

*First they ban your language...*

## “English Only” Battle in Utah

by Tarso Luís Ramos

State representative Tammy Rowan first introduced legislation requiring that all communications between state employees and Utahns be in English in 1997. Although the national anti-immigrant group U.S. English has supported Rowan’s efforts with radio and television advertisements, lobbying and testimony before the legislature, her bills never made it to the House floor. So last summer U.S. English hired petitioners and collected enough signatures — over 39,000 — to put the measure before the Utah legislature in January.

In response, local civil rights groups including the Utah Coalition of La Raza (UCLR), Utah Issues and the American Civil Liberties Union, came together as Utah Common Voices to defeat Rowan’s English-only bill. Progressive State Senator Pete Suazo advanced an alternative “English plus” resolution that recognized the assets of multilingualism to the state. (One section of the bill reads, “Utah was part of Mexico until the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1845 wherein the United States insured protection of former Mexican citizens [including] their linguistic rights to continue to speak Spanish.”)

U.S. English Chair Mauro Mujica charged his opponents with holding their constituents in “linguistic slavery.” Mujica, a Chilean, gave the principal testimony in favor of Rowan’s measure during legislative hearings in January. Key arguments against came from UCLR legislative chair Jim Gonzalez, World Word II Navajo Code Talkers Association president Samuel Billingson, and an attorney with the legal firm that represents the Mormon Church (the Church itself remained neutral).

Television ads aired by U.S. English in the days leading up to this debate featured a thick-accented Latino suggesting that English-only laws help immigrants by compelling them to learn English. Despite the media blitz, 22 Republicans joined with Democrats in voting down the measure 43-31-1. However, Rowan came closer in February with a modified bill that failed by only two votes.

U.S. English has vowed to put the measure before Utah voters in the year 2000 and to

actively campaign against legislators who opposed Rowan’s bills. The group, which to date has spent \$50,000 attempting to pass English-only legislation in Utah, needs just 29,000 more signatures to qualify their measure as a statewide ballot initiative. And according to a recent newspaper poll, 56% percent of Utahns “strongly support” making English the state’s official language.

“Despite our many challenges, including the seemingly unlimited resources of U.S. English, we will continue to fight English-only in the legislature or on the ballot,” says ACLU board member Yvonne Paul. “We are somewhat encouraged that a less restrictive measure has already been struck down in Arizona.”

The Utah experience reflects patterns and lessons evident elsewhere in the region. First, the Right is increasingly targeting this, the whitest region in the country, with racist campaigns such as anti-affirmative action, English-only and anti-bilingual education measures.

Second, the Right attempts to mask its racism by using people of color to front these initiatives. This “Clarence Thomas” syndrome has become all-too-familiar: lacking a local spokesperson in Utah, U.S. English sent its chair, Chilean-born Mauro Mujica, to lead the charge; in Wyoming, state representative Nimi McConigley, an East Indian, was the leading advocate for the state’s 1996 English-only law; and so forth.

Third, evidence suggests the Right can win racist campaigns in this region without spending major resources. Such was the case with 1998 English-only and anti-affirmative action ballot measures in Alaska and Washington, respectively. Both were relatively inexpensive for proponents and both passed by wide margins. With 56% of Utahns behind the measure, English-only must also look to the Right like an easy ballot victory for 2000.

Finally, coordinated, collective action by people of color and anti-racist white allies can defeat these racist attacks. In order to do so, however, we need to increase our community and electoral organizing capacity and build a stronger, multi-racial coalition for racial justice in the West.



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