

## **The Minutemen Are Coming!**

by William Hillyard

**DANA POINT, CALIF.** – Most days, the stretch of sidewalk along Doheny Park Road, just a couple blocks from Dana Point’s beachfront affluence, is an informal day labor hiring site. Most mornings, Latino men, the majority undocumented, wait here for employers offering temporary construction work. On an average day there are 20 to 50 workers ranging in age from their late teens into their 50s. But this is not an average day; today, with the bright blue Donut World donut shop as a backdrop, the site is a battleground.

On one side, anti-immigration activists known as the Minutemen, have staged a direct confrontation with the day laborers to protest the right of undocumented workers to solicit work. And on the other side, another group has come to show solidarity with the day laborers. Pushed to the margins are the day laborers themselves.

As the sweet scent of frying donuts hangs in the crisp morning air, the crowd grows. Perhaps 30 people all told — senior citizens mostly — spread out over the city block in groups of three or four. Their red, white, and blue clothing matches the American flag each carries. Many hold video cameras. A wiff of fresh tortillas wafts from the tortillaria across the street. Beside four lanes of traffic, a quartet of women sing the refrain from a country and western anthem at the top of their lungs. “I’m proud to be an American, where at least I know I’m free.” They accompany a boombox cranked up to the point of distortion.

### **The Minutemen Are Coming!**

The Minutemen entered the national scene two years ago with the first of their civilian border patrols intended, as Chris Simcox, co-founder of the Minuteman Project, puts it, “to observe and report suspicious and illegal activity” on the border with Mexico. They hoped their conspicuous presence on the border would dissuade immigrants from entering the country illegally while calling attention to what the Minutemen feel is insufficient border security.

Simcox now heads up the Phoenix, Arizona-based Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MCDC), the largest of the Minuteman organizations. His 9,000-member organization has 78 chapters in 36 states with an email newsletter circulation that tops 270,000. Since the first Minuteman muster in 2005, dozens of other groups have sprouted up across the country, some affiliated with the larger MCDC or Minuteman Project, others not.

And while there is still a small contingent of Minutemen who stake out the border trying to curb illegal entry, the broader focus is changing. Most weekends now, Minuteman activists picket suburban day labor hiring sites in hopes of disrupting the hiring, driving the day laborers away and ultimately back across the border. The Minutemen see the

immigrants as alien invaders who enter the country illegally and then tax the infrastructure.

“They come here and steal that which we produce,” complains “Minuteman Larry” of the local Minutemen Project. Larry’s face is masked behind an enormous mustache, which, like his hair, is dyed jet black, grey roots showing. A red, white and blue pinwheel spins on top of the large sign he holds: ‘Only Traitors Hire Illegal Aliens.’ To his mind, immigrants cross the border in violation of immigration law, taking jobs away from Americans and straining the capacity of schools and hospitals. Since immigrants don’t pay taxes, he argues, the immigrants are instead a toll on these institutions.

For anti-immigration activists like “Minuteman Larry,” who cannot make it to the border, protesting day labor sites has become a way to participate. According to MCDC Executive Director Al Garza, “This is a way for them to make a local impact.” MCDC sees day labor sites as lures that draw undocumented immigrants across the border into the United States. “We try to take away the magnets to illegal aliens,” he says; they hope that the immigrants will eventually give up and go home.

With that as the goal, a local resident and Minuteman activist known to his fellow protesters as Rockerman for his long sun-bleached hair and ZZ-Top beard, arranged today’s protest promoting the event over the web forum of the anti-immigration group, Save Our State. Save Our State instigated the first rallies against day laborers in the area last year by targeting the city-supported day labor hiring center in Laguna Beach, California. The Laguna Beach site remains the target of frequent protests.

Minuteman protests are also meant to bring the immigration debate into the public eye. Coupled with coordinated pressures on city councils, they have spurred new ordinances aimed at curtailing day laborers’ ability to find work. Bowing to public pressures, the Dana Point city council enacted an ordinance prohibiting solicitation of work from public property. Questions as to the legality of this law have since put its enforcement on hold. New anti-loitering laws recently passed in the nearby cities of Lake Forest and Mission Viejo have effectively shut down the day labor sites in those cities and similar legislation is being looked at in Suffolk County, New York and elsewhere across the country. The American Civil Liberties Union is currently suing Lake Forest on behalf of labor groups challenging the constitutionality of these laws.

### **The Goons**

Gathering courage, with signs held like shields that read ‘Anti-Racism Anti-Minutemen,’ a hesitant group of counter protesters advances into the Minutemen’s lines. Clad in black and gray, many cover their young faces with black bandanas. These are high school and college age kids — ‘The Goons,’ the Minutemen call them, naming them, ironically, after union-busting thugs of the 1930s.

Less well organized, the counter protesters are a direct reaction to the Minutemen, who they believe are attacking victims rather than addressing root issues. “It doesn’t solve the

problem, going after poor people,” says anti-Minutemen protester, Naui. “[The Minutemen] feel that the quote unquote illegals are driving the wages down. Why don’t they go after the big guys? Why don’t they protest the big agricultural corporations?”

The anti-Minutemen protesters see corporations such as large agricultural concerns and sweatshops as a root of the problem. As they see it, these corporations exploit immigrants with substandard wages, deplorable working conditions, and a disregard for workers’ safety and civil rights. “If [the Minutemen] were really concerned with slave wages they would go after those people,” says Naui.

