

Aztlàn

Karen Wald

1970

DENVER, Colo. (LNS) — “We have created the nation of Aztlàn,” Corky Gonzalez said to the people who filled the Crusade for Justice auditorium on Sunday afternoon on the fifth and last day of the 2nd Annual Chicano Youth Liberation Conference held March 25–29.

The main purpose of this year’s meeting was to create a political party and Congress of Aztlàn—the Aztec name for the lands of the Southwest stolen from the Indian and Mexican ancestors of today’s Chicanos, spiritually incorporating all brown people, all of North America’s Spanish-speaking people.

But as Corky noted, the five days of meetings, workshops, theatre, music, fighting, playing and rapping had done far more than simply create a new, independent political party. It had given shape, form—visibility—and an unprecedented unity to the nation of people who created this party and who the party was to represent.

The basic issues and concerns of Aztlàn could be found by looking at the list of workshops: community control of schools, churches, agencies and institutions; creation of an economic base in the barrios of the cities, the villages, and the countryside through rural and industrial cooperatives and joint accumulation and working of land; security and self defense; meaningful education through creation of Chicano liberation schools and universities, taught and controlled by the people; health and welfare, relating the need for community clinics, to the need to nationalize the welfare agencies; art and the Chicano artist, ranging from discussion of techniques, to the need for preserving a rich cultural heritage of art, views shared in the literature and drama workshops; communication to end the isolation and alienation of Chicano brothers and sisters in various localities; anti-war and draft resistance to end the double-genocide of brown people from the U.S. (and some of its colonies) dying en masse in the process of killing their Vietnamese brothers; and many workshops to discuss the creation of a political party and a Congress for Aztlàn.

There was no women’s workshop per se, but brown women did meet during the conference to discuss their role as brown women, as revolutionaries and potential revolutionaries. After the first tentative meeting, they opened the continuing women’s workshop’s to the men, and the overall effect was to produce stronger, more committed women taking their place in the Chicano movement alongside the men.

There was no workshop on “unity” either, but this was probably one of the most significant factors of the conference. A year ago in Denver, Puerto Ricans and blacks were attacked and barred from the conference by some Chicanos who are now called “cultural nationalist.” This year they were invited back, and Young Lords and Latin Kings shared the stages, dormitories and guard duty with Brown Berets and Crusaders. Gangs from Chicago, whose members previously could not have walked across each other’s turf and come out unharmed, traveled together in the same buses, shared meals and lodging, rapped and partied together, and came out of the conference with a feeling of solidarity and brotherhood inconceivable a short time ago. Again, that is not to say everything went smoothly.

A few individual fights sent several brothers to the hospital. But the strength of the unity that was built was shown in the reaction of the groups to these fights. Instead of rallying around their injured members and

counter-attacking the groups, which would be the traditional response, gang and club leaders denounced the actions as “fucked up behavior” and reaffirmed their solidarity with their people in the other groups.

The strong cultural heritage of La Raza, displayed in art, music, poetry, dance and theatre, was one of the many aspects which markedly distinguished this conference from any white movement meeting. It is also one of the factors uniting the old with the young; no generation gap is visible in the Chicano movement. Old and young responded with rhythmic handclapping and foot-stomping and series of short, high-pitched yells as beautifully costumed Chicano women came out to perform traditional dances. The shouts and applause increased as they came back for a second number with packs and guns on their backs, and mounted to roars of approval and a thundering ovation when the women were joined by young men, also elegantly costumed. What had been a political war-cry throughout the conference took on a new meaning as voices intoned “Chicano-o-o” and others thundered back “POWER!”

Theatrical groups were less traditional and more directly aimed at the problems of today’s Chicano. They ranged from the Teatro Triste street theatre of the East Oakland barrio—many of whose members have only recently gotten off of speed and heroin and all their related problems, and none of who had ever acted before they got together—to Teatro Urbano, by far the most “professional” and talented of the various groups. Teatro Urbano is run by Daniel Valdez, brother of Luis Valdez of Teatro Campesino, and as the names imply, the group is the city counterpart of Luis’s farmworkers’ theatre. Teatro Triste, reflecting its composition and the backgrounds of its members, deals primarily with the problems of drugs in the Chicano community, the related problems of theft, fighting and hatred among the brothers and sisters, as well as the general conditions of poverty and oppression in the barrio, but also touches on things like the degradation of Mexicans in TV commercials.

