

LA LUCHA CONTINÚA

A Short History of Unión del Barrio

By Roberto "Rob" Camacho

Barrio Logan and the surrounding neighborhoods of Logan and Sherman Heights are home to an intricate assortment of groups, organizations, and networks that serve the various and unique needs of the community. However, few are as synonymous and integrally bonded to the community and its historic struggle as Unión del Barrio (UdB).

For close to forty years UdB has been at the forefront leading the charge of resistance against border patrol and police violence; defending the rights of workers, prisoners, women, and youth; as well as launching numerous independent electoral campaigns. As a constant presence, UdB has been a sworn advocate and defender of the barrio.

UdB can trace its roots back to the early 80s, a direct lineage to the Chicano Movement of the two previous decades. Going into the 1980s many prominent civil rights movements and radical countercultural movements of the 60s and 70s such as the Black Liberation and American Indian Movements had been repressed and/or began losing momentum. Worn down by government attacks (see COINTELPRO), rising inflation, foreign and domestic policy turmoil and concerns over rising drug-related crime; the dreams of these movements were increasingly eroded and replaced by a wave of conservatism, institutionalized social programs, anti-social economic policies, and declining political life going into the 1980s. The Chicano Movement was no exception, and by the start of the Reagan era the movement had already begun to lose steam and, as a whole, was winding down.

Harry Simón Salazar, an educator and member of the Central Committee (the national leadership of UdB) detailed the first initial years of the organization's existence. "By 1981, a lot of the movimiento organizations had kind of declined,



Photo by Robert Camacho.

and part of the process to push back against that was when UdB was founded," Simón Salazar said.

Many veteran activists and organizers recognized the lack of a politically militant organization to serve the needs of the barrio, Simón Salazar elaborated on initial goals that the founder's set out to achieve. "UdB was originally founded by members that had participated in a whole range of different activities and organizations. When they got together to found Unión it was really to prioritize a multi-issue, barrio-based organization that would be able to do multiple types of community work at the same time and pick up the best qualities of the Chicana/Chicano Movement of the 60s and 70s, while also analyzing and critiquing its mistakes and overcoming its limitations."

UdB was officially founded on August 29, 1981 with the organization's first meeting held at the home of Ernesto Bustillos in Barrio Logan, San Diego. Within a few weeks UdB's membership would expand to a total of seventeen members who formed the org's first general membership.

Needless to say, the original founding members of UdB came from a rich tapestry of barrio-based organizing and activism. With members having backgrounds in Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), the United Farm Workers (UFW), the Brown Berets, La Raza Unida Party, and the Chicano Park Steering Committee; each member had anywhere between ten to fifteen years of experience.

Unión del Barrio



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While its membership was composed of a myriad of different individuals, all were unified with the goal of prioritizing the interest and self-defense of the barrio's working-class community and ultimately "building a people's organization capable of defending the democratic rights and class interests of la Raza."

Harry Simón Salazar's involvement with UdB began almost thirty years ago, after becoming a member in 1992. Simón Salazar had previously joined the Brown Berets de Aztlán when founder David Rico Sr. decided to re-establish the organization in the early 90s.

"When I came in, I was about eighteen, and I was actually a Brown Beret de Aztlán beforehand," Simón Salazar said. "I was a member of the Raza Rights Coalition and I was a journalist for a campus newspaper at UCSD called *Voz Fronteriza*, I joined multiple groups and got my political education slowly but surely."

Simón Salazar's abilities as a journalist caught the eye of UdB, and he eventually became a full member of the group "...because I was into international politics and class struggle, and Unión was more in line with that," Simón Salazar said.

Today, Simón Salazar also co-coordinates UdB's Saturday school called Escuela Aztlan which UdB has maintained since the 80s. The program is an independent Saturday School organized by educators and youth organizers of UdB to help develop cultural and political consciousness among young people in the barrio; as well as help build the organization's long-term vision of an independent "Raza liberation school."

Likewise, UdB also organizes a political education/advocacy project known as the Chicano Mexicano Prison Project; a program with the goal of raising community consciousness (both inside and outside of prisons) about ways the U.S. prison system systematically oppresses Raza through intimidation, incarceration, and family separation.

