

# How a Grassroots Campaign

Led to Avelo Airlines  
Cancelling Its  
ICE Deportation Contract:

An Explanatory Case Study





## Introduction

In less than a year, a decentralized coalition of immigrant rights groups, labor, faith communities, and local organizers forced Avelo Airlines—the largest commercial carrier for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deportation flights—to end its estimated \$150 million contract. The Stop Avelo campaign demonstrates that targeting vulnerable corporate “pillars of support” for ICE can deliver a concrete blow to the deportation machine, while building national power and infrastructure for future fights. And it suggests that similar tactics can be used by other movements to defend

human and civil rights, fight for justice, and correct abuses of power.

This case study explores how and why a combination of grassroots activism, union alliances, and community advocacy successfully pressured Avelo Airlines to cancel its deportation flight contract. It also highlights the timeline, strategies, key moments, organizational tactics, and lessons learned from this victory. In order to make this model replicable for other campaigns and movements, we address the following questions:

**1**

**How** did the Coalition to Stop Avelo mobilize and sustain pressure against Avelo Airlines over 10 months?

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**2**

**Why** was the campaign successful in compelling the airline to terminate its ICE contract?

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**3**

**What** role did grassroots activism, labor unions, and external partnerships play in amplifying public outrage?

# Overview

In April 2025, Avelo Airlines, a budget carrier and subcontractor of CSI Aviation, signed a \$150 million contract with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)/the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to conduct deportation flights. This dual role—operating deportation flights while selling tickets to the general public—instantly sparked controversy. The airline faced backlash from state officials, grassroots activists, and customers, leading to boycotts, public demonstrations, and organized protests.

These acts of defiance and grassroots organizing efforts eventually caught the attention of [national press](#) and large labor organizations, and ultimately forced Avelo to [suspend its West Coast operations](#) in October 2025. Despite initial efforts by Avelo's [PR team to downplay the nature](#) of their involvement in these deportation atrocities and spin this announcement as a purely financial decision, the public uproar and bad press compelled the airline to change its tune and [attempt to publicly distance itself](#) from DHS/ICE before finally announcing in January 2026 that it would terminate its contract by the end of the month.

## Why Avelo Mattered

### Avelo Airlines was...

- \* A relatively small commercial airline with a **public brand** and dependence on ticket sales.
- \* **Receiving public subsidies and political support** from state and municipal governments.
- \* Quietly entering into a **contract with the DHS** to run deportation flights starting May 2025.

Unlike obscure charter contractors that typically run deportation flights in the shadows, Avelo was visible, subsidy-dependent, and brand-conscious—all of which made it uniquely vulnerable to public pressure.

**Organizers understood that deportation infrastructure isn't sustained by ideology alone. It relies on contracts, zoning decisions, labor, reputational cover, and silence.**

Disrupting Avelo meant **materially hampering ICE's ability to deport people**, not just symbolically protesting.

# Groups Involved in the Coalition

**National Networks of Local Activists:** The Coalition to Stop Avelo, a locally led national alliance of organizations, activists, and concerned community members across the country, coordinated the sharing of strategies among groups, nationwide demonstrations, and online digital tactics.



**National Base Building Groups:** Many of the activists and volunteers within the Stop Avelo coalition were associated with or recruited from established groups and organizations such as, Defend and Recruit (a project of Siembra NC), Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and Indivisible, which was part of what made the coalition so grassroots and wide reaching.

**Labor Unions:** Jobs with Justice, The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA), and other national unions provided crucial support, publicizing unsafe conditions and standing up for whistleblowers.

**Faith Leaders:** The Unitarian Universalist Association brought a faith-based lens, strategic organizing support (through their Side with Love campaign), and an additional network of volunteers to the coalition, with congregations in each of the places Avelo flew.

**Student Organizations:** Activist groups at universities like Yale and UConn lobbied administrators to sever any ties with Avelo.

**National Media Partnership:** Communications advocacy organization, ReThink Media, ensured consistent national coverage of demonstrations and boycotts.



Association of Flight Attendants-CWA



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JOBS with JUSTICE

INDIVISIBLE



UNITARIAN  
UNIVERSALIST  
ASSOCIATION

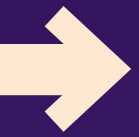


mijente



# Timeline of Events

The timeline of events below is provided to summarize, in a succinct and digestible way, some of the key events that led to this victory. But it in no way encapsulates every detail of the campaign and the hours of unspoken work that was led, by and large, by an army of hundreds of local volunteers who dedicated months of their time to this movement and without whom this victory would not have been possible.



