

**Albuquerque, NM**—On Sept. 29, People United for Justice, a Chicano community-based organization, demanded quality water for human needs and not for profit before a joint Legislative Committee of New Mexico on Radioactive Materials and Water Resources. Water in the Southwest has been very precious and limited. Ground water in the South Valley here has become seriously contaminated, threatening the lives of the community.

The Chicano governor has responded by creating a Public Health Emergency Response Team. Anaya said the South Valley represents a "constellation of public health concerns that require a comprehensive and expanded response from state government." He added that recent efforts by a group of South Valley residents to gain support for incorporating the area as a village "demonstrate a widely held view that the area's problems are unique and serious." The proposed team will provide a systematic attack on the serious environmental and public health problems facing the area's some 80,000 residents.

This water issue reflects the continued struggle of Chicano people for their land and resources — a concrete expression for the right of self-determination. The following is the testimony given by Miguel Garcia, a land-and-water rights organizer as well as project coordinator for People United for Justice.

#### Water Rights and Quality

The South Valley is a traditional Hispanic community, comprised of old communal land grants dating back to 1692, with the Atrisco Land Grant being the oldest and largest of the communities, covering over two thirds of the land base of the South Valley. Pajarito and Los Padillas comprise the other neighboring villages in the South Valley. We are one community with a common history and common problems.

**Our community has historically been plagued by contaminated water... This problem has recently been worsened by... dumping hazardous materials... depositing of the city's treated sewage into the Rio Grande, and former stock yards which created vast amounts of nitrogen.**

In past years land and water resources in our community were geared at meeting our immediate needs for food, clothing and shelter. Water was not seen as a commodity but as a natural element for basic human consumption and usage. Institutions such as the mayor-domo/acequia system insured a partial and equitable distribution of water and served as a unifying force in our community.

Our South Valley community is experiencing very serious problems with our water quality and water rights. We are seeing a disproportionate number of water-related illnesses, like giardiasis as well as an increase in contamination-related cases (yellow water, high nitrates, etc.) Most recently our community almost experienced a catastrophe with the possibility of the contaminant PCBs seeping into our water table. This is still not a resolved question. The installation of state monitors wells near the unlined pit where the PCBs were found and supposedly cleaned is a positive step but not enough of an assurance that this poison has not reached the water table.

But what guarantee do we have that such incidents will not occur again when the violators are only given a slap on the wrist. It is unfair for the taxpayers to take the brunt of the cost of this cleanup. We think there should be stiffer laws and penalties on both private and governmental agencies that poison our land water with hazardous chemicals and wastes.

# Water and Chicano Self-Determination

## Southwest struggle for water rights and quality Chicanos' fight for their land and resources

#### Uniqueness of South Valley

The South Valley has a very delicate water table, the average depth being anywhere from 6-10 feet in some of the basin area of the Atrisco area. Our communities' water supply is divided between private wells and city water. Also unique and not necessarily positive, are the many drainage ditches which criss-cross our community. Unlike our "acequias" which have a gradual flow to them, the water in these ditches basically sits on the water table serving as breeding grounds for mosquitos, and occasionally as a dump site for dead animals and hazardous wastes. This contaminated water eventually reaches the water table.

Our community has historically been plagued by contaminated water. The nitrate problem in the Mountain View area has existed for more than 20 years. This problem has recently been worsened due to a culmination of three things: 1) the dumping of hazardous materials into the Tijeras arroyo via Kirtland Air Force Base, 2) regulated and unregulated depositing of the city's treated sewage into the Rio Grande, and 3) former stock yards which created vast amounts of nitrogen. All these eventually found their way into the water table or the Rio Grande which feeds the water table.

Another problem common mostly in the areas where sewer lines were first installed is the foul sewer smell which our private wells are picking up. One conclusion is that our cesspools are the problem. Even though this might be the case in some isolated areas, the real problem is that city sewer lines are leaking those wastes and bacteria are being picked up by our private wells. The contractors assigned to install sewer lines in many instances had to redo an entire line because it was put in wrong.

The solution in the past has been to neglect the problem of water contamination and just "hook up" to city (Albuquerque) water. *This is the fast-kill solution but not the answer to our problem of water quality and water rights, for the more the city takes from our community, the further disenfranchised we become.* The City of Albuquerque is the main expropriator of water in the South Valley. The city has been one of the main culprits in the deterioration of our water quality and rights.

#### City's Water Resource Ripoff

There are real discrepancies in the development of water resources in our community. We are charged an annex tax on our water that we get from the city. Even though it is our own water, from our own community, we end up paying more for our water than a city resident who uses the same amount.

Many people in our community are also being forced to pay for city water that they are not receiving for the simple reason that when city lines ran past their homes meters were installed. Hence people had to automatically pay a set fee per month. As the economic crisis intensifies, people find it harder to hook up to city water. In many of our homes our highest utility bill is not electricity or gas but the water bill.

