

# Interview Herman Baca of the Comm. on Chicano Rights

The following interview was held on April 19, 1980 at the offices of the Committee on Chicano Rights (CCR) in National City, California. Herman Baca, 36, heads the organization. He is a printer by profession, born and raised in National City. As a father of four children, he has had to deal with the repression and threats that come with his activities. Commenting on the stresses of his life-style Baca believes, "If we don't try to change things, the Chicano will never be a complete human being".

**EL FORO:** Herman, what is the history of the CCR? How did it get started and what issues has it involved itself with?

**BACA:** In the initial years we were an ad hoc confederation that dealt with everything from the Dixon-Arnett Bill, rape and violence by Border Patrolment, the Rodino Bill, inland check points, local issues involving police brutality, the grand jury, etc.

In the process we finally launched a recall effort against the entire city council for their failure to deal with harassment of our community. This got people to join the ad hoc committee. That is when we gave up the confederation. So in 1976 we organized the Committee on Chicano Rights as a non-government funded organization. Our independence rests on being independent from government monies. We are a volunteer community organization which depends on community activities like tardeadas and dances for its financial support.

Most of the members of the Committee are from National City. We have three levels of membership which include: General members who come in and volunteer their work and time and make whatever concrete or regular contributions they can; Associate members contribute money as well as support our activities; and, lastly, there is general community support.

We have had several activities which we feel have had an impact on community awareness of the immigration issue. We organized a campaign against the Carter immigration plan and had a march of 3,000 persons at the border in October of 1977 against the presence of right-wing extremists like the KKK at the border.

We have especially focused on the question of violence at the U.S.-Mexico border. In 1979 we also had 3,000 persons march against Carter's "tortilla curtain" to denounce what we feel is the militarization of the border.

We have also involved ourselves in education issues. Presently, we are suing the Sweetwater School District for its neglect of Chicano concerns in education.



Herman Baca

Photo: CCR

**EL FORO:** What would you identify as your most important victories since 1970?

**BACA:** I would say raising the political consciousness of the people here on the immigration issue. When we started out most Chicano activists could not see the relationship between the immigration issue and their own struggles. There was acceptance of right-wing beliefs that accused immigrants of stealing their jobs and so on. So our biggest victory has been in giving the immigration issue a different perspective.

**EL FORO:** Why do you feel immigration is the most crucial issue for us today?

**BACA:** It is the foremost issue of the Chicano Movement. But it is an issue being used to attack and destroy all the gains of the movement, all the efforts we have made to help the Chicano community. We see it in Houston where there is an effort to deny immigrant Mexican children an education; we see it in California when bilingual-bicultural education is attacked; we see it in Phoenix when attempts to intimidate a whole community are initiated by going after its weakest sector, and we see it in Los Angeles and Orange County with the residential sweeps. Clearly, this is an effort to intimidate a whole community.

**EL FORO:** What have been the greatest lessons you have learned in the Committee's ten years?

**BACA:** In the Chicano Movement we welcomed everyone with open arms

and consequently, there was great confusion, disunity, and division. For example, here in San Diego we had to denounce the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as people who were trying to co-opt our right to self-determination. So we've learned that it is quality rather than quantity that determines with whom we seek unity. Just because you are honest doesn't mean other elements will also be honest, or share the same concerns. This is our biggest lesson.

**EL FORO:** Where do you see the Chicano Movement now?

**BACA:** We have to be honest. The Chicano Movement is presently in a valley. But that's understandable since for every action there is a reaction. The actions of the Movement set in motion reactions by the forces in our society who are against progressive change. The successes of the late '60s and '70s were also seen by our opponents as threats so that co-optation and disillusionment have been used against us. Currently we see it in the form of Jarvis I and Jarvis II.

But I tend to be optimistic. There has always been a movement, there will always be a movement. The question is whether there is going to be enough of a movement when people start looking for alternatives. After all, we are only talking about a period of ten years which is a very short historical period. There is a higher consciousness now than ever before amongst Chicanos.

**EL FORO:** To what do you attribute that "valley" and what makes you so optimistic about the future?

**BACA:** I attribute the decline to numerous factors. Firstly, co-optation by government monies and jobs. Yesterday's militants are today's government employees, thus draining our communities of what should have been valuable leadership.

Secondly, our own successes. The movement opened up a lot of doors, and those people who walked through them for lack of consciousness have never come back to make their contributions to the movement. Thus, our own successes have been used against us. We see Chicanos of ten years ago calling themselves "Hispanics" trying to get a little closer to the "correct color scheme" of our heritage.

Thirdly, people became confused. The ideological bickering between nationalists, internationalists, pseudo-this and pseudo-that turned-off a lot of people.

As to my optimism, it is based on the belief that the emerging conditions will spur our people to greater unity and greater action. We are a young population and it will be interesting to see what kinds of organizations our youth will build. We are predominantly workers, and the economy affects workers more than any other sector.

**EL FORO:** How does the immigration issue affect this process? For example, what does being a Chicano mean in regards to Mexican immigration?

**BACA:** The best way to answer this is by going back to what the Chicano Movement means to me. Chicano to me means change. The movement came about because of our situation in this historical period. Before the Chicano Movement we didn't exist. We were the invisible minority, we didn't exist to Mexico and we didn't exist to gringo institutions. The word Chicano implied that we understood our situation and that we would part from that reality.

But instead of being anti-Mexican as some people have tried to project it, it was really more of an effort to learn about being a Mexicano. It was learning about our history and language. But it took into account the realities confronting us. We never said we weren't Mexicanos. At the same time, we needed to make Mexico aware of our situation over which we had no control - and make clear we would have to be respected for our efforts.

