

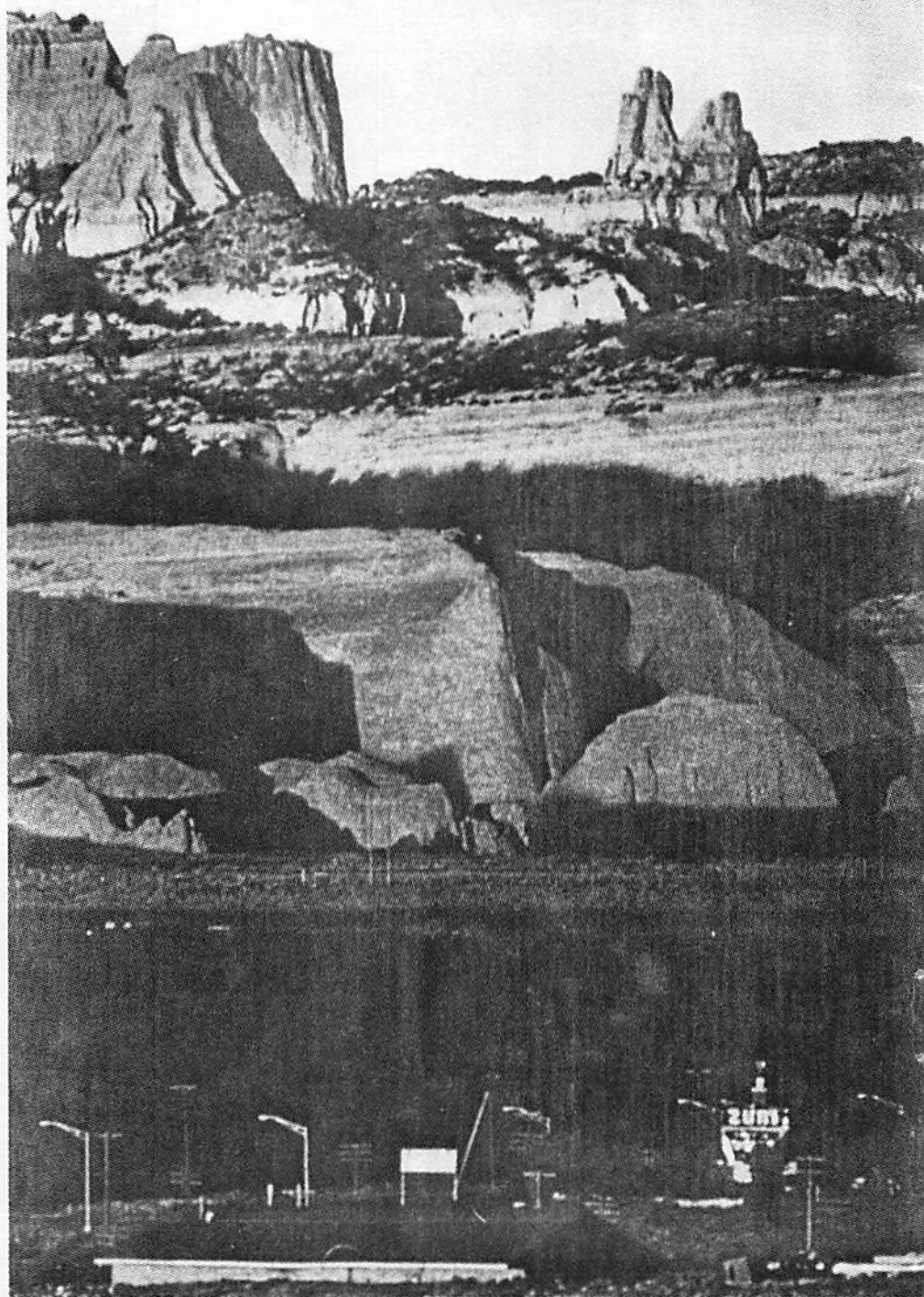
**Chicano
power:
The struggle
for
Chicano political
representation
and
empowerment
in the
Southwest**

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New Mexico: Chicanos shake up the system

Firsthand report from
southern New Mexico

Joe Navarro

Las Cruces, N.M. - New Mexico is called the Land of Enchantment but for Chicanos, Mexicanos and Native Americans, it has historically only offered disenchantment and disempowerment.