## Phase 1: Early Mobilization

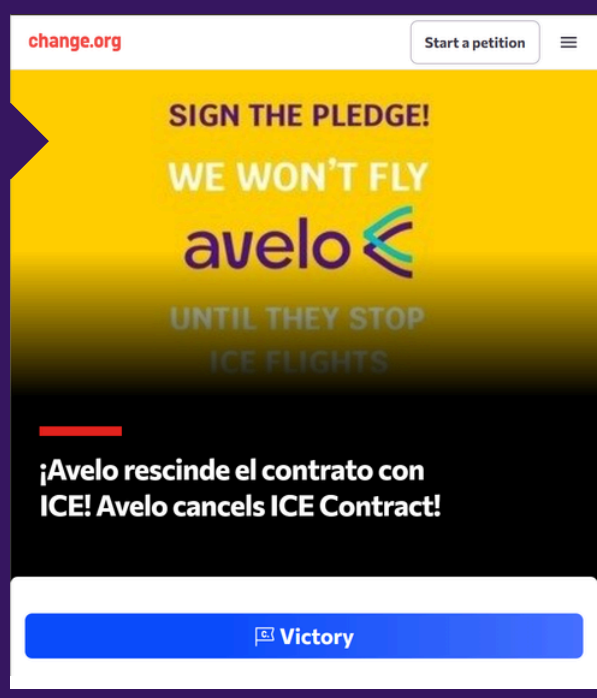
### Local Discovery and Early Mobilization: How it started in Connecticut

**March 2025:** Community members and immigrant rights organizers in Connecticut discovered Avelo's ICE contract and upcoming deportation flights.

**The New Haven Immigrants Coalition (NHIC)** moved quickly to:

- Launch **local protests**
- Demand an **end to public subsidies and partnerships** with Avelo
- Start a **boycott petition**

Around the same time, staff at **Defend & Recruit**, a project of Siembra NC, a Latine led immigrant rights organization based in North Carolina, began researching and tracking the Avelo deportation story, which was making waves in online forums for pilots. Defend & Recruit reached out to NHIC about supporting their work, and began developing a toolkit that others could use for boycotting Avelo.

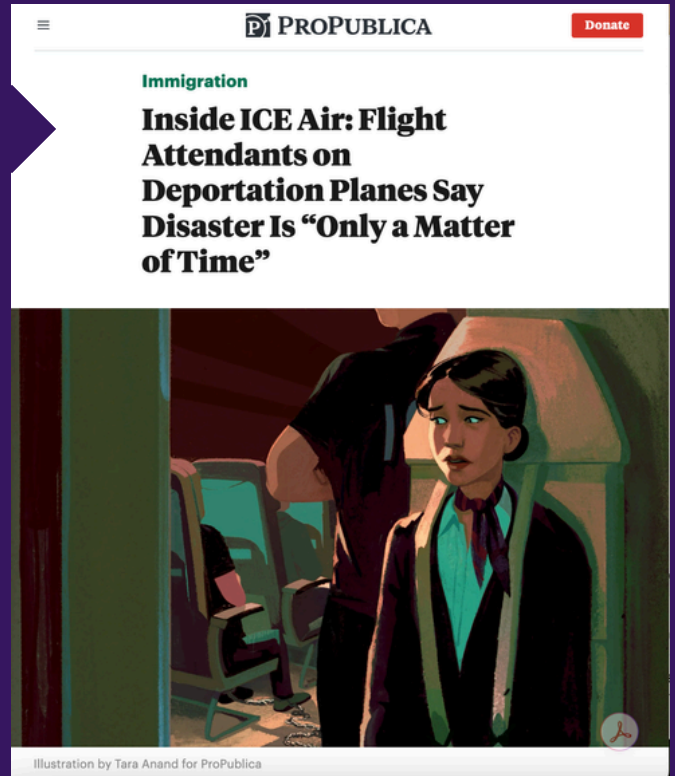


## April 2025:

Avelo Airlines' \$150 million contract with ICE became public knowledge. NHIC's boycott petition was circulated more widely, quickly gaining the attention of local and national press, as well as local politicians and community activists, the latter of whom began calling for corporate accountability.