Mexico, because of its situation, has never defended the Chicano the way it should have. The Chicano was forced to look inward and understand that if we wanted respect, we would have to fight for it, if we wanted change we would have to make it ourselves. It is a positive thing because it has reinforced us as one people and I see a linking up somewhere in the future based on that understanding and that respect. I think the Chicano will be crucial to Mexico's future and immigration is an important link in that relationship.

**EL FORO:** Where are we now in building those links?

**BACA:** Not as far as we should be. Concerning the immigration issue for example, we see the Chicano Movement in contradiction with forces in Mexico. While the Chicano is against temporary worker programs, the PRI is for them.

This requires that we understand and be clear with whom we are going to align ourselves in Mexico. There is a great difference between the Mexican people and the PRI. Whom do we align ourselves with? The reactionary forces in power or with the progressive elements who are trying to do the same things we are trying to do?

**EL FORO:** What is your feeling about the term "Hispanic"?

**BACA:** I think we have the whole right-wing "burro-crazy" trying to confuse and divide a growing population of Mexicanos in this country.

The first time I heard the term used was in 1972 by Spiro Agnew. That ought to give us some understanding of where this term came from.

# Herman . . .

My personal feeling is that identity is what the Chicano Movement was all about. For the first time as a colonized people, we had a banner and I view this word as I do any other effort intended to set back the clock of our progress.

Each Latino group has to play out its own destiny. By lumping us all together the government hopes to dilute and confuse the demands, issues, and problems of each group. By lumping us all together they hope to weaken our growing potential.

We should never be against unity with other Latinos in this country or anywhere else. But the terms of unity must be worked out among ourselves and not imposed on us from above or from outside our communities. Remember that the movement behind "Chicano" has given us more in ten years than the previous 130 years. So why trade in a good thing for something we didn't create ourselves?

When you see Coors Beer celebrating the 1980s as "the decade of the Hispanic" we should be suspicious. It is tantamount to the Nazis in 1930 proclaiming "The Nazis welcome the 30s - decade of the Jewish people." Anytime your enemy starts patting you on the head there's something underlying it which is not in your interests.

**EL FORO:** What is your opinion of the recent appointment of Mexicanos to two of the most sensitive positions in the U.S. government in its relations with Mexico, that is, Julian Nava as ambassador and Mat Garcia as head of the INS.?

**BACA:** We, in the Committee have always approached politics from a definition of power.

As far as I am concerned anything that is not controlled or accountable to us isn't ours. All of the Mexican-American politicians that are not controlled by or accountable to us are merely window dressing - politically speaking. Until we have power these appointments mean very little. They create and destroy heroes as fast as they can manufacture them. Look at Leonel "Coyote" Castillo. He went from controller of the city of Houston, to INS chief where he made the Washington D.C. circuit, then went back to Houston and came in fourth in a race for mayor. What did it all mean? Go into the community and ask for Leonel Castillo and people say, "Leonel who...?"

From a more positive perspective, it is clear that those in power see that we are a people who are not going to be ignored any longer and must be taken into account. Carter knows that to win the Mexican vote he must maneuver a new trick.

**EL FORO:** You are hosting a national immigration conference this month. What is the thinking behind such a conference and what do you see being accomplished?

**BACA:** I see immigration being the biggest issue for the Chicano, Mexico, and the U.S. Some say Mexico's petroleum is the biggest issue. But people are a nation's most important natural resource - they are the ultimate resource.

It will be an important factor in the 1980s because of Mexico's inability to absorb a rapidly growing population into the labor market and this country's efforts to preserve its economic system by a more efficient exploitation of both labor and Mexico as a market.

For the Chicano Movement the immigration issue is crucial. When people cross that line the impact that immigration has had on our communities is great. Immigrants come and go but we are left here with the Border Patrol, the repression, the prejudice, etc. Just out of survival we must get involved, or face a South African situation in the Southwest.

If we as a people are ever going to progress, we must get this issue resolved.

Only two things make up power: Money which we don't have and people which we do have. We must organize a united position in the Chicano community on this issue.

I see the following goals for this conference as being: (1) to get people together on this issue; (2) to define the issue in a clear and objective way. For example, what is a Bracero Program and why should we be against it; (3) to give the community leaders and activists knowledge and understanding to take back to their communities to start the process of education and political action; and (4) to call for participation in the Memorial March to dramatize brutality at the border. People are being beaten, raped, and killed. We have Border Patrol agents firing and

releasing tear gas from helicopters. Many people don't have any idea of the level of violence encountered on a daily basis by immigrants crossing the border. We must let the world know that there are severe human rights violations taking place right here.

Many kinds of organizations have endorsed the conference from throughout the country. We have been endorsed by labor unions, religious organizations, health and social service agencies, lawyer's groups and civil rights organizations, educators and professionals as well. There is a wide spectrum of support for this conference and we expect a large turnout.

Most of the positions which have been articulated on immigration have been hammered out in Washington, D.C. board rooms and not in the community. We feel it is significant that this conference be held in this geographic region, here on the border.



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## Conference

## Schedule

FRIDAY, MAY 23

10:00 a.m. REGISTRATION  
6:00 p.m. GET TOGETHER

SATURDAY, MAY 24

8:00 a.m. REGISTRATION  
8:30 a.m. MARIACHI  
9:00 a.m. Invocation  
9:15 a.m. Welcome

SUNDAY, MAY 25

10:00 a.m. MASS  
10:30 a.m. Menudo  
12:00 noon MARCH  
2:00 p.m. RALLY & Press  
Conference Resolutions  
Music, Ballet Folklorico  
Speakers  
4:00 p.m. BREAK