Teatro Urbano deals with a wider range of topics, including the war in Vietnam (in which the Chicano soldier makes friends with a Viet Cong and shoots the American General), the problem of “Juan Raza” who loses his identity (the name-card around his neck disappears) when he encounters the American Dream one night, and tries to make it in -a world the way “Ben Dido” (vendido—sell-out) did, then as a hippy, as a black and ultimately as a soldier, all to little avail. Getting killed as a soldier, he comes back as the Spirit of Aztlan and offs the American Dream. Teatro Urbano also has a broad repertoire of Chicano, Mexican and Latin American songs, which the singers frequently improvise to make them conform more to the American reality, although they remain the most internationalistic of the groups.

(Danny, at the microphone, told the audience “The gabacho [gringo] wants to take our land. But he can’t win there. He tried in Vietnam, and he couldn’t win there. He wants to keep Latin America—BUT WE’RE NOT GONNA LET THEM, ARE WE?” In their own rendition of “Bella Ciao,” Teatro Urbano sings “Desde Bolivia/a California/Hay solo una revolución [From Bolivia to California there is just one revolution.]”)

The walls of the Crusade of Justice Center, which was formerly a church, have been redecorated by the Chicano artist Manuel Martinez with Aztec and Chicano scenes and figures. A slight, grey-haired figure, he carefully sketched and painted in one mural of two women as the conference surged around him, little children and others standing around in groups to watch him. Said one artist, reporting from the artist’s workshop, “Chicano art is the truth about our life. It is not a pretty picture of a pretty flower or a pretty tree or a pretty blond girl. It’s also not a mexicano in a sombrero asleep leaning against a cactus. Our art must reflect our lives and our feelings.”

More than 3,000 Chicanos, Latinos and Puertorriqueños from all over the country filled the Crusade for Justice Hall for five days (over 2,400 registered the first day) and the main purpose of their being there was to create an independent political party of the nation of Aztlan.

Disagreements ran through all discussion about what role the party was to play. Many were adamantly opposed to any involvement in electoral politics; others followed the lead of Corky Gonzalez, who, although he denies there is a single leader of the Chicano movement, clearly is that leader at this point. Corky, who works for the Crusade for Justice in Denver, feels that a political party running candidates can be a tool with which to make use of the gringo mass media. Some claimed that if Aztlan truly were a separate and

independent nation, then it should simply elect members to its own congress, and per- — - haps send ambassadors or consuls to other nations including the U.S.

There was never a specific decision made regarding this, but it seemed likely that candidates would run in certain places. The resolutions that were passed called for the formal creation of the nation of Aztlan, and the establishment of an independent La Raza Unia political party, which would have the Plan of Aztlan (drafted last year) as its main platform, to be later expanded by the newly-formed Congress of Aztlan. The resolution stated that “We will withhold our support from any candidate running in any other party.” It went on to say that the Congress of the nation of Aztlan will be the governing body of the party and will handle all political questions concerning the nation of Aztlàn.

In other resolutions proposed by the delegation from New Mexico, Reis Tijerina was proclaimed national hero of Aztlàn, with June 5—the date of the Tijerina Amarilla raid—declared a national holiday. The resolution described Tijerina as a political prisoner, and pledged the nation of Aztlan to “free him by any means necessary.”

One of the final acts of the conference was a wedding of two young Denver Chicanos by the nation of Aztlan. The audience—which had witnessed a similar wedding in a film showing of “Battle of Algiers” the day before—accompanied the young couple with rhythmic hand-clapping as they marched through a line of Brown Berets and Black Berets—each raising a clenched fist as the couple passed through. At the stage, Rocky, wearing an army fatigue jacket and black beret, and Della, in jeans, t-shirt and serape, faced Corky, who told the people present: “I am no high priest. They have made the decision. This isn’t a ceremony but a witnessing of the love of two revolutionaries who believe in the same cause, the same nation. We of Aztlan decide our own destiny. What these young people do today is a symbol of liberation and revolution.” They left amidst an incredibly long string of “Chicano/Power” handclapping, foot-stomping chants. As they walked out, they were very much the visual symbol of the new nation that has been born at that conference.

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