

ing the bill, it gave the government broad powers to wiretap, arrest, and detain people “suspected” of having ties to terrorists. Although President Bush disclaimed anti-Muslim prejudice, it was clear that Muslims, South Asians, and other people of color were being targeted. These same groups were also subjected to verbal abuse and physical assaults, on the streets, in workplaces, and in their homes. As Monami Maulik, a community organizer of the Queens-based DRUM (Desis Rising Up and Moving), wrote soon after, “[D]uring this period of grief, we have had to endure perhaps the worst mass-scale anti-Arab, anti-South Asian, and anti-Muslim violence this country has seen.” Maulik, born in Calcutta and raised in the Bronx, worked with the New York Taxi Workers’ Alliance before helping to found DRUM in 1997. She wrote this essay on organizing after September 11 for *Manavi*, a South Asian newsletter based in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Monami Maulik, “Organizing in Our Communities Post-September 11th” (2001)⁴

Since the tragic loss of lives on September 11th, I find the need for organizing in my community is even greater in the coming years. But this is not because September 11th was or will be the only mass-scale loss of human lives. Since the Gulf War, over 500,000 Iraqi children have died as a direct result of economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. against Iraq. Are the lives of these children any less valuable? In the midst of realizing the mass-scale inhumanity of war and imperialism, grassroots organizing can be the source of hope for a building a world centered on social justice. What distinguishes organizing from services, advocacy, and relief-work is that organizing seeks to change the root causes of social injustice as opposed to responding to its symptoms. But the question becomes whether we are organizing to challenge the institutions that create oppression or to maintain the status-quo?

The tragedies of September 11th continue to deeply hurt the South Asian community at large on multiple levels. First, we have lost members of our community in the World Trade Center. Moreover, a large number of those missing were low-wage, undocumented immigrant service workers whose families do not qualify for federal aid and benefits. Second, during this period of grief, we have had to endure perhaps the worst mass-scale anti-Arab, anti-South Asian, and anti-Muslim violence this country has seen. Hundreds of incidents ranging from threats to beatings to killings have been reported around the country. Our homes, communities, and places of worship have been under siege. And these are only the incidents that are reported. Moreover, this anti-immigrant backlash is currently being institutionalized via new anti-terrorist legislation, racial profiling, and the suspension of hard-won civil rights. Thousands of immigrants have been illegally detained and

deported since September 11th, most of whom are Arab, South Asian, and Muslim. Third, U.S. bombing of Afghanistan and military presence in Pakistan to wage an endless war has many of us concerned with the possible impending devastation of our communities and families back home.

Given this hostile climate nationally for the South Asian immigrant community, particularly for undocumented immigrants in the years to come, there is an urgent need now more than ever to organize against the growing conservatism that can undo years of anti-racist, feminist, anti-homophobic, and pro-working class struggle. Our short-term objectives must be to re-build security in our communities against racial violence and provide emergency relief to undocumented families. Our long-term objectives need to challenge racism and xenophobia, organize to end state violence in the form of the Patriot Act and other racist, anti-immigrant legislation, and to build the emerging anti-war movement with the leadership of immigrant and people of color communities, particularly those whose voices are historically marginalized, such as women, queer people, undocumented immigrants, and low-wage workers.

But as socially conscious South Asians, perhaps our biggest challenge in organizing our communities in the coming years will be to counter the growing conservative backlash we are witnessing. In the past several weeks, mainstream South Asian organizations have followed the destructive path of blind patriotism that has fueled the horrific war against Afghanistan and the passage of the Patriot Act, one of the most anti-immigrant legislations passed by the U.S. in recent history. At the same time, conservative and communalist forces that have fueled anti-Muslim, anti-Dalit, and anti-Christian violence in India have been lobbying the U.S. government to inject its military might in South Asia to fuel the war over Kashmir.

This is the moment that we must ask ourselves what side of the fence do we stand on? The side that will only perpetuate more violence against Third World people around the world like that we have glimpsed so close to home on September 11th? Or the side that is for peace with justice both within the U.S., for immigrants, poor people, women, queer people, and people of color, and outside the U.S., for the people of Afghanistan and other nations targeted by U.S. militarism and imperialism? DRUM and the community organizing we practice stands for the latter.

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When it became clear that President Bush would follow up the war on Afghanistan by attacking Iraq, a number of labor unions across the country passed resolutions against going to war. City councils in more than one hundred cities also passed anti-war resolutions. Here is one of the resolutions passed by Local 705 of the Teamsters, in Chicago, Illinois, one of the biggest Teamsters locals in the country.