UdB's work, however, is by no means regulated to an intellectual capacity, nor to the confines of lectures or the classroom. For years UdB has organized volunteer community patrols that track and warn of immigration and I.C.E. raids, and which have thwarted multiple mass arrests and deportations in the region.

"In the current period, our most consistent and noteworthy work has been the community patrols," Simón Salazar said. "We've received state-wide and national media attention for the fact that we're organized to both pursue and push back against I.C.E. and migra raids in the barrio."

In fact, in 2019 the self-defense arm of Unión's work is perhaps more relevant than ever before. Under a Trump administration that promotes rising hate crimes against Chicanos and Latinos, deadly attacks in Gilroy, California and El Paso, Texas carried out by white nationalists explicitly targeting Mexicans and the continued targeting of Chicano Park by white nationalists and right-wing extremists, the direct actions of self-defense by UdB has received more mainstream attention than ever before in its thirty-eight-year history.

Simón Salazar illustrated renewed relevancy of UdB's self-defense platform in the aftermath of the 2016 election. "For so many years

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everything we were doing seemed like it was way out on the edges of what our community needed. So many people saw us as out on the periphery, we were ‘those radicals.’ But, under Trumpism we’re one of the few organizations that make sense by organizing the active self-defense of our barrios,” Simón Salazar explained.

“Trump could disappear tomorrow, but Trumpism will have its boot on our neck long after Trump is gone from the scene. There’s a whole body of people that have identified our community as the enemy of their future and they’re betting their political future on wiping us out.”

With the residual effects of Trump’s presidency still feeding into continued hostility towards the community, particularly against Chicano Park, Simón Salazar stressed UdB’s move to put the organization on a self-defense footing. “We have to prepare, develop, and advance our ability to defend our barrios by any means necessary,” Simón Salazar explained. “We’ve had to protect Chicano Park in coalition with the Brown Berets de Aztlán and other community organizations, as well as protect the barrio from migra, I.C.E. raids, and police brutality.”

Simón Salazar lamented the increasingly aggressive behavior that San Diego Police has displayed not only when patrolling in Chicano Park, but particularly against members of political organizations in the surrounding neighborhood as well.

“There’s been a new hostility to Chicano Park and to those of us that in one way or another are connected to the history of the park,” Simón Salazar claimed. “We’ve seen a noticeable increase in the aggression of San Diego PD against political activities in the neighborhood. Anybody that’s been around San Diego for any length of time, that’s involved with any kind of progressive politics down with communities knows that this [Chicano Park] represents the beating heart of political struggle in all of San Diego county. And as long as we have his park, then our community has a voice and has a little bit of power that is our own.”

Simón Salazar concluded by saying, “Really the survival of our communities depends a lot on this park, I’m not talking metaphorically. This is literally the beating heart of our people’s struggle. San Diego PD knows that - the Alt-Right, the white nationalists, and those Trumpers - they all know that; that’s really why they have the park in their crosshairs.”

With the 2010’s coming to a close and the prospect of a potential second Trump term looming ahead, UdB is dedicated more than ever to going into the new decade ready to fight and defend the rights and interests of the barrio’s working class. Simón Salazar stressed that in the coming months and years the pivotal battles against fascism will be fought in neighborhoods like Logan Heights.

“The frontlines of anti-fascist struggle in the United States is in our barrios, it’s right here,” Simón Salazar said. “The cornerstone of Trumpism is anti-Raza politics, and the measure of Trump’s success and his presidency will be based on how heavily they bring the hammer down on our communities.”

Simón Salazar also expressed the importance of planning down the line, as threats to the barrio will still continue to exist regardless of who occupies the White House in the future. “People may be able to vote that human garbage [Trump] out of the White House, but Trumpism has been unleashed. It’s a socio-cultural phenomenon operating on the level of mainstream United States political culture, and it won’t simply go away with him out of office.”

Ultimately Simón Salazar concluded by highlighting the importance of principled, structured barrio organizing. “What we have to do is organize, if people are not members or don’t belong to an organization that defends the barrio, then they’re part of the problem. “We have to live the change that we want, and if you’re not living the change that you want then you’re just reproducing the system as it is.”