizing capacity of shelter residents. By creating autonomous sites of decision making in various sectors that rejected state-enforced ideas of status, we created a new way to do politics, challenging state power in a real way.

We know that immigration enforcement enter shelters and rape crisis centres in order to enforce deportation orders. Sometimes they wait outside the service centre and sometimes they go inside. We effectively mobilized around the idea that "deportation is violence against women" and we are working to ensure that the

momentum of this mobilization is directed at building our capacity and power, not just passing policies. By organizing with residents, survivors, staff, and board members at anti-VAW organizations across the city, we created the resolve to block immigration enforcement from these spaces. It doesn't matter what the policy itself is; what matters is that irrespective of policy, through practice we can transform the whole notion of what it means to be non-status. Our work is thus about people power and sustainability.

When we started talking about an "Access To Services Without Fear" policy within anti-VAW spaces, we noticed that shelters didn't always agree on what the policies should be or how they should be implemented. Sometimes there wasn't even consensus on whether or not people without status should be served and supported like people with status. You may not expect these sorts of conversations to take place in the anti-VAW sector, but they do happen. At the same time though, people are working through them and coming to some sort of consensus. People didn't always talk about immigration, detention, and deportation as violence against women, but these kinds of conversations are now possible because of the intersectional analysis that we, as women of colour, have fostered.

**Faria:** Health For All (H4A) started as a part of NOII-Toronto in May of 2009 during a city meeting to stop the workplace raids that were happening at the time. Too often in our cities, health is narrowly defined as access to health care services, hospitals, clinics, or to some form of treatment. Health is determined by more than just access to medical care; it is determined by the political, economic, social, and environmental conditions that people live under. For those with precarious or no immigration status, the systemic reality of poverty, racism, poor housing, lack of childcare, unjust labour practices, and denial of basic rights and services all contribute to a lack of health security. As such, status should be seen as a fundamental social determinant of health – one that has serious implications for personal and community health, and determines the extent to which people are able to actively participate in decisions that impact their lives. H4A seeks to broaden and redefine health and healthcare. To us, health means individual and community empowerment and well-being; health is about justice and dignity.

Despite Canada's "universal" health care system, there are over half a million people who remain uninsured. In challenging

this narrow “universality” we have three demands: (1) Access to health services without fear of debt, denial of service, detention, or deportation; (2) universal health coverage for all people in Canada; and finally (3) universal status regularization of all people in Canada, solely on the basis of their humanity.

Some of the challenges we face in H4A are related to our attempts to politicize a health sector that often fails to understand larger systemic oppression. With the SSS campaign, we at least see a sizable chunk of the feminist movement still entrenched. In the health sector, a radical presence is largely absent, so we have been trying to build that presence in health centres, in hospitals, in university health programs, and in directly affected communities that are excluded from these spaces.

**Hussan:** Standard organizing models argue that the interests of those who work at a place, those who access it, and those who are excluded from it are fundamentally contradictory. This is not always true. Often people are connected by their distaste for the exploitation of communities by capitalism and colonialism and are motivated by their desire for a just world. We can use those feelings to build relationships and struggle to create freer places together. The core of our work is not to create antagonistic divides but to move everyone a step forward in their analyses and involvement, while always keeping sight of our goal: transformative decolonized people power over all aspects of our lives.

A concern that people in the social services sector have with joining this work is the constant threat of funding cuts. The Harper government has shown that it will cut funding to progressive organizations. This happened to Palestine House, the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, and Kairos. At the same time, the government cannot cut everyone’s funding – if all the shelters, or all the food banks, or all the housing institutions struggle collectively, there would simply be too many of us. And by all these places, I mean all the people that gather at them and work at them. Once we decide to block immigration enforcement from our spaces, once we decide that we will make these places safe and accessible for all people, once we establish alternatives to public funds that come with strings attached – then funding cuts will not be a concern in the same way.



### **What are some of the opportunities that the Sanctuary/Solidarity City campaign offers?**

**Faria:** The campaign allows for political conversations to take place in spaces where people may not be having them. Why are so many people paying high fees for health care in a “universal” health care system? Why are so many people losing status? Why aren’t there enough beds in a shelter? What is forced displacement, and what does it mean to be living on stolen indigenous land? When an organizer from NOII enters various spaces across the city and initiates a conversation, workers at these sites re-envision their day-to-day service provision as part of a much broader movement. Each campaign allows us to focus on the struggles and challenges that each of these sectors separately face and examine the ways in which they are systemically linked.

**Fariah:** The campaign allows those in our communities who have been shut out of the traditional venues of power to directly challenge the decisions and policies that impact all of our lives. Sanctuary/Solidarity City delegitimizes the role of the state because we do not wait for the government to change, rather we struggle to create a just city for ourselves. This is the primary reason for our success – we don’t wait for our strategies to be approved or recognized by the government before we go ahead and try to implement in on the ground.