Even the official seal of New Mexico portrays a Mexican eagle being overshadowed by a larger American eagle. This is a bitter reminder of the forced annexation of northern Mexico and the subjugation of its people after the U.S. won the war against Mexico in 1848.

Today, Chicanos make up 37% of the state's 1.4 million residents but account for only 30% of the state legislature. On the local level of county and city government, at-large elections (elections held on a city-wide or countywide basis instead of by districts) and gerrymandering have blocked Chicano representation. Even though Chicanos constitute 30% to 50% of a county's population, they have little representation on the county commissions which decide tax rates, road repair, law enforcement, economic development and other government services.

(Facing page) The Mesilla Valley near Las Cruces.

But deep and striking changes are underway as the fight for the Chicano empowerment movement is gaining victories.

Chicanos will be going to the polls this November to elect Chicano county commissioners for the first time in Chaves, Curry, Otero and Doña Ana counties. These candidacies are the result of a sweeping 1985 state law which mandates district elections.

The situation in southern New Mexico is not totally unique. In many ways, it capsulizes the conditions that Chicanos face throughout the Southwest - conditions of brutal exploitation, inequality and racism, and denial of even the most basic democratic rights. The lack of democracy in this part of the Sunbelt cuts right through the farce of U.S. "democracy."

This fight for district elections and greater political representation for Chicanos is thus part of the struggle for democracy and self-determination. The Chicano and Mexicano people, along with the Native American Indian peoples, historically settled this land and have paid for it in blood, sweat and tears. They have the democratic right to decide how it should be governed and developed.

How district elections were won

In 1984 a series of lawsuits were filed throughout New Mexico to change the voting methods that have kept Chicanos from being elected to political office. This was particularly significant for southern New Mexico, especially in the southeast part.

Many Chicano activists are very supportive of the lawsuits. Among these is Dr. Arthur D. Martínez, who is a professor at the Western New Mexico State University who wrote a paper entitled "Single-Districting Versus At-Large Elections: A 'Parochial' Challenge to 'The Public Interest'?" Dr. Martínez wrote: "At-large elections favor candidates with the monetary resources to run extensive citywide campaigns. Consequently, critics assert that at-large elections diminish the political importance and participation of the racial and ethnic minorities in local politics. As a simple illustration, Chicanos concentrated in several wards of the city might easily elect council members from that group under single-numbered district elections. The same

group, since it constitutes only a minority of the (citywide) population, might go totally unrepresented in a city council chosen through at-large elections.”

This is actually the case in New Mexico. Several of the lawsuits were won by Chicano activists and the legislature, fearing high settlement costs, passed legislation in 1985 that mandated district elections in all cities, counties and school districts with populations of more than 10,000, 13,000 and 16,000 respectively. Governor Toney Anaya, a Chicano, supported the bill.

As a result there have been Chicano victories in Socorro, Chaves, Curry, Eddy, Luna, Grant, Roosevelt, Otero, and Doña Ana counties. Frank Sánchez, a Roswell Chicano voting-rights activist instrumental in the lawsuits, estimates that 15 to 20 Chicanos have been elected to city councils and school boards in 1985 as a result of the new law. Chicano activists in California are studying the law and Assemblywoman Gloria Molina will be sponsoring a bill for district elections next year.

At the heart of the fight for district elections is a demand for democracy and political power. It captures the progressive sentiment of Chicanos to control the future direction of the community, to assert demands for equality and justice.

An ongoing struggle

But once the law was passed, it was still a struggle. I talked with Mike Ordáz, a Chicano activist who was elected to the Silver City School Board. Previous to this election only two Chicanos had ever been elected in the history of Silver City. Now, four of the five members of the school board are Chicanos.

When the new laws took effect it was necessary to struggle over the way the district boundaries would be set. Ordáz's district boundaries had to be set three different times before they were acceptable to the Chicano community. The old anglo power structure wanted to set the district so that it would still dilute the Chicano vote.

The situation is similar in the southeast part of the state known as “Little Texas” because of its close proximity to the Texas border but more so because of its Texas-style racism and repression of Chicano and Mexicano people. Lucinda Bonney, a

Chicana teacher's aide in Clovis, is running for county commission this November against a male anglo Republican. If elected she will be the first Chicana ever elected to the commission in Curry County, which is 52% Chicano and Mexicano. She described some of the problems: "People here are very prejudiced, but it's more subtle. The Hispanic business people haven't every been able to make a go of it. Opportunities for scholarships and grants, when it came time for minorities, just dried up."

