

# **Viva MEChA!**

A personal history of the  
Chicano student movement

and

**The  
significance  
of  
El Plan de  
Santa Barbara**

A personal history

# Viva MEChA!

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## Viva MEChA!

A personal history of the Chicano student movement

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**A**s Chicano students prepare for their seventh annual National Chicano Student Conference (March 14-16 at UC Berkeley), I was struck that some who will be there were just starting grade school when UMAS (United Mexican American Students) and MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) were first established.

After nearly 20 years, the Chicano student movement remains a strong and vibrant part of the Chicano Movement. The MEChAs play an important role in the struggle for equality, political power and self-determination. Many leaders of national and statewide Chicano/Latino organizations first learned about the movement through their experience in MEChA and in struggles on the campuses.

As this year's conference takes place, the Reagan administration and right-wing forces have launched a broadside attack against the Chicano people. Reagan is attacking bilingual education, cutting back on student loans, eliminating special admissions and opposing affirmative action. He is

(Facing page) "...we do not come to work for the university, but to demand that the university work for our people."



East Los Angeles August 29, 1980

spending billions on the military, and under the guise of “fighting communism,” he is attacking the sovereign rights of the people of Nicaragua and propping up various unpopular dictators. He is continuing draft registration so the U.S. can send our youth around the world to protect the property and profits of U.S. corporations.

These attacks have not gone unnoticed among Chicano students. MEChA and the entire Chicano student movement are undergoing an upsurge. Students have re-established Chicano student organizations at campuses which have not had them for years. They are building strong regional and statewide ties. They are strengthening ties throughout the Southwest and with campuses on the East Coast. As Chicano students prepare to establish a national Chicano student network, I offer this brief personal history of the Chicano student movement in hopes that it will help in that process.

### **The turbulent '60's**

Chicano students did not always have an organization

to fight for their political rights. In fact, it wasn't until the late 1960's and early 1970's that Chicanos began to enter colleges and universities in any large numbers. We were the product of the post-World War II “baby boom,” as Chicano veterans returned to raise families and struggle for equality and a better education for their children.

When I entered UCLA in 1966, there were less than 40 Latino students on a campus of nearly 30,000. By the time I graduated in 1970, there were nearly a thousand. The numbers of Chicano students rose dramatically at campuses across the Southwest, but only as a result of fierce struggle with university administrations — sometimes violent, usually peaceful, but always determined to open up the “lily-white doors” of higher education.

The 1960's were times of world revolution and rebellion, and the campuses were no different. Sit-ins and protests were commonplace. Our knowledge that oppressed nations around the world were rising up against imperialism inspired us. China in 1949. Cuba in 1959. Africa, Asia, Latin America — the entire third world — was raising its head, proudly proclaiming independence and self-determination. The old colonial giants were shaking.

The people's hunger for freedom and equality reached into the bowels of imperialism itself. Birmingham, Alabama, was thrust into the world limelight as African Americans and whites marched together against racist “Jim Crow” segregation. I remember my anger as I watched a TV news report of Black protesters being attacked by vicious police dogs and bludgeoned with police sticks. I grew up knowing deep in my heart that it was an act of great moral courage to protest inequality — even if it meant breaking an unjust law.

Our heroes were Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, Che Guevara and Mao Zedong, César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. We sought to emulate them — to be willing, if necessary, to give our lives so that our people could be free.

And so the cry for Chicano liberation gave rise to the first Chicano student organizations back in 1966-69. Most of us then entering college then were the first in our families

to go to college. Our parents were farm workers, cannery workers, autoworkers, steel workers, cooks and secretaries. So when César Chávez and the farm workers began their long battle for union recognition, naturally, Chicano students were quick to respond. Often grape boycott committees brought together the handful of Chicano students to form their first campus organization.

I first became active in UMAS in my sophomore year in response to the severe racism at UCLA. A fraternity held a "Viva Zapata!" party, draping a Mexican flag with a "finger" replacing the eagle and captioned with "No Mexicans Allowed." Chicano students sought each other out. We confronted the administration and forced the suspension of the fraternity.