**Hussan:** To me, the opportunity is to change the imagination of Canadian society. It does not matter what we win and it does not matter what we lose. What we are doing is creating a new form of power and political organizing that can, if done properly, radically reshape what it means to actually take on radical struggles inside neoliberal economies. It is a campaign to create a different political culture and give rise to a new way of thinking. That’s what we are doing here. I think it is extremely important to continue organizing and not get trapped by the day-to-day victories or the day-to-day failures. We are building a model here – a model that we hope organizers in cities around the world can take up and implement.

**Fariah:** Once we achieve a Sanctuary/Solidarity City, immigration status becomes irrelevant. In such a city, all people those with or without passports, women, queer folks, indigenous communities, and disabled people are able to organize collectively, access basic services, and create systems that work for them. By challenging

immigration status, we make it possible to consider a world without war, economic, exploitation and exclusion – a new world. But we need the idea of sanctuary to mean something to people first; we need people to think and feel differently about citizenship regimes and status altogether. Once ideas of race, citizenship, or immigration status mean something different to people, we can build the city we want. Therefore, popular education, mass outreach, and radical discussions are a key part of the struggle.

**Farrah:** Cities are the beating heart of capitalism. Residents have the power to shut down banks and big business, to severely disrupt and halt arms manufacturers and mining corporations responsible for war, displacement, and the theft of resources from communities around the world. We have the power to stop the elite from living their lives of luxury. We do this by creating power; we utilize this power to re-distribute wealth in ways we decide are just and equitable.

While we have successfully stopped deportations, fostered alternative ways to speak about migration, and implemented policies (such as DADT at the Toronto District School Board), the call for status has to be broad to be truly sustainable. We want people to not only challenge unjust immigration policies, but to challenge exclusionary social welfare policies, war and militarization, patriarchy, and ableism at the sites and spaces where these policies and systems are born and enforced. The call for status, by which we mean access, justice, and dignity, has to come from as many directions as possible.

**Hussan:** I think the Sanctuary/Solidarity City campaign effectively responds to neoliberal imperialism. After food, health, anti-VAW spaces, and education, I think our next step could be to join housing campaigns to support safe, accessible housing for non-status people. From there we could go into child care centres, into other areas that people gather. These are the campaigns that can move us forward. Once we are rooted in every place that people gather, we can begin to exert enormous power and actually create the conditions for self-determination.

**How have service providers, users, and those excluded responded to your attempts to create a city-wide network of Access Without Fear?**

**Farrah:** The campaign has been a way to collectivize the experience of isolation for people who are individually impacted

by the injustices of this immigration system. In the case of SSS, we provide ongoing individual support for people but have realized that this was not a way to deal with the systemic injustices that people face. Our campaigns bring together people's stories and build people's capacity.

For service providers, users, and those excluded, responses vary depending on who we are talking to. Many are excited about the possibility of actually creating a difference. But there are also people who are skeptical because they are wary of losing funding. Some service providers are afraid to be involved in political work, but there are also those who have come out of a rich history of feminist and anti-racist organizing and are thrilled to be involved.

**Fariah:** Many service providers are not willing to implicate themselves in processes of racist state legislation even though service providers are often the enforcers of these laws. I remember in one instance, the manager of a particular shelter told me that her shelter was “funded” and “mandated” to serve women experiencing violence, and that non-status women might not be able to “meet the criteria” according to funders. If funders don't recognize the rights of undocumented migrant women, we need to challenge that. Workers in the sector have taken up this fight because these conversations have been initiated.

**Farrah:** While we fight for AWF, we also intervene in federal immigration policy and in support of indigenous land defenders. We don't do this because we believe in a just refugee system or in just reforms to temporary foreign worker programs or any of that – immigration systems by definition will exclude someone. Rather it's a way for people organized at these different sites to intervene in the broader political framework, through ways more commonly understood as political participation.

**Faria:** What I want to highlight most saliently is the fact that there is no such thing as “the excluded” or “the marginalized.” We are all excluded on some level. In the Sanctuary/Solidarity City campaigns we have tried to highlight the false separation between those who have status and those who don't. Status is access to good jobs, healthcare, education, housing, childcare, justice, and dignity – and most people at some point in their lives are unable to gain status.

**Farrah:** Of those involved in the SSS campaign, it was the residents that were most responsive. When the large-scale workplace

raids happened in 2009 across Bradford, Markham, and West Gwillimbury, it didn't have to do with shelters, or with immigration going into those sites – it was an issue of immigration enforcement at workplaces. When we told shelter residents that there were workplace raids they got on buses and went to the detention centre in protest. Even folks with precarious status were there. In this case, they mobilized much more quickly than people who had been involved in the Stop the Raids campaign, or even people who had regularly come to SSS meetings as part of their paid work. They were able to see this issue as not just about access to shelters, but about exploitation at every site of the city – where people go to work, school, etc. When we need to mobilize responses to things like workplace raids or take to the streets on Mayday to show the strength of our movement, it is shelter residents who are the most active in organizing and getting the word out.