The impact of Chicano empowerment

Frank Sánchez and other activists hope that Chicano empowerment will mean greater economic development for Chicanos and poor people who have long been neglected as county governments served the rich landowners.

Electing Chicanos has already made a difference. One of the main changes that newly elected Las Cruces City Councilman Sam Barba, a 57-year-old transportation specialist, wants to make is to give Chicanos a greater opportunity to get employed in higher city administration positions. Barba pointed out that Chicanos end up in the lowest paid of city jobs, garbage pickup and street sweepers, etc.

He pointed out that "some areas have gotten good street maintenance, they sweep the streets. They'll even pave an alley. In Chicano areas, they barely have paving, they don't have proper drainage; they're not well maintained because poor people don't have anybody to speak up for them. This is what we need, somebody who will go to bat for the people."

He also noted that the city wanted to sell the public hospital in Las Cruces and make it private. But if this happened, there would be no available care for low-income people. Many Chicanos and Mexicanos only receive minimum wage and have no health-care plan. They would be severely affected by this. Due to Sam Barba's and other city councilmen's efforts they were able to defeat this move. However, Barba thinks that city officials will continue to try to sell the hospital and he will keep fighting it.

Frank Sánchez believes that these victories represent a great step in the process of empowerment for Chicanos, but this

doesn't automatically mean good representation. District elections have made running for office possible for Chicanos but Sánchez believes many of the races focus on personalities rather than issues. "we need to elect people who are responsive to the needs of the district. We have to begin to focus on important issues and nurture good candidates who care about the community."

Winning district elections cannot end the oppression of Chicanos, but it is a big advance. The lawsuits brought together a strong united front of Chicano activists. Now that more Chicanos are running for office and winning, there is more enthusiasm among Chicanos to vote, and there will be greater scrutiny of the politics of each candidate and struggles to hold Chicano elected officials accountable to the people they serve.

The process is not over yet. In some counties, there is organized opposition from anglos who want to maintain the system of oppression that they've had all along. The fight for district elections is just one front in a much larger battle for economic and political equality. And it is a battle Chicanos and Mexicanos are determined to win.

Chicanos win in New Mexico and Texas

Chicano empowerment movement
grows in Southwest

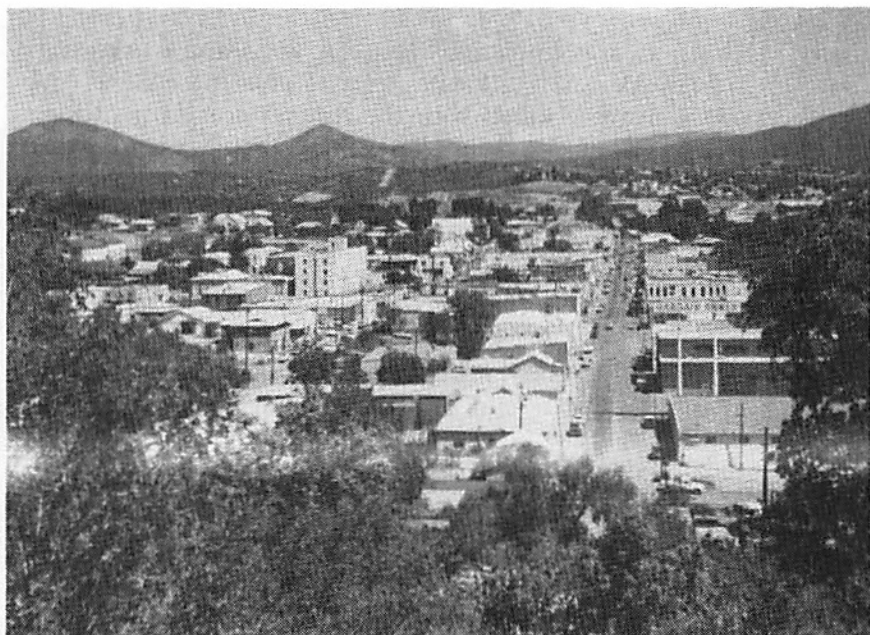
Evaristo Garza

Chicanos in the Southwest scored victories on November 4 in state and local races in Texas and New Mexico, marking a growth in the movement for Chicano empowerment in the historical homeland of the Chicano-Mexicano people.

