

## Towards A Popular Front of Struggle for Higher Education & Chicano/a Studies

Unión del Barrio

*La Verdad Publications (2009-2010)*

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*Editor's Note: The following article is written by Unión del Barrio University students in San Diego as a response to the growing and escalated attacks on higher education as a result of the growing capitalist economic crisis. This analysis is meant to build a working class student movement to challenge these attacks. This article should be seen as an expansion to the article featured in the March-May 2009 issue of ¡La Verdad! entitled, "40 Years of Struggle: El Plan de Santa Barbara, MEChA & Chicano Studies", by reinforcing the importance of building broad coalitions on college campuses, involving the Chicano/a Studies Department and MEChA in order to defend the right of our Raza's ability to access higher education.*

### **Contemporary and Material Analysis of Higher Education**

Today the state of education is in a dire condition. For working class families all across the nation, dreams of a college education are being extinguished for reasons seemingly beyond their control. The larger capitalist economic crisis has resulted in numerous budget cuts and fee increases which together limit the ability of our communities' youth to attend college. This is the principal material contradiction that faces us as working class Raza in the U.S. with regards to higher education. To begin addressing this contradiction we may want to ask ourselves some questions? Who decides to make budget cuts and raise tuition fees? Why are these decisions made? And what role do poor and working class families have in these decisions?

We know that the decision to execute budget cuts and impose fee (tuition) increases is a right reserved exclusively for state legislatures (lawmakers). Once elected these individuals are free to make decisions independent of the poor and working class families that may or may not have elected them. For the working class in this political system, political inclusion stops at the ballot box. Even worse, many Raza families are further excluded politically by being denied the right to vote due to their citizenship status (regardless of how much money they continue to pay in taxes). Also, Raza communities are further marginalized through the political system as our communities have one of the highest youth indexes in the nation. This means that disproportionately more of our communities are composed of young people considered "too young" to vote for the people who will impact their future. For Raza communities, political accountability in the U.S. ended before the electoral process ever began.

We should realize that in this political system, while attacks on public education are constant, they are amplified when enacted against poor or working class people of color and even more so in times of economic crisis. Evidence of such can be seen in the history of public education of California. As a majority "white" state California continually developed the quantity and quality of educational institutions until the 1950's, at which time the state became a majority "minority" state. Since this time public education in the state has undergone multiple budget cuts while college fees continue to rise and graduation rates for poor and working class people of color continue to drop. Today the fastest growing communities in California are working class Raza communities. Rather than preparing to educate our young people, the state has elected

to decrease the quality of our public schools, raise the price of college while simultaneously building more prisons than schools. These decisions are not made in a vacuum and are directly related to the economic crisis in the U.S.

As a further example, on May 13, 2009 a 10% fee increase across the CSU system was approved (\$306 annually per student). As of July 21, 2009 CSU students will also be expected to pay an additional \$672 annually (\$728 for teaching credential students and \$828 for graduate students). This \$978 total increase is targeted at the state's most "affordable" university system and will impact almost 450,000 students statewide. The actual dollar amount of the first increase is expected to generate over \$153 million over the next two years while one third of this amount is allegedly being reserved to increase financial aid packages. Similarly, the second tuition increase is designed to cover one third of California's current deficit. Unlike the \$306 increase, no money will be set aside from the second increase to increase financial aid packages. Students and their families will have to pay the difference themselves. In addition to these fee increases, the UC system has been continually raising fees (tuition) as well. March 14, 2007 saw a 7% increase (an additional \$435 for undergraduates and \$483 for graduate students annually) while on May 7, 2009 the UC Board of Regents approved a 9.3% increase that will cost UC undergraduates an additional \$662 annually.

### ***The Capitalist Ruling Class Pays for their Crisis with our Misery***

The U.S. government acts in the political interest of the U.S. ruling class which is a capitalist class dependant on the labor and misery of working class families. All of the support given to the ruling class by the U.S. government (subsidies, "acquisition of foreign markets" also known as war, and most notoriously the \$700 billion dollar bailout) has to be paid by someone. Working class communities are paying for the capitalist class's welfare. Money is sucked from public education, health care, transportation and other public sources to pay for the financial survival of our oppressors; the capitalist class. These budget cuts and tuition increases are a way of shifting the economic burden of an unstable and erratic capitalist economy on to the politically disenfranchised working class for the benefit of the ruling capitalist class.