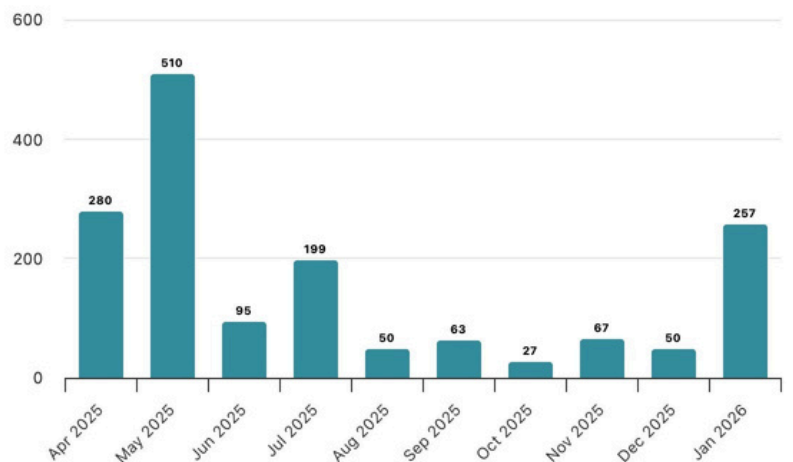
## Local and National Press Attention Boost Support

Avelo Airlines first shared details about their new contract with ICE to its staff in late March 2025. At the time this news had still not been made available to the public and Avelo Airlines CEO, Andrew Levy, attempted to frame the contract as a smart business decision that would provide the small budget carrier and its employees with financial stability for years to come. Despite these claims, and assurances that employees would not be forced to staff these deportation flights, numerous Avelo employees were deeply uncomfortable with the **unsafe and inhumane flying conditions**, and those that verbalized their displeasure with the airline's new services were subsequently laid off by the company.



[Read the full article](#)

## Avelo Campaign Articles:



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MAIN NEWS, TRANSPORTATION, TYPEFEATUREDARTICLE

## Avelo Enters Deportation Biz



Credit: Paul Bass File Photo

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## Profiting off 'people's suffering': Airline set to operate ICE flights faces backlash

*Protests are breaking out across the U.S. against Avelo Airlines after it agreed to help the administration carry out deportations.*

Apr. 30, 2025, 2:10 PM EDT  
By Rachel Maddow and Allison Detzel

*This is an adapted excerpt from the April 29 episode of "The*

[Read the full article](#)

Word spread and eventually made its way to the [New Haven Independent](#), a small local newsroom in New Haven, Connecticut, which became the first news outlet to officially break the story of Avelo's ICE contact on April 7, 2025. Within a month, news coverage of this story ballooned, with local outlets in cities and states where Avelo operated across the country publishing the story.

During the life cycle of this campaign, there were numerous fluctuations in news coverage. As shown in the graphic above, the coverage on this Avelo story peaked in the first few months of the campaign, which is typical for most stories in the fast-paced news cycle and landscape. What is unique about this Avelo story though is that initial news

coverage, within the first month of April, was actually surpassed the following month because of a news segment on Avelo that [The Rachel Maddow Show](#) ran on April 29, which incited a new wave of interest in the story come May.

This news coverage and engagement helped put Avelo on the map and brought new activists and community members into the fold. It also sent a warning to Avelo Airlines that this news would not fly under the radar. This surge of local reporting in April not only brought national attention to the story but also undoubtedly accelerated the collective action and coordinated efforts that would transpire in the following months.

## Political Outrage Puts the Spotlight on Avelo

Local reporting and organizing in Connecticut on Avelo's contract with ICE not only sparked a public outcry but also caught the attention of local politicians in the state. In particular, Connecticut Attorney General William Tong verbalized his displeasure in multiple public statements and interviews.

The Attorney General also sent several **official letters** to Avelo requesting further information about their contract with ICE and underscoring his disappointment in the budget airline's decision to enter into a contract with the immigration enforcement agency despite numerous reports of the human rights violations taking place onboard these deportation flights.

The extensive pushback from state legislators in Connecticut signaled to activists that there was widespread support for this resistance work and inspired other state legislators to speak out and take similar action against Avelo.



*"No human being should be stripped of their right to due process, physically restrained and shackled against their will, and deported—sometimes to countries they are not even from—for simply trying to build a better life for themselves and their families. These tactics are illegal, immoral, and reckless."*

*- Rev. Cathy Rion Starr, Unitarian Universalist Association and Delaware Stop Avelo Coalition*



## Avelo Campaign in the media

[Watch the interview](#)

## To summarize, within a month:

Tens of thousands of people signed on to the boycott—many outside Connecticut.