Texas saw its first Chicano elected to statewide office as Judge Raul Gonzalez became a justice on the state Supreme Court. Meanwhile, Chicanos in New Mexico won several elections in the wake of successful lawsuits resulting in a new law to end racist gerrymandering and at-large elections.

These victories are significant because Chicanos have long been denied political power and representation in the Southwest, which was once a part of Mexico until the United States forcibly annexed this territory in 1848 following the Mexican-American War.

Although the scenario has varied from state to state, for the most part, Chicanos have been virtually excluded from



The town of Silver City.

the political process and have been denied basic democratic rights.

Until this year, in New Mexico, because of gerrymandering and at-large elections, Chicanos could not win seats even in areas where they constituted a majority. These racist barriers to Chicano voting rights are very much like those which existed in the South for African Americans before the Civil Rights Movement, and which still exist today in other forms.

As a result, in some states and local areas in the Southwest, no Chicano has been elected to office in over a hundred years.

So the Chicano victories in the 1986 elections represent a step forward in the struggle for basic democracy in the Southwest.

Highlights

In Texas, Judge Raul Gonzalez won his seat on the Texas Supreme Court with 1,634,603 votes, or 53% of the vote.

Gonzalez was born and raised in Texas and worked as a field worker in California prior to entering college. "My roots are very much with the *campesinos* (farm workers — *ed.*)," Gonzalez told *Unity*. "There is no way to remove our life experiences from the way we perceive the world. Certainly, I am sensitive to people who are disadvantaged and oppressed."

In New Mexico, the first-ever district elections enabled the large Chicano-Mexicano population to win political representation for the first time in decades.

In Otero County, Ramona Vallejos became the first Chicano in 20 years and the first woman ever to be elected to the county commission, which oversees county government. Vallejos, former mayor of Tularosa, a village of 3,000 people, won in a district which is 36% Chicano.

Vallejos attributes her victory to support from Chicanos, whites and Native American Indians. "The Mescalero Apache reservation vote really carried me through," Vallejos told *Unity*. "I think the Chicano and Native American coalition has always existed."

Other Chicanos elected to county commissions included Lucinda Bonney in Curry County and Joe Velasquez in Chaves County.

Chicano victories in the legislative races were also crucial in enabling Democrats to gain four seats to take over the New Mexico House of Representatives. In an upset victory, Vincent Gallegos was elected in Curry County. Barbara Perca Casey's re-election as state representative in Chaves County was especially significant. "This is the first time that a Hispanic Democrat has won any race with over 350 votes," Casey told *Unity*. "I think the people are enthused about having a Hispanic running."

Besides winning Chicano support, Casey drew support from the area's 1,900 African Americans as she campaigned with James Lewis, the Democratic candidate for state treasurer who became the first African American elected to statewide office in New Mexico. She also drew support from white farmers, who relied on her legislative experience to deliver needed water and sewage projects to the local communities.

Casey's victory came in the face of a vicious attack from the National Right to Work Committee, which sent out a campaign hit mailer raising several false charges. Casey opposes "right-to-work" laws, which are aimed at wiping out unionization drives.

Frank Sanchez of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project told *Unity*, "Turnout in the minority precincts was close to 70%, which is very good for an off-year election. The election showed that our political strength is growing. We have the potential to elect some legislators, especially in the reapportioned districts where the lines are drawn more fairly, that would help minorities get elected." This high turnout is nearly twice the average national turnout this year, indicating how important these district elections are to the Chicano-Mexicano people in their struggle for political empowerment and representation.

Sanchez added, "I think the next step is to determine what our priorities are as a community and begin to set an agenda of things that our communities need. And of course those involve poor people and working people."

Chicanos fight for control in Clifton

Strike supporters vie for run-off seats in May

Catalina Chávez

CLIFTON, ARIZ. -- "Phelps-Dodge is trying to control us. (But) we want to hold on to what little power we have left in our city government."