The incident sparked a broader struggle for our rights as Chicano students. We fought for increased Chicano student enrollment and demanded open admissions. With Black and Asian students, we won a special admissions program based not only on academic achievement, but also on minority students' commitment to return to their communities.

Throughout the Southwest, similar struggles were taking place. Soon each campus had its Chicano organization — MEChA, UMAS, MAYO (Mexican American Youth Organization), CSU (Chicano Student Union), MASC (Mexican American Student Confederation), and so on. We worked together on a regional and statewide basis. We formed a Central in Los Angeles to support the struggle to improve the East Los Angeles high schools. Statewide, we formed task forces to monitor Chicano recruitment.

In 1969 at a conference in Santa Barbara, the first statewide Chicano student organization was developed and one name was adopted for all Chicano student organizations in California — MEChA. There, Chicano students, faculty and staff joined together to write *El Plan de Santa Barbara*. *El Plan* was a "manifesto" addressing the major issues of the day affecting Chicano students. It connected the struggle of Chicano students for higher education to the struggle of the Chicano people for their liberation.

*El Plan* was the most progressive statement to emerge



Chicano leaders like César Chávez of the United Farm Workers inspired Chicano students.

from the Chicano student movement at the time. It underscored our pride in being Chicanos and the importance of affirming our identity, and served as a program for the Chicano student movement of that period.

For example, we provided a sample curriculum for Chicano Studies and a proposal for establishing a *Mesa Directiva* (steering committee) to ensure that these programs would be controlled by Chicano students and faculty. *El Plan* also tried to summarize our experience in campus organizing and in building coalitions.

Today, *El Plan* serves as an important historical document for the Chicano Movement. Of course, many conditions have changed since 1969, and *El Plan* does not address how to struggle in today's climate of right-wing reaction and open attacks on the gains of the 1960's. Even so, it remains an inspiration.

The late 1960's was also a period of ideological debate. Many activists in the MEChAs were searching for the path for Chicano liberation. Some defined self-determination as simply Chicano control over community institutions or



1,500 attended the historic Denver Chicano Youth Conference, March, 27, 1969.

Chicano Studies departments. Some felt our people could be liberated solely through getting more Chicanos into college and professional school. Others even promoted Chicano capitalism as the path for Chicano liberation. Still others advocated "narrow nationalism," discouraging MEChA from seeking alliances with other Third World and progressive students.

I was among the growing number of Mechistas who began to question whether our equality and self-determination could be won under the present social system, without wiping out the system of imperialism, which we saw as responsible for our oppression as a people. We saw many parallels between our experiences and those of oppressed nations in the third world, and we began to realize that in almost every case, the successful national liberation struggles were being led by Marxists.

Increasingly, activists within the Chicano Movement and the MEChAs began to call themselves Marxists or socialists and to study and apply Marxism-Leninism and revolutionary theory. It was in this period that I became a Marxist.

### Upsurge in the 1970's

The high point of the Chicano Movement had to be the August 29, 1970, Chicano Moratorium Against the Viet Nam War, the largest Chicano demonstration in history. Chicano students from all over the country came to Los Angeles to participate. UMAS from Boulder, Colorado, MAYO from University of Texas at El Paso, even the Puerto Rican Student Union from New York, joined in the giant march of 25,000. MEChAs throughout California helped organize the event. We linked the struggle against U.S. aggression in Viet Nam to the struggle for Chicano self-determination in the U.S. Thus, we chanted "Nuestra Guerra Está Aquí, No Está en Viet Nam!" ("Our War is Here, Not in Viet Nam!") and "Viet Nam y Aztlán — los dos Vencerán!" ("Viet Nam and Aztlán — Both will Win!")

After the Moratorium, the Chicano Movement went through a short decline. We had been viciously attacked by the police and courts. Many of our leaders were constantly harassed — some jailed, others killed. The police and FBI tried desperately to split our movement. They used undercover agents and provocateurs to infiltrate our organizations and plant evidence which could later be used to discredit our movement.

When these tactics failed, the government tried bribes such as high-paying jobs "representing" minority communities. The capitalists even tried to split off well-known Chicano leaders from the masses. They spread rumors and lies — even redbaiting people like César Chávez and Martin Luther King Jr.