Local news outlets **exposed a hidden relationship** between local public dollars and a deportation profiteer.

The airline's self-image as a 'local, family-friendly' airline became politically costly.

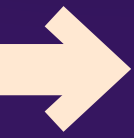
Early actions weren't yet coordinated nationally, but they did lay critical groundwork:

- Putting Avelo in the public eye as an **ICE contractor**.
- Signaling that **this was a winnable, leverage-based target**, not just another protest.
- Starting to build a **base of outraged community members, travelers, and workers**.



## Avelo Campaign in the media

[Watch the broadcast](#)



## Phase 2: Mapping Vulnerabilities and Building a Coalition

### Researching the target: Finding Avelo's Weak Points

Groups like Siembra NC, **Mijente**, **LittleSis**, and an emerging ad hoc coalition of organizers began asking:

1. Where does Avelo fly?
2. Who funds them?
3. Which cities and states subsidize them?
4. What's their financial and political weak point?

### Key vulnerabilities identified:



**Financial fragility:** Avelo was struggling to raise capital in a tight market.



**Public subsidies:** Dependent on state and municipal support, especially in Connecticut and other bases.



**Brand exposure:** As a commercial carrier, Avelo relied on customers and "hometown" goodwill.



**Political dependencies:** Needed friendly relationships with local airport authorities and elected officials.

### Organizers framed deportation subsidies in a new way:

"Subsidies" weren't *neutral economic development* — they were **public investments in state violence.**

This framing helped turn airport boards, city councils, and state agencies into **pressure points**, not neutral actors. It also gave local organizers concrete demands: end subsidies, cut contracts, pass resolutions.

## Coordinating toward a united front

Local Stop Avelo groups began popping up near airports where Avelo operated around the country. Some of these activists were recruited by Defend and Recruit or DSA, but many simply heard about the outcry in Connecticut and started organizing themselves at their local airport. A duo of volunteers in Oregon, Matthew B. and Barbara W., realized the need to present a united front for decentralized activity to increase the pressure on Avelo. Drawing on media reports of anti-Avelo actions, they began googling and reaching out to other Avelo protest organizers and affiliates, such as Indivisible chapters across the country, to invite them into a national Stop Avelo coalition. They set up a website and developed a logo to help create a shared identity and to clearly communicate to possible coalition members the goals of the campaign.

Organizational representatives and individuals from across the country began gathering in a weekly call, communicating in a group chat and on email lists to share information, ideas, and strategies.

## Expanding geographically

With a new coalition infrastructure and meeting cadence in place, hundreds of new volunteers were able to seamlessly join the campaign. New volunteers and activists brought varying levels of organizing experience to the Stop Avelo coalition and, with the encouragement of coalition leaders and members, everyone was welcome to join. This supportive and welcoming coalition environment encouraged "novice" volunteers to get started in their own local organizing work or tactics while simultaneously helping them build up their organizing skills.





As research circulated, Stop Avelo organizers identified Avelo's network of local weak spots:

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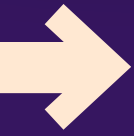
- **Flight-route cities** (e.g., Mesa, AZ; Burbank, CA; Baltimore, MD): Focused on airport authorities, local officials, and community pressure at the airport.
- **Subsidy sites** (e.g., Connecticut, Delaware): Recast subsidies as complicity in deportations; pushed to revoke them.
- **Financial centers** (e.g., New York): Targeted Jefferies Group, a major investment firm raising money for Avelo.
- **Non-flight cities:** Organized protests to make clear Avelo would not be welcomed if it tried to expand there.

At the same time:

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- The flight attendants' union publicly warned about **safety hazards** of deportation flights (people shackled and handcuffed during emergencies)
- Pilot whistleblowers started sharing inside information about company behavior and vulnerabilities

**All of this built a shared strategic picture and illuminated how vast this network of anti-Avelo demonstrators had become.**



## Phase 3: Scaling Up Through Decentralized Coordination

A Swarm of Persistent Pressure Points

**May–July 2025:**

Once connected, local groups and national networks with local chapters, like Indivisible, Defend and Recruit, and DSA started to actively recruit new volunteers to the Stop Avelo campaign. Within a few months, grassroots demonstrations were taking place nationwide, targeting airports and local governments, and leading to the passage of several city resolutions preventing local officials from contracting with corporations coordinating with ICE.

