



Bio: **Marien Pabellon** is the executive director of New Labor, an alternative model of worker organization that combines new and existing strategies to improve working conditions and provide a voice for immigrant workers throughout New Jersey.

New Labor is a local leader in the national campaign for just and humane immigration reform, and an important local player in pushing for state and local level policies that respect immigrant families and unite our communities.

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An Interview with Marien Pabellon

Conducted by Leadership Scholar Lesley Pairol, Class of 2011

Edited by Nicholas Salazer

**Lesley Pairol: What were your first visions of women?**

**Marien Pabellon:** Women in my family they are strong as hell. They are really strong and they taught me that it's not a passive role in my family. Eventually they say we Puerto Ricans are strong, but at the same time they were very upfront. They were mothers that decided to go to school instead of staying home with the kids.

I remember one day, I was waking up, it was a Saturday, and I was like, "Mommy why you don't make breakfast like all the other mothers?" And she was like, "Listen! If you want me to do it I will do it because I love you, but not because that's my role. We are more than that, and we are more than just cooking and washing dishes and stuff like that." It took [my mom] a long time to be able to graduate from school because she was battling these double [standards.] When you are mother and you are wife and you are also working, balancing that dynamic is so hard. But I learned from her that you actually have to push, and my grandmothers did the same. My grandmother, even though they were daughters of a time in which the men were the ones who ruled, and domestic violence was around, they did [well] and they were not going to take that. Not that that happened, but they always taught me that a woman does not have to go through that. That we are smart, we speak loud that we are able to make our decisions and stuff like that. There are always things, but at the same time my mom showed me that we can be independent, and we are, and the goals that we set we can get them accomplished.

**LP: Could you talk to me about your childhood in Puerto Rico and the events that helped shape your principles today?**

**MP:** I love Puerto Rico! I miss it a lot. Puerto Rico, I really think, is part of who I am right now. I am the daughter of a hippie Baptist pastor, which is a weird combination, but he was awesome, and from a very progressive librarian. A lot of the politics that I learned, I learned it in church. My father was talking about service and how important it was to empower the people for people to move forward. And I learned a lot from him about caring for people. But even though church was really important for me, I felt something missing because you can serve and serve, but then you are not changing the macro level.

I remember him taking actions [and] going to strikes. [He organized] the first strike ever that happened in the seminary. That was the part that I felt was missing a little bit and that's why I was so close to the issues of justice and empowerment. But church was also the place where I learned to be a leader.

You have to step up. You have to talk to people, coordinate activities and stuff like that. Plus, my family was always pushing us to do well, and I owe them a lot. My great grandfather was working in sugar cane fields and he set his purpose: that his daughters and sons were going to go to college and educate themselves so they could stop working on the sugar cane fields. And they did it. They went to school and they faced a lot of issues because they were black. So, they faced an issue in college, and how they overcame those challenges is also a testimony of why I do what I do. The reason I am here is because they struggled [so], I owe it to them. It's something I actually have to be responsible with.

**LP: Who were some of your role models?**

**MP:** My father. My father is one of the people that I miss the most because he past away, but that taught me that we can fight stuff and that we can win it. That everything that you are going to do, you need to do it with love and with the responsibility that it requires.

**LP: How do you think that influenced who you are and the things you do today?**

**MP:** I am not shy, that's not part of who I am. For example, when I got to the U.S. I quit my job. I did it because I wanted to do my Masters in Labor and Employment Relations in Rutgers. I did not know [if] I was accepted or not, and I quit everything. I said, If I am not going to get in the Fall, [then] I am getting in the Spring. But I am getting in that school. And in that sense, I learned that from the women I know. Because I think that's what helped me to move forward with it. Because I could start like, Alright well I stay here in Puerto Rico, I keep with my work, and stuff like that. Then, I came here and dropped everything aside, because I wanted to do it, and I believed that I was able to do it.

I stayed here with my mom's uncle. I am forever thankful for that. But it's a place where nothing was a plan when I did it. I wasn't sure I was going to get in. I just had to keep pushing. We called it in Spanish, "Fajona," which means that you keep pushing and pushing until you get there, and that is something I learned from the women in my family. Like I said before, it took her ten years

to finish her masters, but she did it. And when I started college in Puerto Rico, she was finishing. That was her last year in college too. She is a good example, and actually the [reason] that I am strong and that I look at things as challenges. I go over them and then complain, but at the same time things need to be done, and I learned that from her.