The Chicano Movement rejected redbaiting, and the ploys failed to stop the movement. But these tactics weakened the Chicano and Black movements during the period from 1970-73.

The MEChAs continued to be active, but their influence declined. Student-run programs were replaced by part-time paid staff controlled by EOP or Ethnic Studies. Although these programs had been established by students, the universities moved quickly to control them.

Between 1970-74, Mechistas took up several important struggles. Many Chicano students joined La Raza Unida

Party (LRUP) and helped in voter registration. Although its influence has significantly declined, LRUP then was an active force carrying out day-to-day organizing as well as running for local offices. In 1972, the Farah garment strike began and UMAS and MEChA helped set up a national tour of strikers. Many campus organizations formed boycott committees to help the mainly Chicana Farah workers.

During these years, many Chicano activists gravitated toward Marxism and revolutionary ideas. Many leaders of MEChA promoted socialism and took up study of Marxism-Leninism. In 1974, the August 29th Movement (Marxist-Leninist) was formed — the first national Chicano Marxist-Leninist organization in U.S. history. Many MEChA activists joined ATM and other Marxist-Leninist organizations.

By 1976, the Chicano student movement was experiencing an upsurge. On September 16, 1976, the California Supreme Court upheld Allan Bakke's claim that he had been the victim of "reverse discrimination" when he was refused admittance to the U.C. Davis Medical School. The case became the legal rationale for a full-scale racist assault on affirmative action and special admissions.

The struggle to overturn the Bakke decision galvanized the Chicano student movement. MEChAs organized campus protests and joined coalitions with community groups. Throughout 1977, the MEChAs organized statewide and regional meetings. A statewide rally in Los Angeles drew over 2,000 Chicano students and community groups. With Asian student organizations, MEChA initiated a multinational coalition of student, community, and labor groups to fight Bakke and to uphold special admissions and affirmative action. The Anti-Bakke Decision Coalition spearheaded the struggle against Bakke in California and eventually expanded throughout the country.

MEChA has always had to fight attacks on its integrity and survival, usually from racist administrators or the government. Ironically, it was during this period of upsurge when some members of MEChA attempted to split the organization. These attacks could have weakened the Chicano student movement. Instead, the vast majority of



MEChA played a leading role in the Anti-Bakke Decision Coalition (ABDC). Here, ABDC rally October 15, 1977, in San Francisco.

Mechistas used the struggle to strengthen their organization and rejected those who would have destroyed MEChA.

CASA (the Center for Autonomous Social Action), for example, attempted to form their own organization, CEP (Comité Estudiantil del Pueblo), and attacked MEChA as too "narrow." CASA rejected the term "Chicano" and saw the Chicano Movement as "weakening the revolutionary struggle in Mexico," which they saw as their priority. CASA proclaimed themselves the "vanguard of the Mexican proletarian movement in the U.S." and hoped to build CEP as their own student organization.

When CEP failed, CASistas joined MEChA but tried to make MEChA subservient to CASA. They argued that students didn't have time to organize rallies. By this logic, the anti-Bakke struggle could only succeed if run by CASA. CASistas physically threatened and assaulted students who disagreed with them. They even resorted to redbaiting to the university administration some progressive faculty and staff who dared to stand up against their divisive tactics. CASA attempted to cover their actions by claiming that

the real culprit was the August 29th Movement, which in fact was helping to build the MEChAs and was one of the main forces in the anti-Bakke struggle.

Despite these attacks, MEChA grew into a strong and effective political organization. Through the course of the anti-Bakke struggle, MEChA in California developed its current statewide infrastructure — the centrales, regionals, liaison committee and task forces. These various forms of organization facilitated communication and joint action and are the reason that the California MEChAs today are among the strongest in the country.

### **MEChA goes national**

In 1979, the first National Chicano Student Conference (NCSC) was held in Colorado to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the 1969 Denver Youth Conference. Chicano students from all over the Southwest had pledged to meet annually and to begin work for the tenth anniversary of the 1970 Chicano Moratorium. In 1980, Chicano students from Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and California organized for the rally, which drew over 6,000 Chicanos to East Los Angeles under the banner "Tierra, Libertad y Unidad — Self-Determination for the Chicano Nation!"