The city presently has a vast number of wells in the non-incorporated areas of Atrisco. These wells supply much of the city with water. The city puts a price tag on these waters of which revenue we never see in the Valley, but which aids in the development and expansion of the city. The extensive draining of our water table by these city wells is causing our private wells to become sand-locked or dried out. It is how we say in Spanish "se esta esprimiendo la tierra" (the land is being squeezed). This extensive policy is resulting in a subsiding flow into our water table, forming pockets of contaminated water which is not naturally cleansing itself out and of which we are drinking.

Aside from this lies the asbestos problem. Much of the city water lines in the South Valley are made with asbestos material. Asbestos is a carcinogen. *What is this cancer-causing material doing to our water table, our health, our children, our chronically ill?* We have not begun to document or perceive the harmful effects of this material because we have no mechanism that can assure us of a systematic way.

Water resources is the biggest business in our Chicano community of 80,000. Sewer projects, water hookups, and now lift stations, have been the leading industry in the South Valley for the past 10-15 years. Just recently the city water resources department registered a \$7.6 million surplus. We speculate that the majority of this surplus came from inflated water rates in the South Valley and non-water usage from South Valley residents who pay for city water that they are not even using. On top of all these inequities the city has projected 34 more "giant" wells for our community. *What audacity!*

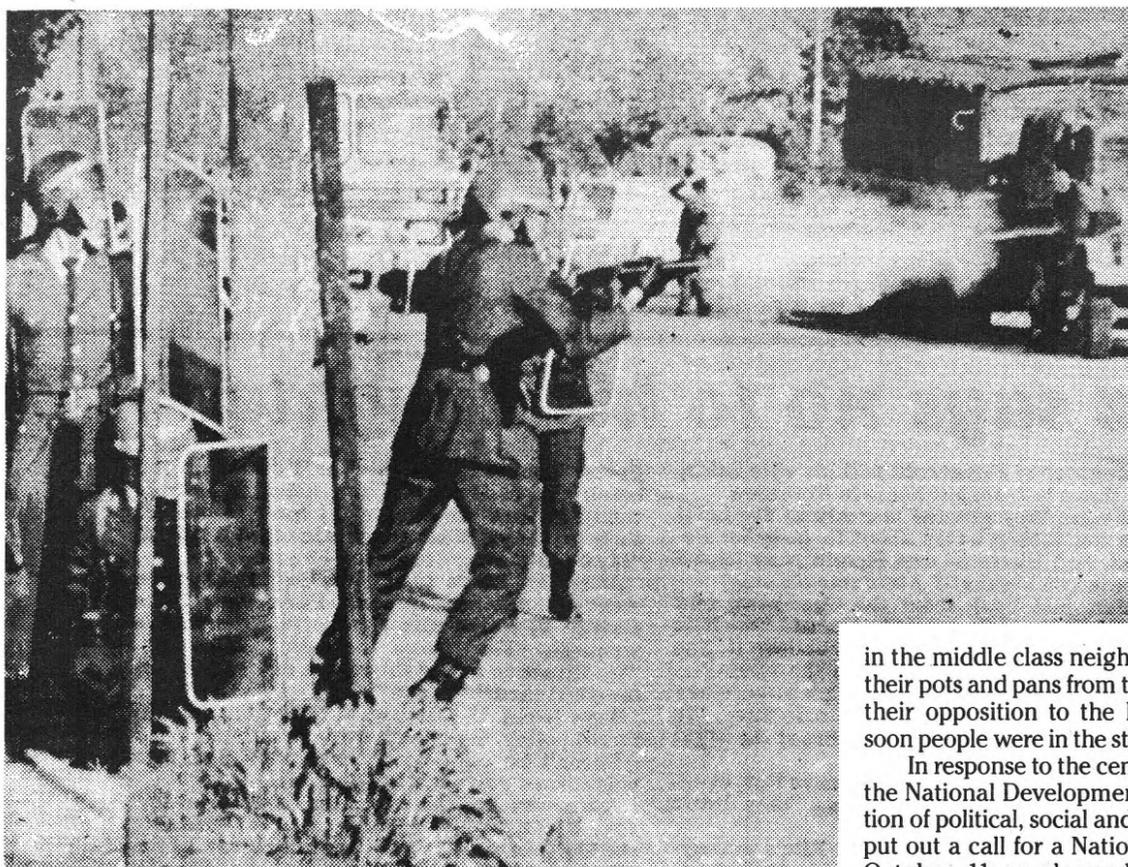
At the beginning of the presentation, we stressed the need to be solution-oriented to our water problems, solution-oriented so we can effect social change. That is why we established a South Valley water hot-line number 873-AGUA, and we came today to present a concrete solution to our water problems.