**LP: Can you describe New Labor and your role in the organization?**

**MP:** I am the Executive Director of the organization, but I started as an organizer. New labor is a very interesting and happening place to work at. [It] is a community-based organization/worker's center, and a lot of the work that we do is with the purpose of helping people amplify their voices. We believe that workers and low wage immigrant workers, in general, have a voice. So, we don't have to come in and provide people with a voice, because they already have it. But what we want to do is provide them with the necessary skills so that they can use those voices, that they have already in their workplaces, in the community and also in politics. It's a process of obtaining and gaining power, and at the same time, using it to improve working conditions, which is a really pressing matter for them.

**LP: What does new labor mean to you in a more personal level?**

**MP:** This is my family. We fight together, we party together, we dine together, we go to all of our birthday parties, graduations, and stuff like that. For me though, all my closest family is in Puerto Rico, so I am like by myself, but this is my family and I cannot fail my family. And there was a door open in terms of things that I've never seen in my life before. I've never seen this kind of oppression that people go through. I knew that there was inequality, I knew there was a lot of stuff that wasn't right in the world, but I didn't think it was so close. And here, in the United States, it's very obvious. It's way too obvious and I don't know [how] people can turn around and say it's not there, because its so in your face. But new labor for me is that family that I don't have here, it became that new family and now I am fortunate I have one here and one back home. But that also translates in responsibility, in understanding that you cannot be impulsive, you have to actually think about what people's needs are and what your family actually needs. Its something that I didn't have before that I know I have now.

**LP: What led you to pick New Brunswick and pick Rutgers for your masters?**

**MP:** I think it was because in Puerto Rico you [could] go to a private school to do your Masters in Labor and Employment Relations, but it wasn't a challenging masters program. So, when I started looking to where to go, I heard from professors that Rutgers was really good, and that some of the students from my department in Puerto Rico had come here and [said] it was a really rewarding experience. I didn't have a clue at that point, as I said before, I kind of just did it. I didn't think it through. I didn't even think about the student loan things, I just did it.

**LP: Why did you decide to get your Masters in Labor Relations?**

**MP:** I think it was because of the fact that we all work. One of the things that makes part of who we are [within] society is that we are all workers. You can be from Latin America, you can be from Europe, you can be from South Africa, but you have to work. That's the bottom line. And I think that employment relationships and the labor market define ourselves and our lives. I don't think people understand how important their work [is] as workers. How much it contributes, and sometimes it's a little bit abstract, the perception of power that people have. It feels like people just go to work as a means to an end, but we are putting a lot of time on our jobs, right? And I don't think people want to make the best out of it sometimes. They just take it. Work is supposed to dignify us as workers and as human beings. It's not supposed to humiliate us.

Somehow we have forgotten that part. And the labor department, in my perspective, is a way to not only organize workers, because we organize workers so people can assert their voices, but also, [a] means to understand the employer relationships between employer and employees and how we can do better. I don't think we are aware that we can actually change the structure that we live in. Sometimes, we go to work but it doesn't work for the worker. It works for the employer or for the profit manager or for the budget lines, but it doesn't work for the workers.

**LP: What was your plan after getting your masters, what did you have in mind for yourself?**

**MP:** I wanted to do my PhD, but I didn't. I worked in two research projects at Rutgers. One was with port truckers, and actually riding. That was so fun! I was riding with them in trucks and trying to find out what the working conditions of the operators were at the port in New Jersey. I got to hide in the trucks and look [at] the piers from inside. I was able to hang out with truck drivers, even though I didn't know them, but I just started talking to them. So, it was really amazing because it opened a door in terms of how multicultural this state is. In Puerto Rico, we have different cultures but it wasn't as shocking. I didn't know I would have the opportunity to talk to somebody different, from Poland, Russia or China. It was the first time I had that exposure to those cultural experiences.

Another kind of oppression that I didn't witness before, were really terrible working conditions. I worked in that. And then I worked in a research project for new labor. That's how I discovered New Labor. I was doing data entry and translation for surveys for the day labor project. Day laborers were waiting in corners for contractors, and people did the surveys [but] nobody knew how to translate that in English. I was able to do that, and discover again, another area that I never saw before. It was kind of a waking up to the world because I wasn't sure. I really connected with the truck drivers at that point, and I wanted to continue to work with them. The teamsters were the union that was organizing the Ports. They actually offered me a position as an organizer and I took it.

Then, in New Labor, it was funny because they offered me a position at the same time [as] the teamsters. You know how student life is, you graduate and you are like, Oh Dios Mio what am

gonna do? I took the job with the teamsters because they responded first, and then things didn't work out and I came here to work at New Labor, and it has been a blast.