Well known to the Minutemen, Naui is a regular at the weekend protests and counter-protests. During the week, he works side-by-side with immigrant workers as a laborer on his uncle’s landscaping crew. He comes to these protests, he says, to show solidarity with the day laborers and to ensure that the Minutemen do not harass them. “Some are really hateful; they want Mexicans out of here,” he says. “I think a lot of them are racists.”

Nai drifts through the crowd, holding his camera inches from Minutemen’s faces, “You want to do some ethnic cleansing today?” he taunts. His bright red sweatshirt is silk-screened with the image of a Sioux in full headdress. Though born and raised in Costa Mesa, California, he does not consider himself American; he is Mexica [meh-SHE-ca]—indigenous Aztec Indian. “Racists go home! Racists go home!” he chants through a rolled up poster, sticking his impromptu horn in the lenses of demonstrator’s cameras.

Video cameras buzz in faces like flies; when one gets too close, it is batted away. Everyone is hoping to film their adversaries in a Rodney King-style incident so they can post the video on YouTube.com.

YouTube has become the propaganda showcase for anti-minuteman protesters and the Minutemen alike. Amateur activists edit together shaky videos crafted to portray adversaries negatively; links to these videos are shared and posted on web logs and forums. Recently, a scene captured by Naui showing kindergarteners shouting down a Minutemen protest made international news and was shown on Spanish language news broadcasts here in the United States.

While most protests become a war between Minutemen and counter-protesters, verbal abuse of day laborers themselves is not uncommon, and there has been at least one incident of violence. Last March, the San Diego City Attorney’s Office filed criminal complaints against anti-immigration protester John Monti alleging he verbally abused and punched immigrant workers during an anti-immigration protest in November, 2006. Monti claims it was he who was attacked by the day laborers who hit him and smashed his camera. He was recently acquitted of all charges.

## Los Pichoneros

A clutch of stocky men—extras, really, in the street theater unfolding—hang back off the street. Their sun-browned faces are blank with bewilderment; their weathered hands in

worn pockets. Day laborers like these primarily perform unskilled, manual labor for homeowners and construction contractors. Although the average day laborer looks for work six days a week, he encounters it only infrequently. A 2006 study, written by the UCLA-based Center for the Study of Urban Poverty (CSUP) estimates that only about ten percent will find work on a given day, forcing them to live and feed a family on an average of about \$700 a month; these men whom the Minutemen target are among the poorest people in America.

Spurred by employer demand, hundreds of day labor hiring sites are sprouting up in home improvement store parking lots, parks, vacant lots or truck rental businesses, or, like this Dana Point site, around a busy donut shop. The day laborers here are just a few of the more than 110,000 such workers waiting for work at day labor hiring sites like this across America, according to the CSUP study. The average site supports about 30 workers. While the day labor trend is largest in the West, it is following migrants North and East (though the largest site in the CSUP study is located in Langley Park, Maryland. It has seen as many as 349 job seekers waiting for work in a given day). They estimate that three-quarters of this workforce is undocumented.

Raymondo arrived here from Guanajuato, Mexico, in 1988. He watches the ruckus from the sidelines with his two young children, Jessica and Juanito, a tattered gray sweater hangs on his lean body. His lined face is accustomed to the sun. Raymondo has made a life for himself and his family as a pichonero, as the day laborers here call themselves. Like their namesake, the pigeon, pichoneros feed themselves by scratching up crumbs from the dirt. "We have the right to be here," he says. Torres refers of the *leyes de Dios*, the laws of God, which, in his opinion, supersede the laws of man. He feels that the need to work and feed his family overrides all other concerns. "Está cabrón," he says. Life's a bitch.

"Minuteman Ron" is hoarse from yelling at the day laborers. His "Jim Gilchrist for Congress" cap shades a trimmed grey mustache. "Making Our Borders Secure," the cap advertises. Gilchrist is president of the Minuteman Project and ran a single-issue campaign in 2006 for California's 48th Congressional seat. Spitting his disdain and disgust, Ron thumbs at the impassive laborers. "Look at this pus oozing out of this country," he seethes. He refers to the day laborers collectively as "the Josés." Save for the rage in his face, this white-haired man looks grandfatherly. "Half of these illegals are probably felons!" he declares, echoing common Minuteman lore that the crime rate is higher among immigrants.

Statistics, however, fail to support this assertion. In fact, a 2007 study co-penned by University of California, Irvine professor Rubén G. Rumbaut suggests that the likelihood that day laborers including those here in Dana Point are felons is one-fifth that of native-born American men. "Rigorous empirical community studies all point to the same robust and consistent results -- the foreign-born have the lowest incidence of crime commission, arrest and incarceration," Rumbaut says.

**“We don’t ask them to prove their citizenship”**

Up the street, one block away but very distant from the fray, a group of day laborers accepts breakfast from Patti, a mission worker from St. Edward Catholic Church. Unnoticed and completely ignored, she spends her Saturday mornings feeding the poor from the trunk of her little white car. The workers sip coffee from Styrofoam cups as she rolls small burritos and offers them to any who approach. “I do what I do out of love,” she explains. The echoing cacophony of the morning’s protest nearly drowns her out. “We don’t ask them to prove their citizenship.”