



Chicano students



and community



fighting for



educational



rights

Chicano students and community fighting for educational rights

Contents

Pushing open the doors to education . . 1

From Unity, February 21, 1986

A program of struggle for Chicano . . . 9 students

By the League of Revolutionary Struggle
From Unity, February 21, 1986

Pushing open the doors to education

Contributed



The battle for Chicano educational rights is heating up throughout the country. While Reagan talks about the “great gains” “hispanics” have made under his administration, he has cut back student loans, undermined special admissions programs, attacked bilingual education, and eroded teacher training programs. In short, Reagan and the reactionary politics which he represents is trying to “turn back the clock” to the “good old days” when Chicanos knew “their place” — at the bottom of the economic and social ladder.

Just how bad is it for Chicanos? Let’s take a quick tour of the country.

In Michigan, we spoke with the parents of a young Chicana. María is eight years old. She should be in school. Instead, she works alongside her older brother in the fields. Her parents are migrants who travel throughout the Midwest each year. As her father explains, “María can help us pick crops. It’s a little extra money for the family. Besides, by the time we have her in school, we have to move on to another town and another crop.”

Joaquin is 19. He is a janitor in Phoenix. Joaquin dropped out of school in the ninth grade. “I spoke Spanish when I started school. The teacher made fun of my accent and that hurt. I just stopped talking. I fell so far behind that I couldn’t see any point in continuing. I can’t read or write — English or Spanish. At least my parents can read and write Spanish. I feel cheated.”

The crisis of Chicano education

Chicanos are the fastest growing nationality in the country. Since 1970 the number of Chicanos has nearly doubled to roughly 18 million — most of whom live in the Southwest. The median age of Chicanos is only 18 years old. The Chicano population is expected to double again by 2010. Add to this the near certainty of increased immigration from Mexico and Central America, and it is clear that Chicanos will increase their size and political clout in the next

two to three decades.

By the year 2000 Chicanos will be the largest ethnic group in California. In Los Angeles, Chicanos and Latinos already account for 54% of the huge Los Angeles Unified School District and account for 60% of students K through 6th grade. But how many of these Chicano youth have a chance to go to college? Let's review the facts:

- Almost half of all Chicano students drop out or are forced out of school before graduating from high school.

- By third grade, 80% of all Chicano students fluent in English are below grade level. By sixth grade they lag two full years behind Anglo sixth-graders. By tenth grade the gap is as much as three academic years.

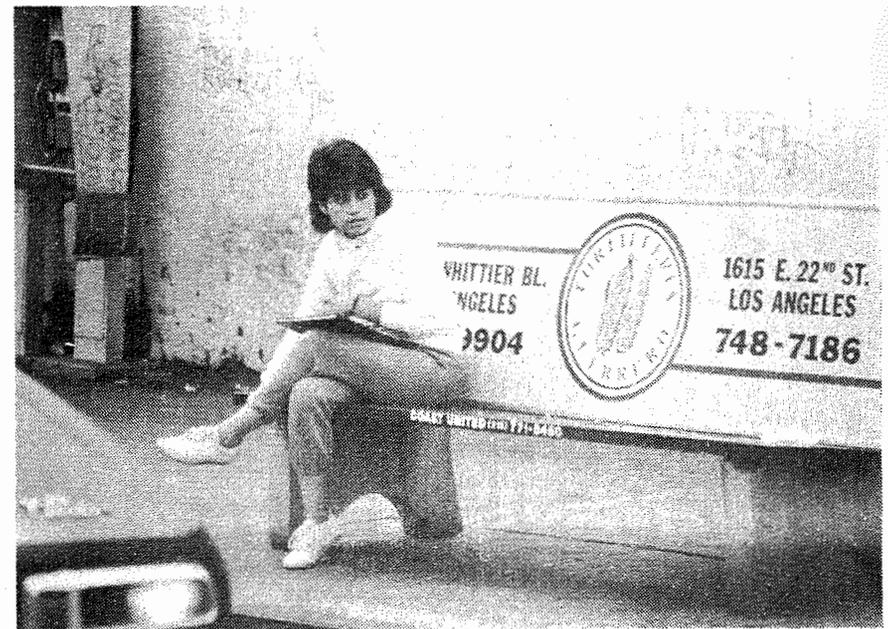
- Because of tracking systems seven out of ten Chicanos end up in vocational education courses. Three out of four Chicano high school graduates do not meet requirements for four-year colleges and universities. Only 25% have taken Algebra I and fewer than 10% have taken trigonometry and calculus.