This is how strike supporter Alicia Castañeda described the battle against the giant Phelps_Dodge copper company's attempt to take over this tiny copper mining town of 3,000. After going all out to smash the miners' strike, begun in 1983 at the nearby Morenci mine, the company is now trying to capture the seven-seat City Council, which up to now has always been 100% Chicano and 100% pro-union.

In the March 26 City Council elections, pro-union candidates had to run for the first time against a company-backed slate. Four seats were filled in the regular election by strike supporter Anna O'Leary, president of the Morenci Miners Women's Auxiliary; two pro-company candidates, David McCullar and David Stacy; and Teresa Benavidez. Run-offs for the remaining three seats will be held May 20, with two pro-union and four pro-company candidates in the race. The new City Council will then elect one councilperson as mayor.

Phelps-Dodge is doing all it can to win a City Council majority. It wants a City Council that will side with the company



Anna O'Leary.

in times of strike. Also, the company is under fire by the Environmental Protection Agency and various environmental groups for polluting the air and poisoning ground waters. A pro-company City Council could take some heat off of health and safety concerns, and give a green light to projects like the company's plan to build a new smelting process.

Strike supporters know it will be an uphill battle. Tommy Aguilar, mayor for 18 years, was ousted in this election. Also, Phelps-Dodge has destroyed the livelihood of the mainly Chicano miners. As a result, unemployment here is twice the statewide average, and hundreds of strikers' families have been forced to move out in search of jobs, so the pro-union vote has shrunk. Many of those who remain are retirees.

Anna O'Leary based her successful campaign strategy on winning support from retired mine workers and seniors. She ran a grass-roots campaign with over 30 women volunteers from the Morenci Miners Women's Auxiliary.

The focus now is to help the pro-union run-off candidates win, which would give pro-union forces three seats, with one potential swing vote and a chance at electing a pro-union mayor.

Controversy on LA redistricting

Alatorre plan set African
Americans, Chicanos and
Asians against each other

Roberto "Beto" Flores

LOS ANGELES -- The dust has finally begun to settle in the aftermath of an intense struggle to redraw the City Council districts of Los Angeles.

After several weeks of bitter political infighting, the Los Angeles City Council adopted a redistricting plan which could result in an additional Chicano-Latino seat on the 15-member council in upcoming elections. The plan must now be approved by Judge James Ideman of the U.S. District Court, who is presiding over a federal Justice Department suit which sparked the whole controversy.

The council was forced to redistrict after the U.S. Justice Department filed suit last November claiming that gerrymandering diluted Latino voting strength. Richard Alatorre, the lone Chicano councilman, was appointed to come up with a new redistricting proposal.

Alatorre's proposal created a storm of outrage in the city, pitted different sectors of the Black, Chicano and Asian communities against each other, and gave rise to bitter conflicts within the council itself.

Minorities demanding more power

Los Angeles' Chicano population is clamoring for more political representation and power. Los Angeles is the second



What will be the future of Los Angeles minority communities?

largest city in the country, with a minority population of over 50%. Nearly one-third of its population is Chicano or Latino. Yet ten out of fifteen members of the Los Angeles City Council are white. Two of the minority members -- Alatorre and Michael Woo, an Asian -- joined the council only in the last year. Minority representation on the council should be at least eight seats, with Latinos holding four of them.

The Justice Department suit offered the council a golden opportunity to correct a grave historical injustice. But asking the Los Angeles City Council to treat minorities fairly is like asking the fox to guard the hen house. Vested interest ultimately prevailed. Richard Alatorre produced a plan which would have increased Latino representation by one seat, by making Woo's district predominantly Latino. In order for Latinos to increase their power they would have to vote out the only Asian on the council. The Asian community rightfully rose up in arms at this ridiculous proposal. Although Woo was not elected by an Asian majority, he clearly represents the only voice on the council for the city's Asian population.

The particularly disgusting thing about Alatorre's proposal is that he could very easily have drawn up a plan which would have made Latinos a majority in the 4th Councilmanic

District, the one presently occupied by white right-winger John Ferraro. But Alatorre and his council cronies, seeking only to protect their incumbencies and power bases, were perfectly willing to pit Asians against Latinos and to hell with democracy. 'Sleazy politics'

Councilman Woo accurately summarized Alatorre's plan as the product of "sleazy back-room politics." And a broad sector of the Asian community rallied against the Alatorre proposal. They largely endorsed the effort to achieve greater Latino representation, but insisted that it not come at the expense of another disenfranchised minority.