#### People's Solution

*What do we see as an immediate solution?* To insure quality water in the South Valley, we need a comprehensive water testing/monitoring system where people can go and have their water tested and where field workers can go into target areas and do sampling. We need to nip the contamination, illnesses, asbestos and PCBs problem in the bud. A comprehensive, systematic water testing/monitoring system would do just that. A system that would have a scientific approach towards documenting our problems instead of the helter-skelter or non-existent approach that exists now.

The county will not test your water if it is not sitting on a concrete slab. And the tests they do are only for bacteria, not contaminants. The State (EID) does tests but on a crisis-oriented and sporadic basis, when the harm has been done and when people are suffering.

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## *“Ten years of misery enough!”*

*Chile: largest, most militant anti-government protest ever*

in the middle class neighborhoods, to bang on their pots and pans from their balconies to show their opposition to the Pinochet regime. But soon people were in the streets in large numbers.

In response to the centrists' announcement, the National Development Project, a left coalition of political, social and human rights groups, put out a call for a National Day of Protest on October 11 as planned. They went out to organize in the shanty towns and poorer sections of the cities and were able to mobilize the largest demonstration in the 10 years of the fascist Pinochet dictatorship. Just 24 hours before the scheduled demonstration the government issued the permit.

### **“Ten years of misery enough”**

Among the speakers was Jorge Lavandero, former Senate president and a rally organizer, who said that people had come out in such large numbers to “tell the dictatorship that 10 years of persecution and misery were enough” and that soon Chile would emerge from “this long night of anguish and pain.”

During Lavandero's speech, the crowd erupted with cheers when Rudolpho Seguel, the young leader of the Copper Workers Union, arrived on the speakers' platform. Seguel has been arrested twice this year for his organizing activities. His most recent arrest sparked a wave of work stoppages at Chile's state-owned copper mines.

Also speaking at the rally was Fabiola Letelier, sister of the late Orlando Letelier, Foreign Minister in the Allende government, who was murdered in Washington in 1973. Ms. Letelier, a lawyer and human rights activist, charged the government with “terror against the people” and with “selling out the country to foreign capitalists.” She specifically pointed to the International Monetary Fund's plan to impose an austerity program on Chile, saying “while people slowly die of hunger, new credits from abroad are used almost entirely to repay debts incurred by powerful economic and financial groups.”

Many people who took part in the rally carried portraits of the late Marxist president Salvador Allende and chanted his name through the course of the demonstration.

### **Cracks in Ranks of Christian Democrats**

Among the 40,000 demonstrators were many people who identified themselves as members of the socialist and communist parties as well as other left organizations. But there were also many Christian Democrats and other centrist parties represented despite the fact that the Christian Democrats and the Democratic Alliance both officially refused to endorse the rally — evidence of the growing dissatisfaction and frustration with the Christian Democrats' inability to win reforms from the Pinochet regime through negotiation. It is unlikely that any concessions will be won in that way and more people are beginning to see the futility of limiting the struggle to negotiations alone. As the movement to oust Pinochet grows, it will be up to the left to lead the people to a real victory and real democracy. □

LOUISE FALCONE

**O**n October 11, more than 40,000 people gathered in Santiago, Chile for what turned out to be the largest and most militant of the monthly National Days of Protest. The protests did not end with the rally though. They continued in Santiago and other cities, as did the clashes with police, and lasted for the next two days. During the three-day period, 300 people were arrested, many more injured and five killed, one of them a police corporal. The death toll since the monthly demonstrations began in May now stands at 69.

In addition to demonstrations, there have been reports of clashes between students and police on three university campuses in Santiago as well as in the poorer sections of that city. In the San Miguel section of Santiago at least three people were seen throwing home-made bombs at the town hall.

Students also took to the streets in Valparaiso, 60 miles west of Santiago and in Concepcion, 320 miles south of Santiago. Fighting between police and students also broke out repeatedly in the days prior to the demonstrations in many areas.

### **Days of Protest Too Hot for Centrists**

In late September the centrist coalition (the Democratic Alliance) that had organized the previous Days of Protest announced that they would not organize another demonstration. They were apparently intimidated by the governments' refusal to issue a permit for another rally and by their own inability to control the militancy of the crowds.

These days of protest had begun with the Democratic Alliance calling for people, mainly

## Land Fight

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Why does the South Valley merit such a comprehensive system? For one, all people should have assurances of good quality water in an advanced technological society. But what is particular to our community is the shallow water table, coupled with a dense population (80,000 people at the least). On top of this we have had case histories of water contamination and a disproportionate number of water-borne diseases. Our children deserve better.

We cannot continue to allow the degradation of our health and standard of living of our community. We cannot tolerate the undue economic hardships which this problem is creating, for even though our community is a proud and traditional one, it is an impoverished one as well.

We cannot be complacent with studies on and about our problems. We need resources, material and human, to deal concretely with our water problems. A comprehensive *water testing/monitoring system* whose services are directly accessible and of no cost to our community is just that. We are willing to work with the legislature in securing this project for our community. □