Organizers adopted a multi-pronged organizing strategy to keep the pressure on Avelo and deliberately target the corporation's weaknesses.

**This form of collective action can be viewed as a 'swarm strategy': a set of repeated actions that, together, make it too painful for a corporation to continue harmful behavior.**



# Tactics included:

## 1 Nationwide week of protests (late May 2025)

- Actions in **22 states**
- First-time activists stood alongside experienced labor and immigrant rights organizers
- Faith leaders, community members, and frequent flyers joined in

## 3 Faith-based pressure

- The Unitarian Universalist Association mobilized congregations across the country
- Faith leaders framed the issue as a **moral conflict**: safety through care, not punishment

## 5 Labor and worker involvement

- National labor unions like Jobs With Justice and other worker bodies got increasingly involved
- Workers at airports and within the airline ecosystem amplified internal pressure

## 2 FOIA requests

- Volunteers sent freedom of information act (FOIA) requests to local airport authorities to obtain the organization's contract with Avelo to better understand the specific demands they could make of the airport authorities
- Through FOIA requests, volunteers found out that some regional airport authorities could legally terminate their contract with Avelo at any time and that other states, besides Connecticut, were also subsidizing Avelo's operations

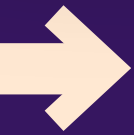
## 4 Electoral and legislative pressure

In some places, elected officials:

- Paid for **protest billboards** out of their own pockets
- Introduced **resolutions and legislation** restricting state employees' ability to fly Avelo for government business (e.g., in California, activists won commitments from officials not to use Avelo)

## 6 Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) engagement

- DSA identified chapters in **44 of Avelo's 51 key cities**
- Chapters integrated Stop Avelo into ongoing immigrant defense work
- The campaign doubled as a **training ground**: Members learned how to run effective corporate boycott and pressure campaigns



## Phase 4: Escalation and Wins

Early partial win: West Coast pullback and further coordinated actions

### July-October 2025:

Pressure intensified with the closure of Avelo's West Coast base. Boycotts and Stop Avelo campaigns bolstered national media coverage.

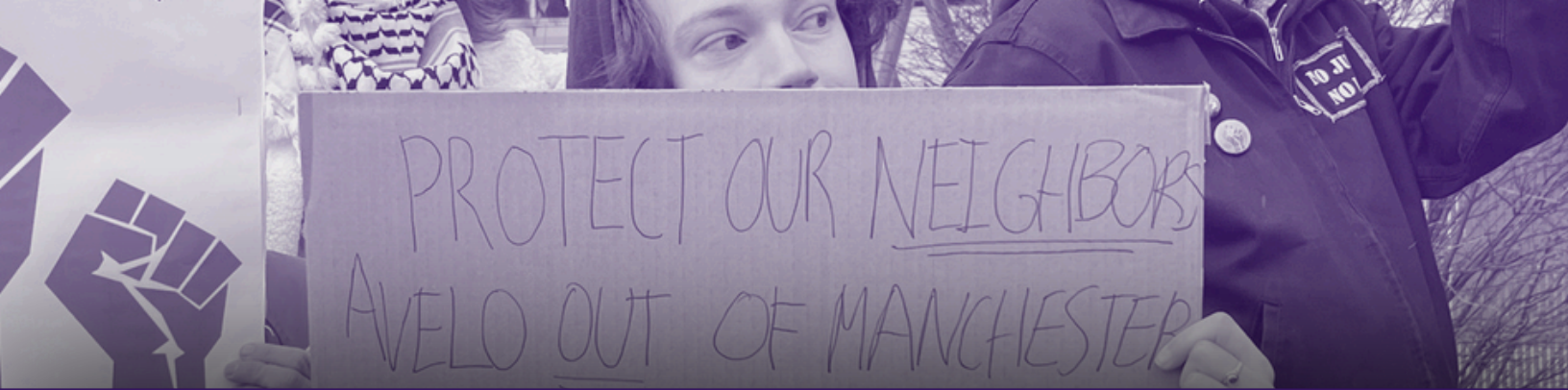
By July, Avelo **announced** it would be **ending its West Coast operations by December**, though they ended up leaving earlier in October. While the company did not publicly admit the decision was related to the deportation protests, many organizers took this as a win and **proof of concept** that the pressure was working. Local media outlets also framed the news as directly related to the growing backlash but national media outlets mostly ignored the shift.