Since 1979, Chicano students have organized national conferences in each of the southwestern states. In 1980, the Albuquerque Conference was disrupted by members of the Communist Workers Party. They took over the microphones and attempted to prevent MEChA members from adopting resolutions which they disagreed with. When that failed, they walked out condemning the conference.

While this type of disruption is unfortunate, it has never deterred MEChA or the Chicano student movement from the tasks of fighting the real enemies — campus administration, the government and the capitalists. In fact, overwhelmingly the resolutions that were adopted at the 1980 NCSC addressed the many struggles facing Chicanos on the campuses and in the community, including building communications and networking.

The following 1981 NCSC was held in Arizona and was

attended by over 500 Chicano students. And annually since then, the NCSC has continued to meet, gathering Chicano students from all parts of the Southwest. This reflects the determination of the Chicano student movement to organize, build unity, and allow for differing views, whether from the left, middle or right. It has seen the struggle over differences as part of a process which strengthens organizational unity.

Last year, for example, I was keynote speaker at the Arizona NCSC and was impressed by the determination of Chicano students to learn from each other and respect differences of opinion. Conference organizers were able to avert a potential walkout when the entire New Mexico contingent — which was overwhelmingly Republican — opposed the NCSC's anti-Reagan stance. They were convinced to remain, however, when the call was made for unity and all participants were reminded of the importance of keeping the NCSC as a viable organization. The New Mexico contingent realized that despite their disagreements, they had a common interest in remaining a part of the NCSC and building the nationwide struggle for Chicano educational rights.

As MEChA enters its seventh annual NCSC, it is confronted by tremendous tasks. The Reagan administration and the right wing have accelerated their attacks on Chicano students. The clock is quickly being turned back to the days when there were handfuls of Chicano students on the campuses. But Reagan cannot turn back time. To do so, he would have to face the anger and energy of the Chicano student movement. The struggle of Chicano students over the next few years will be arduous. But the Chicano student movement is up to the task.

**Viva MEChA! La Unión Hace La Fuerza!**



# The significance of El Plan de Santa Barbara

A personal history

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Ben Garza

**A**uthor Ben Garza is a signatory to El Plan de Santa Barbara. He was a University of California, Davis, delegate to the historic April 1969 conference in Santa Barbara, California, which drafted El Plan. This manifesto on Education became the founding perspective of the California statewide MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán — Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán).

In the 1950's when I was growing up in South Tejas, I could see in my *carnales y carnalas* a burning desire for education. They, too, dreamed of becoming lawyers, teachers, doctors and engineers. But we were the children of migrant farm workers and packing shed workers whose dreams died with us amidst the hard work which was our daily life.

We knew the worst act of oppression the rich capitalist government of Eisenhower could carry out against La Raza was to deny us the right to a decent education. Keeping Chicanos ignorant and oppressed, while exploiting our labor, has always been the basis for maintaining the capitalists in power. So we were left to the lowest-paying jobs as farm workers, packing shed workers, maids and janitors, or to fight and die for U.S. imperialism in Viet Nam.

It was against these conditions that the Chicano Liberation Movement grew, and the first to respond were the poorest in the fields and *varrios* — the *campesinos* and urban Chicano working class people.

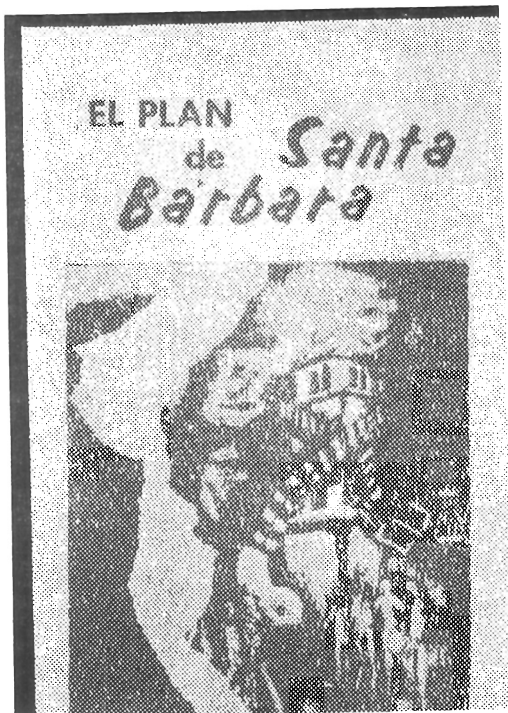
These older Chicano revolutionaries made education the key to Chicano Power, Liberation and Self-determination. They encouraged people like myself to organize Chicano youth organizations in the *varrios* and schools.