- Of all Chicanos in California who manage to graduate from high school, only 15.1% are eligible for admissions to the California State University system. Of these only 2.9% enroll. By 1988, with new requirements at the Cal State level, as few as 5% of all Chicano high school graduates will qualify for state college and university admissions.

- Only 5% of all teachers in the Southwest are Chicano. Texas and California — the two states with the largest Chicano populations — now require certification tests for all new teachers. Four out of every ten Chicanos who have graduated from state colleges and universities and have completed graduate study in education are failing these culturally biased "skills" tests and are being denied certification until they pass.

Separate and unequal

The conditions Chicano youth face in the schools are some of the worst in the country. Schools are deteriorated and overcrowded. Equipment is outdated or not replaced when broken. Funds for schools with high con-



About 40% of Chicanos are under 18, and these youth are coming of age at a time when college doors are closing on them.

centrations of Chicanos have been reduced.

A 1984 survey of Sunbelt cities found heavily segregated Chicano neighborhoods and schools in Los Angeles, San Jose, Houston, Phoenix and Denver. Comparisons of urban and suburban Chicano neighborhoods found increased segregation from 1970 to 1980. Metropolitan segregation rose in Houston by 20% and in Phoenix by 15%. In California, a 1985 study found Chicanos to be "the most racially isolated students in the state" because of segregated housing patterns.

Racially segregated, inner city schools have historically meant poorly equipped facilities and offer substandard education. Students at San Jose High School (which is 85% Chicano) have only two working microscopes for science labs, compared to predominantly Anglo Southside schools, which average one microscope for every two science students. In Los Angeles, a 1985 survey found unequal expenditures of school district funds, with an average per student per day expenditure of \$75 for schools that are predominantly white and only a \$55 per student per day expenditure in

schools which are predominantly Chicano or Black.

Even when school districts undergo court-ordered integration programs (as is the case in San Jose), often "desegregation" means improving urban schools for white students. As one parent explained, "They were going to close San Jose High School. We stopped them from that. Now, they plan to make it a 'magnet school' with 'high-tech' classes. But they're going to limit the number of Chicanos who can attend. We live around the corner from the school, but my kids might have to ride a bus for 45 minutes each way just to go to school. That's not what we fought for!"

Worse, desegregation programs can be used to disperse Spanish-speaking students throughout an entire district. School districts sometimes use this tactic to break up bilingual education programs.

As one Chicano parent in East Los Angeles told me, "In the South they called it 'separate but equal.' But there's never been equality on any terms for Blacks or for us."

Who's to blame?

Reagan and right-wing social scientists and educators are quick to blame Chicanos for their poor performance in education. According to this logic, Chicano students "lack motivation" compared to white students. Some argue that the fault lies with parents who "don't take sufficient interest in their children's education."

But the real problem lies elsewhere — in a racist system that systematically excludes Chicanos from educational political rights. Chicanos are part of an oppressed nation. Their land was stolen by the U.S. in 1848 in a brutal war of aggression. After the Chicanos lost political power, they no longer controlled the courts or legislature. Schools which were built by Mexicans were taken over by the Anglos. Suddenly, the "official" language of the land became English and Chicanos were made "foreigners" on their own soil.

Chicanos have suffered discrimination as part of their oppression as a people. They have been forced to adopt a new language and receive an education in that language. Often Chicanos have been kicked out of school or even

beaten for speaking Spanish in class. Racist principals, counselors and teachers have discriminated against Chicanos, tracking them into vocational education programs — even when the students wanted college preparatory classes.

Ironically, Chicanos are growing in size and influence precisely at the time when the U.S. empire is shrinking — facing diminishing influence, and competition from abroad. Together with a staggering national debt and worsening trade balance, this has forced the U.S. to reassess its traditional "liberal" solutions.

The rise of Reaganism in the '80's saw a traditional "back-to-basics" approach in education and the wholesale dismantling of social programs such as affirmative action, special admissions and financial aid programs. The capitalists continue to need a large pool of semiskilled and unskilled workers who can fill the low-paying jobs of the service and high-tech industries. Chicanos and other minorities are being slotted to fill these positions — thrown onto the job market with only minimal educational skills.

According to Reagan and the capitalists, the U.S. can no longer afford the "luxury" of providing free quality education while at the same time keeping a strong military. Billions are spent to modernize the armed forces, building high-tech tanks and "Star Wars" weaponry instead of investing in the education of youth.