### Increased Communications Capacity

As the summer wound down, Stop Avelo coalition leaders realized the need for additional communications capacity support and expertise to keep the media's attention on Avelo and coalesce the growing coalition of volunteers under a unified narrative. By September, through the generosity of an anonymous donor, the coalition brought ReThink Media onboard to bolster the coalition's internal communications capacity, support its digital organizing abilities, and increase its national media presence.

**Overall, this news was a huge morale boost that fueled deeper commitment and escalated tactics.**





## November-December 2025:

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Activist groups targeted university contracts, used billboard campaigns, and planned coordinated holiday protests to escalate public scrutiny.

In November and December, activists continued to ramp up the pressure on Avelo by planning additional eye-catching boycott demonstrations. This included:



Coordinated demonstrations at key airports during peak holiday travel times (Thanksgiving weekend and Christmas week).



Partnering with university student groups to share campus petitions calling on university administrators to cancel or pledge not to charter flights through Avelo.



Additional billboard campaigns in New Hampshire and other states.



Further pressure on local airport authorities—these quasi-public appointed committees had power over subsidies, advertising, and airport procedures.



Continued work with state legislators to craft legislation prohibiting airlines working with DHS/ICE from receiving state contracts or municipal funds.

# Phase 5: A Victory for Distributed Organizing

## Full win: Avelo exits the deportation business

### January 2026:

Avelo announced plans to terminate its ICE contract at the month's end, citing reputational risks after nearly a year of protests. Notably, this news came on the same day that Renee Good was murdered; a tragic headline that eclipsed immediate coverage of this huge victory.

In early January, Avelo **quietly announced** it **would shutter operations at Mesa Gateway Airport in Phoenix, AZ**. This effectively meant that Avelo was **ending its role in deportation flights altogether**.

★ **From the inside, organizers summarized the win as:**  
*"From the tarmac to the ticket counter, our organizing created a sustained pressure campaign that Avelo could no longer ignore."*



### This outcome:

- Removed one of ICE's largest commercial pillars of support
- Signaled to other corporations: Profiting from deportations carries serious reputational and financial risk



## Local Organizers On the Ground

Local activism was the lifeblood of this campaign, and why this campaign was able to last for as long as it did. Without the tireless efforts of groups and individuals, like some of the examples listed below and throughout this report, the Stop Avelo campaign would not have lasted or been as successful as it was at keeping the constant pressure on Avelo Airlines. The examples below are just a few of the dozens of local groups and hundreds of community activists who dedicated so much of their time and effort over the past year to pressure Avelo Airlines to cancel its contract with ICE.



*"Our first Stop Avelo protest in May 2025 saw over 100 people turn out in the pouring rain. That energy never let up throughout our campaign."*

*- Marianna A., Indivisible Albany, NY and Lead Organizer for the AveloNO Coalition*



*"Working and poor people have way more power than the system wants us to believe, we just have to keep working together to topple the people who keep a dominating grip on power and resources."*

*- Caritas K., Delaware DSA member & Lead Organizer of Delaware Stop Avelo Coalition*

# Key Tactics for the Campaign:

1

## **Public Demonstrations at Airports:**

Activists targeted airports in multiple states, drawing media attention and pressuring local leaders.

2

## **Employee Testimony:**

Whistleblowers exposed unsafe working conditions and retaliatory practices against Avelo employees, escalating public outrage.

3

## **Legislative Victories:**

Eureka, California and Wilmington, Delaware, passed resolutions prohibiting ICE municipal contracts.

4

## **Billboard Campaigns:**

Visibility increased—billboards called attention to Avelo’s complicity in deportation flights.

5

## **University Pledges:**

Student activists secured commitments from colleges to avoid Avelo for future charter flight needs.

6

## **FOIA Requests:**

Gave volunteers and organizers the tools and information they needed to strategically pressure Avelo, as well as local airport authorities and universities contracting with Avelo.



# Findings

## Top Takeaways:

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- No single national organization “owned” the campaign
- Different groups used strategies adapted to their context under a **shared theory of change**:
  - Target corporate collaborators with ICE
  - Hit them at the local, financial, political, and reputational levels
  - Maintain constant, visible, distributed pressure

## Key Strategies:

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**Grassroots Mobilization:** De-centralized Stop Avelo groups effectively organized consistent protests, media briefings, and strategic boycotts.