I didn't think I was going to be the director. I really wanted to do something where I was going to be able to be creative and use the knowledge that I just got from the masters. But at the same time, I was able to impact change, and this is a better setting for that. You can see it upfront and you see the workers' participation and everything; how the members determine and shape the organizational agenda of New Labor. And that's exciting because you know how [you] look at immigrant workers and say, Oh my God they are so vulnerable. Oh my God poor kids. And it's not that. People [are] working. People [are] standing up everyday and facing their challenges. And they say, No! No! No! You don't have to pity me I am able to work and contribute to this country, but at the same time I am going to fight for the things we need. And that's what is so exciting about this job because it's just seeing it live.

**LP: Could you think of any one specific case in which a worker came to you, and maybe talk a little about it.**

**MP:** We went to an agency called On Target. On Target has been doing a lot of stuff against workers. One of the workers was saying, "Look I have been paid, but it's not a lot. It's just one day." And so the whole group of workers started saying, "What do you mean it's not a lot. One day is one day." Because if you don't pay your rent on time, it's a lot of money. So, that was good and so they said, "Ok we are gonna go with you to get that check."

So, forty-five of us went to the temp agency. That was like the third time we showed up and [the main clerk] never wanted to give it to us. The first time that we showed up she said that he did not file the application properly. So, he filled out the application again. Then he said, "The branch manager said that he wasn't even in the job site. So, he never went out to work because he did not show up in the list." On the list, their names are put in pencil so you can erase. I got so mad; I start telling the branch manager, "Look. Show me how they have to fill in this piece of paper for people who get in the van. So, they use that to charge the warehouse, for the workers that they sent. Show me that sheet of paper. Show it, show it, show it." So, she showed it and he is right there, his name is there on the list. Then, she said the application issue. Then, when we went the third time, she wasn't even in the branch office. The good part is that they were waiting to send the second shift out to work when we entered. So, when the forty-five of us got in the agency, we said, "You have to call that person; the person that was there. She owes us this, and we are not going until we get the money, we are not leaving." And she starts shaking, "Ok I am gonna call, im gonna call." And she did, but out new labor members started talking to the people that were waiting for work inside of there, which was the good part of it, and they started talking and saying "This woman doesn't pay." So, they started leaving the temp agency. So, they couldn't send people out for the second shift. But then she didn't show up, she was late, so she didn't come. So, I told the lady, "At 1:30 if she is not here, we are just gonna start screaming." So she was like, "No, she is coming, she is coming." She wasn't there so we started chanting, but it was a really mellow chant; it was like, "Estamos aqui, no nos vamos." So, we saw that she

arrived, she pulled over and called the police and tells the police that we were threatening with physical violence. So, people started saying just spontaneously, “Tu no le puedes quitar la comida de los hijos a nadie.” They started saying, “Un dia pa trabajado es un dia pagado,” but nobody instructed them to do that, it wasn’t in the playbook, and it was so spontaneous. And I remember saying, “That’s good that you called the police, because the only thief is behind the counter.”

So, when the police came we were just like, “Estamos aqui...” so the police officer starts dancing while we are singing. And she tells the police officer, “Ok I am going to press charges against her, I want her arrested.” So, then they instructed the workers to leave, and the workers didn’t want to leave, and that was kind of touching because I wasn’t expecting that. So, they were waiting but they called like five police cars, which was ridiculous. It was a back and forth, and it was ugly. The police officer said, “If you don’t leave we are going to arrest you.” I was like, “We are not leaving. She has the check in her hand, you could see the check and she doesn’t want to give it out.” When he saw that she had the check, he was like, “Just give him the check.” It was kind of like the first hardcore action that we had because the police backed the workers. So, we were able to leave with the check, but that’s not the good part. I think that people saw that it was possible. So, it triggered a lot of job action. We just had to pick up the phone and say to the members, “There is going to be an action here and there,” and they would just show up.

**LP: Do you think the fact that you are a woman, and you are in a position of power has an impact on the way people interact with you?**

**MP:** I always was in a guy field. I was a union representative in Puerto Rico, and then I was another union representative here, and now I am in new labor. And a lot of the people that you organize are men. The question was, Oh she is a woman, but is she brave? Is she tough? And you have to show that through [a] side of you to justify that you are capable of doing the work. I really didn’t need to show that part because I am though by nature.

It was worse in the teamsters. The first two weeks of training they [sent] me to L.A.. Mind you I interviewed workers during my masters as a research assistant, and I did not know these guys. I got with them in the trucks without even knowing them. I gathered a lot of the data that came from workers and the talking points that the campaign did, a lot of that came from the research I was working on. Then, [they] sent me to training two weeks in L.A. and while the males were in their meeting, the women were in charge of cleaning the office. Hell no! That wasn’t happening. That was something that I wasn’t not going to put up with. So, I started doing reading or something like that; it was kind of rebellious. Then it became an issue and that’s why I left the teamsters. There was an issue that I was a woman, with an academic degree. It was kind of like an intimidation kind of thing. So, I told them, “Look, I’m going to go with the law here. I have to tell you that I don’t feel comfortable with this kind of comment, therefore this is the last time you are able to say them. That’s it because the second time, I am entitled to complaint higher.” But they didn’t change and I was like, “Did I join the kindergarten club or the teamsters?” It wasn’t a space for women really. A lot of the leaders of these community organizations are not

representing the makeup of their base. There are a lot of gringos; there are a lot of different kinds of people in the top. So, sometimes you talk and nobody listens, but you have to just fight it, it's not an easy thing. It's been kind of hard, I think it's a mix of three things: the accent, the women and the Latino thing.