But even with the crisis of imperialism, the capitalists have monies which they could allocate to Chicano education and yet have not. In California, for example, Governor George Deukmejian boasts of a \$1.3 billion reserve, part of which could be used for school construction or for the upgrading of classrooms and equipment. To free up these funds for improving Chicano education requires a strong and powerful political movement which will force the government to allocate funds for Chicano education.

Education and political power

The current crisis in education for Chicanos reflects the lack of political power of the Chicano people. Chicanos



MEChA continues to be the rallying force behind many of the mass struggles on the campuses for Chicano educational rights and progressive issues.

as an oppressed nation must have the right to self-determination. That is, Chicanos must have the right to self-rule in the Southwest. Instead Chicanos have been systematically stripped of political power.

Districts are carved up through gerrymandering to dilute the Chicano vote. Many elections, especially for school boards, are based on at-large elections rather than voting by district. This process favors candidates with the most money or financial and political backing. This is one reason that the city of San Francisco has no Latino on the Board of Supervisors despite the large Latino population in that city.

To improve the level of Chicano education, Chicanos must have increased political power. They must have greater political representation in the U.S. Senate and Congress. Nationwide there are only 12 Latino congressional representatives and not one U.S. senator, despite the fact that these bodies make decisions for allocating billions of dollars that Chicanos and Latinos have paid in taxes but over which they have little or no say.

Similar under-representation exists in every state legislature in the Southwest and in most major cities in the country. The recent election of Richard Alatorre to the Los Angeles City Council represented only the second time in 40 years a Chicano has served on that body despite the fact that Los Angeles has the largest concentration of Chicanos in the country.

But the clearest area of under-representation is in the education arena. Of over 500 school district superintendents in California only 3% are Chicano. Of the 5,000 school board members throughout that same state less than 5% are Chicano.

Building the struggle

The facts speak for themselves. The system of education has failed Chicanos. It prepares Chicanos only for a life of misery and exploitation working in unskilled and semi-skilled industries. It is clear that Chicanos must organize for their educational rights. The lack of educational opportunity affects the entire Chicano Nation. The level of health care in the community suffers because there are so few Chicano doctors. Chicanos suffer under a judicial system when there are so few Chicano judges and lawyers.

In effect, educational rights is a struggle of the entire Chicano people. It affects the lives of Chicano children and of their parents. It affects the well-being of the entire Chicano nation. The fight to improve the quality of Chicano education must be a priority for the Chicano Movement, bringing together every stratum of that movement. It must include students and parents, professionals, Chicano workers and every other sector of the Chicano nation.

How can the battle be won? First, Chicanos must take up the struggle on the local level to run and control schools in the Chicano neighborhoods. This means taking control of school boards that hire teachers and administrators and decide how district money will be spent. The school boards must be forced to grant more money to minority and working class neighborhoods. If schools in Chicano and poor neighborhoods are overcrowded, more schools must be built

— even if it means closing or selling some schools in white neighborhoods where there is low occupancy in order to get sufficient funds.

Second, we must fight to elect more Chicanos to state assemblies and to Congress and to hold accountable any elected officials — whatever their nationality — who represent districts with a sizable Chicano constituency.

Third, it means the rules of the game must be changed. A battle must be waged to end at-large elections and gerrymandered districts. The bilingual ballot must be retained. The Chicano Movement must continue to insure that the Voting Rights Act is enforced throughout the Southwest.

We must broaden the political power of Chicanos and Latinos by extending the vote, particularly in school board elections, to all parents regardless of immigration status. Undocumented immigrants make up as much as 40% of the Chicano/Mexicano population in the large urban centers of the Southwest. They pay taxes and are concerned about their children's education, yet have no right to vote under current laws.

Finally, Chicanos must seek out allies with other nationalities. For example, Asian Americans strongly support bilingual education and should be allies of the Chicano people on the struggle to retain bilingual education.

At the base of the struggle for Chicano educational rights is a struggle too against the system of capitalism — a system which places profits over people, a system which uses its military might to oppress other nations throughout the third world to protect profits for the capitalists.

The doors to education are blocked for Chicanos. But they will not remain closed forever. Chicanos are determined to have their educational rights one way or another. If it cannot be by knocking on the door, then it will be by knocking down those doors.

A program of struggle for Chicano students

League of Revolutionary Struggle

The following is excerpted from a longer program for educational rights from the *League of Revolutionary Struggle*, a multinational Marxist-Leninist organization active in the struggle for educational rights. The full text can be found in the League's Chicano student pamphlet, **Education is a right, not a privilege.**

1. Full democratic control of all educational institutions within the Chicano nation by Chicanos.
2. Democratic local and administrative control of all educational institutions by Chicanos in those areas outside the Chicano nation where they form large concentrations.
3. Equal status for Mexicanos and other Latinos at all levels of education inside and outside of the Chicano nation.
4. Full equality for the Spanish language and Chicano culture.
5. An end to tracking in the public schools.
6. Financial assistance for Chicanos in need throughout all educational levels.