Unfortunately, and to his lasting discredit, Alatorre managed to set African Americans, Chicanos and Asians against each other. His plan fanned up the worst kinds of nationalism largely coming from middle-class elements of the different minority communities.

While the Southern Christian Leadership Conference opposed Alatorre's plan, all three Black city councilmen supported it, mainly because it did not substantially affect the power base in their own districts. Several Chicano professional or middle-class-type organizations also came out for the Alatorre plan, often parroting his pathetic rationale that "if Woo is a good politician" he will get elected even in a Latino district.

These organizations took the road of the most narrow and nationalist self-interest -- accepting the single additional Latino council seat even if it eliminated Asian representation. Many of them swallowed this disgraceful plan simply because it was put forward by a Chicano. In this sense, the council power brokers pulled a clever movida (maneuver) by designating Alatorre to come up with a new redistricting plan.

But other sectors of the Chicano community blasted Alatorre's plan and demanded that the council come up with a plan which would protect the rights of all minorities. All agreed that greater Latino representation was long overdue, but that it must not come at the expense of Asians.

In spite of all the uproar, the council passed Alatorre's plan by a 9-6 vote. Mayor Tom Bradley then quickly vetoed the plan, and the council was forced to adopt a compromise plan offered by council President Pat Russell. Her plan made Woo's 13th District predominantly Latino and moved Woo into Ferraro's

4th District. Rather than guarantee a seat for the Asian community, Woo and Ferraro will contend for that seat in the next election. This plan offers the possibility of upping minority representation to six council seats.

Whatever happened to democracy?

In the final analysis, the City Council was forced to grant some additional Latino representation, while giving the Asian community the opportunity to hold onto one seat. If this all comes to pass, it will represent a doubling of minority representation since 1985, when there were only three African Americans on the council and no Chicanos or Asians.

The council and the mayor decided as they did because they fear the growing power and strength of the Chicano community, and they wanted to "cool it out" without of course granting any more than a minimum concession. (Real equity demands at least four Latino seats on the council).

But this whole exercise in maneuvering and back-room deals also exposed the shabby and reactionary essence of capitalist democracy. Here we had a situation where minorities are demanding simple justice: political representation in proportion to their numbers. This is supposed to be the soul of the U.S. political system. But the people affected, Chicanos, Asians and African Americans, had virtually no voice in the entire process. Instead, Alatorre and the other political hacks cooked up one scheme after another, ignoring the opinions and sentiments of the Chicano and Asian communities.

The ultimate beneficiaries of this whole cynical scenario are the banks, developers and other wealthy interests who really run the city. These folks do not want a bunch of rowdy minorities getting on the council and demanding increased corporate taxes, expanded social services, greater control of the police and a more equitable sharing of the city's wealth and power. And this could possibly happen because the city's minority communities are poorer, more oppressed and mostly working class. They can therefore compel their elected representatives to take more progressive positions. This is something the capitalists want to avoid at all costs.

The good thing is that the people have a chance to fight

this whole matter out again in a few years -- after the 1990 national census, when council districts must again be redrawn. The current redistricting struggle has brought out some important lessons:

*A Black, Chicano and Asian alliance should be formed to fight for greater minority representation, with the objective of at least half the seats on the council going to minorities, reflecting the makeup of the city's population. If the present battle showed anything, it is that the minority communities cannot depend on the Black and Brown politicians now on the council to do the right thing without pressure from the grass roots. If we want justice, we are going to have to get organized and united and fight for it.

*That numerous public hearings be held in minority communities at a time and place convenient to working people. Special hearings should be held in Spanish in the Chicano-Latino community, and in the various Asian languages in the Asian communities.

*The City Council should be doubled in size. As long as the council is only 15 seats, the minorities will inevitably be pitted against each other in seeking political representation. This is especially true because minority communities are either integrated (Black and Latino, Latino and Asian, etc.) or are right next to each other. Doubling the council size would make it possible to greatly increase minority representation without pitting one community against another.

*The city must present to the public all the various redistricting proposals it is considering, and not simply the one they finally agree on. The people have a right to be aware of all the possible alternative plans so they can give their opinion on them in the public hearings.