**Media Amplification:** Engagement with local + national press and the use of billboards amplified the coalition’s message.



**Union Advocacy:** Labor support highlighted unsafe and unethical practices, strengthening broader public outrage.



**Local Alliances:** Activists leveraged connections with local city councils, state attorneys general, and state legislators to secure concrete wins.

## Impact of Campaign:

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- Avelo faced tangible reputational damage, leading to an alleged decline in commercial passenger sales.
- Financial strain was exacerbated by closures of bases and mounting public scrutiny.
- Public campaigns successfully reframed the ICE contract from a procedural agreement into an ethical and reputational liability.



# Key Takeaways and Lessons Learned

## Why the Campaign Succeeded

In the first year of the new Trump administration, there was a bombardment of news that left many feeling overwhelmed and powerless. The boycott against Avelo Airlines felt like an easy decision, morally, and a low-lift action that people could take to get some of their power back. The coalition itself was also successful for these reasons:

### 1 Clear theory of power

The campaign was grounded in a simple, strategic idea:

- Authoritarian projects like mass deportation rely on **pillars of support** (corporations, local governments, contractors)
- If enough of those pillars are weakened or removed, the system's capacity **physically shrinks**

Stop Avelo was not just a moral appeal. It was about **withdrawing logistical, financial, and political support** from ICE.

### 2 Target selection: vulnerable but impactful

Avelo was chosen because it was:

- Big enough to matter (major carrier of deportations)
- Small and fragile enough to be moved (financially weak, subsidy-dependent, brand-conscious)

This combination made it **highly leverageable**.

# 3 Decentralized, not chaotic

The campaign struck a balance:

- Local groups set their own tactics, messaging, and demands
- National organizations shared:
  - Research
  - Training
  - Strategy frameworks
  - Media amplification

No one insisted on a single brand or identity, which:

- Allowed **fast, inventive local action**
- Prevented bottlenecks and burnout at the “center”
- Let very different groups plug in in ways that made sense for them

Weekly, open meeting space, signal groups, and loose coalition structure allowed for:

- Ego-less space that enabled the coalition to remain a welcoming environment for new people or groups to join at any point in the process
- Open communication; questions and feedback were always welcome; there were no bad ideas

“

*“From Avelo to Amazon, all corporations must weigh their options. Democracy or authoritarianism. Community or violence. If you are profiting from a partnership with ICE—a lawless agency kidnapping our neighbors, bloodying our streets, and coercing entire workforces to do their bidding—then you are in opposition to democracy and will face an organized coalition of working people determined to win a future free from the exploitation of the deportation machine.”*

*- Adam Shah, Director of National Policy for Jobs with Justice*

## 4 Multiple Entry Points for Activation

Activists could plug into the work in whatever way felt best for them, including through:

- Local protests
- Airport demonstrations
- Lobbying local politicians/city council
- FOIA requests
- Media outreach
- Letter-writing campaign

## 5 Cross-sector participation

The fight drew power from many fronts:

- **Immigrant communities and base-building orgs** (e.g., Siembra NC, New Haven Immigrants Coalition).
- **Faith communities** (e.g., Unitarian Universalist Association)
- **Labor and worker organizations** (e.g., Jobs with Justice)
- **Everyday people and activists** from different political leanings (e.g., Democratic Socialists of America, Indivisible)

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*“This [victory] is the result of tens of thousands of people organizing in our state and nationwide to put pressure on Avelo, airports where they operate, and local governments that host their operations. It should be a message to other private airlines that cooperation with ICE will be met with mass boycotts and protests, and it will hurt your business. There is no excuse for human rights violations.”*

*- Ryan Harvey from the Maryland Avelo Out of BWI Coalition*



## Conclusion:

The Stop Avelo coalition demonstrated the effectiveness of grassroots activism when paired with effective distributed organizing tactics, clear messaging, and strategic institutional pressure points. By leveraging both ethical arguments (e.g., human rights) and practical concerns (e.g., safety violations, passenger distrust), the campaign forced Avelo Airlines to re-evaluate the cost of maintaining its ICE contract and, in doing so, underscored the importance of public accountability in corporate decision-making during times of political turmoil. The Stop Avelo campaign also shows that corporations relying on unethical contracts can be pressured into compliance through sustained grassroots activism that is combined with a strategic communications and multi-stakeholder approach. This case study should serve as a model for future advocacy efforts targeting corporate complicity in controversial practices.

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