**Hussan:** It's really challenging because we are trying to organize three communities that historically do not speak to each other. People in the past organized in single places: in the workplace, (in labour unions), at service centres, in neighbourhoods, or in community organizations and anti-poverty organizations and such. Sometimes people have organized based on exclusion from a space, like homeless communities, or access to housing. We are trying to bring all three of these communities in the same room, in the same discussion, to create a real transformative shift.

For example, it is much easier to just talk to food bank managers and get them to serve non-status persons, but it's another thing to try and mobilize the front-line staff, the users, and those excluded. It's an opportunity as well as a challenge.

In every space, we are trying to create a culture of resistance. When a new person arrives, be it a resident or staff person, they should be told that if immigration enforcement comes in, we will drive them out. Sanctuary/Solidarity City is nowhere close to that kind of culture of resistance. We need to create that kind of vision and keep it alive in health centres, schools, universities, etc.

We work with people all the time who ask us, "What can you do for us?" We have to be able to answer that by saying, "What can we do together?" When we talk to a staff person who says, "Well, I have funding issues. What if my funding gets cut?" We have to be able to say, "If your funding gets cut we will continue creating systems and mechanisms to support this work no matter what happens." We aren't there yet, but it is possible.

**You are talking about basically taking over the city and reorganizing it from below. What is your organizational vision for how something like this might happen? Do you think that municipal politics has a role to play in winning some of these changes or as a means of transition to a Sanctuary/Solidarity City?**

**Hussan:** For a sustainable anti-colonial struggle to manifest itself anywhere, the push needs to come from many different directions. Thus the Sanctuary City campaign is also framed as a Solidarity City campaign – one where service providers, grassroots groups, organized labour, climate justice activists, gender justice activists, and others will collaborate to challenge and transform elite systems of government at the places they arise. Our fight, though very material, is also in the world of ideas. If enough people across the city think of status as made up, a racist and conjured up notion by the government, then we can push these ideas out of our sites, our lives, our city. Likewise, we need to push ideas of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, classism, ableism, and sexism out of our psyches, in the way we think about these ideas, and in the way we interact with people on a daily basis.

**Fariah:** On the question of municipal politics, no, we don't think it has a role to play in winning these changes. In fact, that's the very notion we are trying to fight against. We are so ingrained within an electoral and municipal system that teaches us that a select and "qualified" few can legitimately represent the views of the many. In this system, change ultimately has to come from the top. The people at the bottom have to lobby, fight and struggle for change, and if and when governments pass policies, our lives supposedly get to change. If we expect that politicians and governments can change and pass desirable policies when we push them to, we not only reinforce the idea of a benevolent nation-state as a supreme entity in control, but we also disempower ordinary people, who should be the true decision making body.

Sanctuary/Solidarity City is about bypassing the ideas behind nation-states and centralized governments. In a Sanctuary/Solidarity City, ideas don't have to get passed at the "top" in order for them to manifest themselves in our day-to-day lives. Sanctuary City is about building ways of living that allow us to horizontally make decisions with collective communities, on the ground, every day, with or without the approval of a colonial state that we believe is an illegitimate occupying force.

**How do you ensure that the campaign for Sanctuary/Solidarity City doesn't turn into an unpaid advocacy organization?**

**Hussan:** The essence of the Sanctuary/Solidarity City is about organizing people where they work, live, and access services. By engaging at these three points we can ensure that the work is about organizing and fighting for justice and broader movement building, while making immediate material differences in people's lives. It's not just about individual casework and making life better one person at a time – it is about using the site of exclusion, the site of tension, to bring people together and create the kind of systems they need.

**What is the internal organization of NOII? How you deal with people getting burned out and how do you maintain a democratic participatory structure?**

**Faria:** We see internal organization as a dynamic process – one that changes depending upon capacity, focus, and goals. Currently, we have a general membership that is responsible for all decision making, including visioning, yearly goals, and objectives. The membership is also responsible for logistics, emergency responses, and analysis. Outside of membership meetings, various committees and subcommittees are formed to manage day-to-day organizing, tasks, events, and campaigns. Each campaign/sector organizes itself based on its own capacity and needs. For example, Education Not Deportation is a committee within NOII, whereas SSS and H4A are autonomous groups with close relationships and ties to NOII.

To deal with burnout, we continue trying to prioritize internal capacity building as a way of evenly distributing work, contacts, and analysis. We hold monthly weekend workshops where we collectively build analysis and provide skills training/sharing opportunities. Additionally, members are actively encouraged to plug into various committees, campaigns, and/or subcommittees as a way of directly engaging in the work and developing skills and analysis in an interactive and supportive environment that is smaller and not as daunting. In smaller groups, where there is more opportunity to plug in a receive one-on-one support, people feel more empowered to take on tasks and gain confidence in their analysis and skills, enabling them to participate more fully in the organization. ★