The struggle for minority representation, and especially Chicano power (since Los Angeles is part of the Chicano Nation), will certainly continue. The city has been forced to give an inch. In 1990 we must make them move a mile.

Chicanos win in new LA redistricting

Julia Santos

LOS ANGELES — *With heated debate the City Council here adopted a new redistricting plan September 12 that creates a second and possibly third district with a Chicano/Latino majority.*

With this, the second plan adopted in two months, the City Council is attempting to head off a Justice Department suit charging that Chicanos are being gerrymandered out of political representation.

Dubbed the Woo-Ferraro plan, the new plan is a major victory for Chicanos. It passed despite a racist backlash, as busloads of whites from affluent neighborhoods rallied in San Fernando Valley days before the council vote. They hurled inflammatory charges that the city is being “given away” to minorities, and cried, “If you want to represent the Chinese, go back to China! If you want to represent Mexicans, go back to Mexico!”

The Woo-Ferraro plan was drafted in direct response to years of mass struggle for greater minority representation,

and to expand the City Council and end gerrymandering and other obstacles to minority empowerment.

A year ago, there were no Chicanos on the 15-member City Council. Last month, a plan was passed creating a second district with a Chicano/Latino majority, but forcing Mike Woo, the only Asian councilman, into another district to face powerful incumbent John Ferraro in the upcoming elections.

When Councilman Howard Finn died, Woo and Ferraro seized the opportunity to divide up Finn's San Fernando Valley district, give Woo a more favorable district and create a district which could possibly elect an additional Chicano councilperson.

The new plan is a step forward, but it is not without weaknesses. While retaining the newly won Asian seat, it disperses other Asian communities into several districts, splitting Koreatown in three, and Manilatown in two.

This latest battle indicates that the fight for Chicano representation will get a lot sharper. But the plan lays the groundwork for waging the battle for greater democracy and equitable representation when the city, whose minority population constitutes a majority, redistricts in 1990. The struggle opens up possibilities for a more progressive grass-roots alliance of the African American, Chicano and Asian communities to fight for a majority of the seats on the council.

More Chicano clout at polls?

Julia Santos

"Our data clearly show that California is the weak point, the Achilles' heel of Chicano politics in this nation," says William Velasquez, executive director of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project (SVREP).

He adds, "The bottom line is that although Hispanics constitute 19% of the population in this state, we are only 8.6% of the registered voters and frequently constitute less than 7% of the total vote on election day." In fact, considering the rapid growth and size of the state's Latino population, California has one of the lowest rates of Latino voter registration and Latino representation in the country.

For this reason, SVREP, the country's largest nonprofit, non-partisan voter registration organization, announced that California will be its top priority state for the next three years. It plans to launch 180 voter registration campaigns in this state by 1988 and is allocating half its total budget to California.

This drive comes on the heels of various studies projecting that Latinos, Asians and African Americans will make up the majority of the state's population by the year 2000. But while the number of Latino elected officials in the Southwest has grown by 82% over the past 12 years, California has lagged far behind. SVREP has found that although over half of all Latinos in the Southwest live in California, the state has only 16% of the Latinos elected to public office in the region.

Some of the reasons include low voter registration and turnout of Latinos, and also the at-large elections which tend to water down the Latino vote.

The results? In Watsonville, a town of 26,000 which is



Strikers in Watsonville are struggling not only against the cannery owners, but also for political representation.

half Chicano-Mexicano, there is not one Latino on the City Council, and only half the eligible Chicano-Mexicano voters are registered. In Pomona, minorities make up nearly half its population of 112,000. But only two minorities have ever been elected to the City Council in 99 years, and none are currently serving. This pattern is repeated over and over throughout the state.

New Mexico, on the other hand, requires that every town with a population of over 10,000 must hold district elections for city council, and every school district of over 16,000 must hold district elections for school board. This law, which SVREP fought for, has resulted in a big increase in Chicano elected officials in that state. But in California, only 15 of the state's 444 incorporated cities have such district elections.

Like voting rights groups in the Blackbelt South, SVREP has challenged in court the discriminatory ground rules like gerrymandering of districts and at-large elections. Currently, SVREP and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund are suing the city of Pomona for violating the Voting Rights Act through use of at-large elections. Beginning with Pomona, SVREP may launch a statewide campaign to abolish at-large elections.



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