But our forces were still scattered, so the call was made to centralize the statewide Chicano student *movimiento* in Santa Barbara, April 1969. Today this is known as *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, and this manifesto around Education is the product that the best Chicano minds of that heyday could produce — given our level of consciousness — to unify Chicano students.

Even in 1970, the Manifesto takes a clear stand against capitalism, racism, and proclaims that “Chicanismo simply embodies an ancient truth: that man is never closer to his true self as when he is closer to his community.” We believed the new emerging Chicano intellectuals should never lose sight of where they came from — the *campesinos* and *obreros*.

We also believed that Chicano Education could not be bourgeois education, for the few and privileged. It had to be for all of La Raza! Here the germ of Chicano socialist thinking is so prevalent. The book even ends with the statement, “. . . we do not come to work for the university, but to demand that the university work for our people.”

It would do good for our present-day Chicano students to read *El Plan* because it may just surprise them that the very people drafting it were not only very revolutionary — they were already beginning to expound and lay the



foundation for Chicano socialist thought and socialist education for all the people of Aztlán.

In the chapter on "Organizing and Instituting Chicano Programs on Campus," it calls for MAYA, MASC, UMAS and other Chicano student organizations to adopt a unified name — either as CAUSA (Chicano Alliance for United Student Action) or MEChA, the name we finally adopted. Some of us took pride in the fact that MEChA means "spark," just as the great revolutionary Lenin's newspaper was named *Iskra*, meaning "spark."

But it is not in the interest of La Raza to dogmatically use *El Plan* as the last word in Chicano student organizing or to force every student generation to call themselves MEChA. This would divide rather than unify our forces. It is better that every generation of Chicano student activists update *El Plan*. In fact, those who drafted *El Plan* in 1969 felt it should be updated every five years, which it never was, and which it badly needs to fit in today's struggles in 1986.

In the "Political Action" chapter, *El Plan* speaks of

Chicanismo — cultural identity and self-awareness, a necessary step in developing political consciousness. It also points out that the concept of La Raza is internationalist enough to study from our brothers and sisters in Latin America. Like them, here in the U.S. we knew that for genuine liberation, it will take many people with many progressive ideologies to unite and win.

And in the last chapter are important words of advice to the Chicano Student Movement. It states that "the role of knowledge in producing powerful social change, indeed revolution, cannot be underestimated." It ends by stating, "the importance of forming an alliance between Chicano students, professionals and workers . . ." But today, this advice is being trampled on by those who call themselves stone Chicano nationalists.

These narrow nationalists expose their own ignorance of *El Plan* by saying that it was the *intention* of the drafters of *El Plan* to view socialist knowledge and Marxism-Leninism, and the alliance of students, workers and community as "too European." It might surprise them that some of the people writing *El Plan* were Marxist and were already reading the revolutionary knowledge of Che Guevara and Chairman Mao, not to mention Lenin and Marx.

But Chicano students should not be afraid of world knowledge which will help us to liberate our stolen lands or free our very own productive labor for the benefit of our *varrios*. The narrow nationalists raise their arguments as a ploy to keep us ignorant, just like the white capitalist has done. These *tapados* are afraid that our people's minds may grow to where they won't be able to control them.

It is *El Plan* which confirms that the Chicano Liberation Movement is not only struggling for our national liberation, but also in an internationalist arena on the side of the third world and against U.S. imperialism.

**¡Por mi Raza habla el espíritu!**

**¡Viva El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán!**

**¡Viva El Plan de Santa Barbara!**



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