7. Open admissions with a minimum of parity for all Chicano students and other oppressed nationality students to publicly financed four-year colleges.

8. An end to attacks on community colleges in Chicano and other oppressed nationality communities.

9. Extra attention to Chicanas at all levels of education.

10. That Chicanos Studies be maintained and expanded.

11. An increase in hiring, promotion and tenure of Chicano faculty, staff and administration.

12. College credits for work and life experience for Chicano students.

13. That all forms of support services beneficial to Chicanos and other oppressed nationality students be maintained and expanded.

14. Greater Chicano student representation in student government.

15. An end to racist harassment and attacks upon Chicano students on campus.

16. Campbell's, Coors beer and scab grapes off campus.

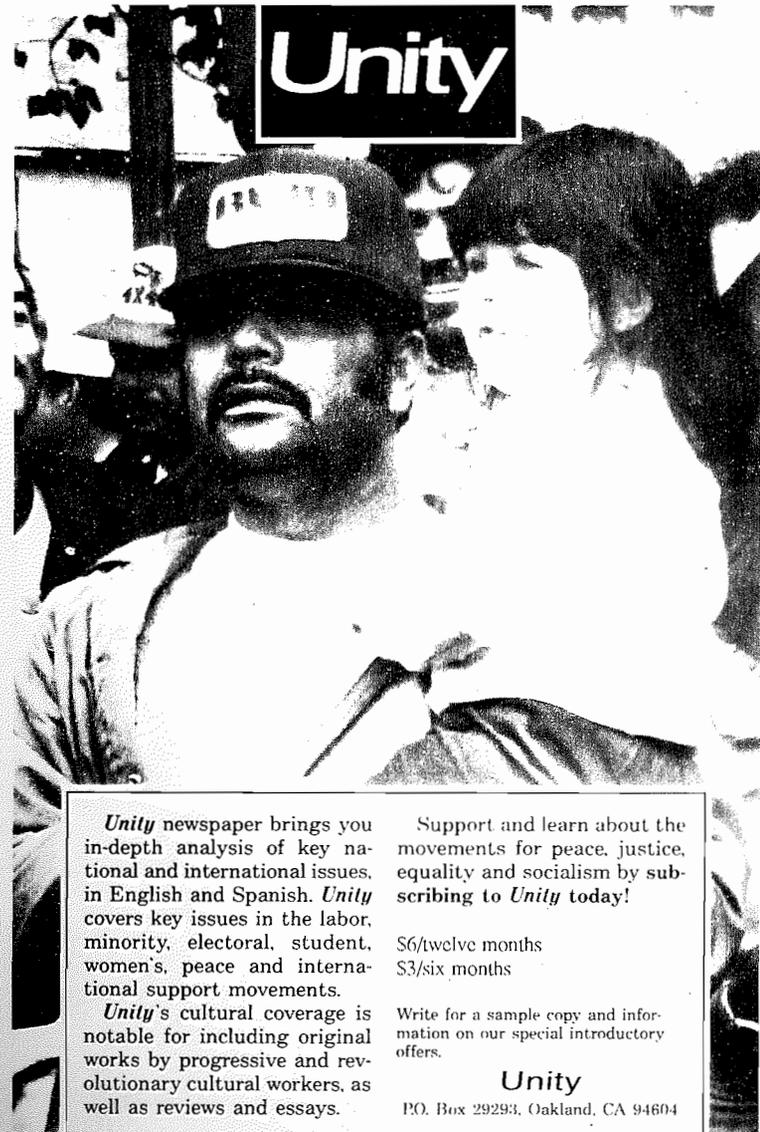
17. that Cinco de Mayo, August 29 (anniversary of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium Against the War), and other major historical and cultural days become recognized campus holidays which are celebrated on campuses throughout the Southwest.

18. That the college campuses become sanctuaries for Central American refugees fleeing political persecution.

19. Divestment of all university funds from corporations and banks doing business in South Africa.

20. No reprisals or academic disciplinary actions against students involved in political protest.

21. An end to ROTC programs, military and CIA recruiting on campus.



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Published by ***Unity Publications***
P.O. Box 29293
Oakland, California 94604