**LP: What do you think women's leadership means?**

**MP:** I think [it] is somebody that is interdisciplinary, that has knowledge of more than just one area. I think a woman leader is strong, is courageous, and its fearless. You can be afraid, we are all afraid at some point. But if u sit down and do nothing then, el miedo, the fear actually won. But if you are afraid and then do it, then there is no fear over you. So, you have to be fearless, and I think [you] also [have] to be smart enough to actually choose battles; I don't think that's a women thing, I think that's something that's for everybody. You have to choose which battles you are going to fight, and which ones you are going to address differently. [I] think sometimes we just go in defensive and forget about everything. I don't think a women leader should be passive, [she] has to be strong enough to make her point and be respectful, and it has to help to pave pathways to others to become leaders too. That's your duty, that's part of the job description; you have to be able to create those pathways for others to also become leaders.

**LP: What do you think are some of the most pressing issues facing society in general today?**

**MP:** I think there is an issue of economic justice that is really pressing, and how its not just an issue of some people, its an issue [for] everybody. The other issue is one I feel really strongly about; it's an issue of how sometimes we as women think that we have come so far because now we are able to choose what we want to do, and the issue of real choice. There is actually an issue of what choice is really about. When you are choosing, you are suppose to have options that are worth it to choose from. But if you are just choosing from something that is really whack, and bad and horrible, then you are not really exercising the power of choice because the choices that are brought to you are not good choices to begin with. So, it's like [just because] you are offering me this opportunity doesn't mean that it's the right thing. So, if you are offering something that is wrong and is not good, how are we going to exercise the power of choice? We think sometimes as women that because we choose this path or that path, or that because we can work outside of the domestic area, that we are so powerful now because we are making some money by ourselves. I hear everyday from members of the organization that these women are making money, but who is controlling the account? The guy. And how we are replicating those models of oppression in the workplace too from the domestic. So, it's really how we solve the things that we said we were going to solve. And I don't think women really understand that part. They think that because you vote, hey, everything is solved. Its not. Also, if when women get to a position of power, [and] we are replicating the male models, then we are not bringing anything different to the table to begin with. So, are we done? I don't think we are.

**LP: What do you think rising women leaders can do about this issue?**

**MP:** First, we need a reality check, and I think both issues are intertwined, the fact of economic justice and the matter of women and power dynamics. I think we need to be more honest with ourselves; I don't think we are in that sense. But at the same time, we have to take the time to have these conversations. So we are trying to have these women circles [in New Labor] and we are going to start dealing with these issues and raising the question of power and address it. How that intertwines with my job, the motherhood, the community and stuff like that. And I think we need that view. So, I think having that conversation to start is good. The second thing is being honest with ourselves. And the third thing we need to start [doing is] creating these pathways for women and men to actually develop themselves with another set of rules. And creating that pathway means that we have to create opportunities for people to deal with these issues together, and at the same time make changes. I don't know if we are creating those spaces to have these conversations or [if] we are just going to keep them in the private or actually very deep down, somewhere in the whole thing. The fourth thing I think it has to do with how we interact with people once we become leaders. Because, a lot of people say that women are, once they get in some sort of leadership position, more conciliatory, more diplomatic, women are this. And then we fall into other stereotypes that are actually not always true, and it sets an expectation of something that may not come true. So it's really important that we start doing cultural changes within our organizations, and that we exercise the time to have the conversation to create opportunities for people to [not only] talk about it, but also to work together so they can replicate what we have said that we are going to change. But it has to create the space. We have to bridge the gap somehow.

**LP: Can you offer one piece of advice for me as I set out towards achieving my goals?**

**MP:** Se Fajona. You have to be committed to whatever you choose to do, and understand that you are not there by yourself, and that there are people around you for who your actions have repercussions; that you are strong and that we are able to overcome things. Sometimes we have to walk a little bit backwards to actually move to the front. It doesn't actually determine what place you get at the end of the race, it's what you overcame to get there and how you dealt with those issues in that race. I think sometimes there is a huge tension between our goals and integrity. So, run the race, but be sure you do it with integrity and respect.