While many people are being affected by job layoffs, reduced work hours and lower wages, we recognize that working class students are getting hit hardest as less employment opportunities are available and the cost of education continues to rise. We already struggle daily to advance academically and now we will be forced to bear the burden of additional financial debt. This is why we demand a fair education instead of the massive government spending on the military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, or the continued financial backing for states that openly violate human rights such as Israel and Colombia, or the billions of dollars spent bailing out the thieves of Wall street, and of course the maintenance and expansion of the open wound of our Latin American continent known as the U.S./Mexico border region. In the face of these conditions, students everywhere should unite to stop fee increases and budget cuts and make institutions of higher educational accountable to working class communities.

### ***Where do we fit into this?***

For working class students in general and working class Raza students in particular it is important to understand where we fit into this developing educational crisis. It is not enough to simply recognize our

marginal position as divorced from political power and on the receiving end of educational attacks. We need to act! Chicana and Chicano students towards the end of the 1960's assessed the dire relationship between their communities and institutions of higher education and moved into action forming M.E.Ch.A. and Chicano Studies departments. Their actions were based on a contemporary material analysis and unified under the politics of Self-Determination as explained in the March-May issue of ¡La Verdad! (see 40 years of Struggle: El Plan de Santa Barbara, MEChA, & Chicano Studies).

Today we can reflect on the state of many Chicana and Chicano Studies departments within institutions of higher education. Apart from the criticisms posed in the last issue, we may find that many of these departments are critically underfunded in comparison to other academic departments on campus. Although we may have secured a foothold in the university through M.E.Ch.A. and Chicana and Chicano Studies departments, these spaces are under continuous attack materially and ideologically. If we are to successfully act in our own class interests with regards to higher education we need to engage in political struggle with as many allies as possible including but not limited to those in M.E.Ch.A. and Chicana and Chicano Studies departments committed to the politics of Self-Determination.

Similar to the Chicana and Chicano student organizers of 40 years ago, we need to transcend electoral politics at the campus and community level. As Unión del Barrio we firmly uphold the right of all working class people in general and of working class Raza in particular to Self-Determination regardless of age or immigration status. By Self-Determination we mean collectively interpreting our history, economically controlling our destiny, advancing our social development by self directing our cultural education and language, independently developing the content, character and direction of our political orientation, and controlling the political institutions that govern us. In order to achieve these goals we cannot rely on the state legislator. We cannot rely on the U.S. government's political processes. We must rely on ourselves, our fellow working class students and our communities committed and organized to overturning the oppressive conditions hanging over institutions of higher education.

### ***Where does Union del Barrio stand?***

As an organization dedicated to the National Liberation of our people, and who struggle for Raza Self-determination we know that all politics must be rooted in our communities' working class experiences. Based on the material conditions of the working class in our communities, in this case defined by; 1) the collective need for higher education in preparation for self-determined political action and, 2) the diminished ability to obtain such educational opportunities, we will be developing a theory and method of liberation at the collegiate level. Our intentions are to force state run institutions of higher education to reorganize around the needs and aspirations of working class people- in short, we demand a socialist plan for higher education.

As we struggle towards Self-Determination and socialism we must pay close attention to the tactics, or methods of struggle, that we use. Given the political realities of college and university campuses today, we seek to form and/or participate in mass coalitions based upon a dialectical understanding of the struggles shared by all students in general and of working class students in particular. While we recognize and uphold

the need to organize Raza students on campus as a central feature of our struggle, we also see the need to outreach and work with other oppressed nationalities and sectors. The use of such methods reflects; 1) our dialectic understanding of material conditions on college and university campuses, 2) the confidence we have in who we are and what we want outlined in our Political Program and, 3) the recognition of our strategic role as working class students who must be at the forefront of a broader struggle concerning higher education.

Student movements are formed through unity based on a shared understanding of what contradictions exist and what needs to be done to resolve them in addition to the shared responsibility of completing these tasks. A student movement is not something organized by one person or a small organization. Thus we intend to inform, empower and support the mass population of students through coalition building. Furthermore, we recognize that any revolutionary movement must have at its heart love and a desire to change conditions for the betterment of society and not the individual. Our desire is for a fair, free and relevant education for all! Like Ernesto “Che” Guevara once said: “At the risk of sounding ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.”

Unlike middle class students who may react to fee increases out of fear or anger, we, the working class Raza students of Unión del Barrio act out of profound feelings of love for our communities’ collective future. Thus we are poised to become leaders of popular struggle on the college and university front. In the midst of capitalism in crisis, now is the time to not only reclaim and support the spaces and institutions created 40 years ago, but to earn our position in the forefront of a popular struggle for higher education.

**¡Estudiantes revolucionarios, Adelante!**