

REPORT ON TRIP TO PUERTO RICO AND SEPTEMBER 23 CELEBRATION

By Linda W. Oct. 4, 1968

September 23rd was the 100 year celebration of the first revolts in Puerto Rico for independence. One hundred years ago the town of Lares was virtually taken over by a pro-independence movement against Spanish domination. The revolt was smashed by Spanish troops before it was able to reach other parts of the country. Thirty years later Spanish domination was replaced by U.S. domination, and today Puerto Rico remains a colony. Their struggle for independence continues. The first revolt for independence occurred at the same time as the Cuban revolt for independence and the success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 has been an enormous inspiration for the Puerto Ricans.

A rally in Lares was called by several organizations in commemoration of the event. The organizations which clearly did all the organizing, publicity, and mobilized by far the majority of the people were MPI (Movimiento Pro-Independencia), FUPI (Federacion Universitario Pro-Independencia) and FEPI (Federacion de Estudiantes Pro-Independencia -- a high school organization).

Monday, September 23rd, was not a national holiday in Puerto Rico. It was a work day and classes were not suspended (in fact, many pro-government professors gave exams that day to keep students from going). Also, Lares is about 3½ hours from San Juan by bus. In spite of these obstacles, 20,000 people attended the celebration. The number in itself is significant, but it reflects a much larger number because of the circumstances described. Transportation, for instance, was a real problem. On the bus that I went on, which took high school students from one school, there were about 70 students, and I'm sure that three buses could have been filled if they had been available. In that particular high school, it was reported the next day that about 40% of the students boycotted classes in solidarity. That was probably the case in many other schools as well.

The rally was made up primarily of young workers and students. The cultural part of the program centered around the freeing of the slaves which was one of the principle demands in 1868. While the revolt itself was smashed, it did result in the freeing of the slaves shortly afterwards. The entire cultural program was directed and produced by Mrs. Piri Fernandez de Lewis, probably the best known cultural authority in Puerto Rico. Mrs. Lewis is also the Director of the Committee to Defend Puerto Rican Youth Against the Draft.

The political part of the rally included speakers from the Communist Party of Puerto Rico; the Socialist League (a small, very sectarian Maoist group, the counterpart of Progressive Labor here); the Independence Party (a bourgeois reformist party that is for independence in name only); and Juan Mari Bras, Secretary General of the MPI. In his speech Mari Bras called for unconditional struggle against colonialism, related the Puerto Rican struggle to the freedom struggle of Vietnam, and also gave support to an underground group called the Armed Commandos for Liberation. Mari Bras was received far better than any other speaker. Because of the size of the rally and the response to Mari Bras' speech, MPI, FUPI, and FEPI, considered the rally a tremendous success.

MPI probably has about 3,000 active members and about as many close sympathizers. Remember that Puerto Rico has only about 3½ million people. FUPI has about 6 or 7 hundred members, but I was unable to get a definite estimate. It is the only political organization on the campuses and has chapters in every university in Puerto Rico -- the main one being the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras. While organizationally separate, FUPI and MPI are in political agreement and their leaderships overlap to a great extent. FEPI, the high school group, has been unable up until now to develop a national structure. They have several members in many of the high schools and the chapters in each high school work independently. They are able to get together on some actions. For example, last year they were able to organize opposition to U.S. Army recruiters. Many of the FEPI leaders were suspended because of these actions. A large part of the FUPI leadership, much of which is also MPI leadership, started out in FEPI.

Their primary demand, of course, is for Puerto Rican independence. They are carrying on a boycott campaign for the presidential elections, and also call for draft resistance. All members of FUPI and MPI refuse to go into the service. FUPI officially condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia, whereas the MPI took no official stand. Having an older membership, MPI has a number of old Stalinists which FUPI does not have.

A number of American groups were represented in Puerto Rico. The Communist Party sent five or six people, including Grace Mora Newman, Ron Lucas, and Jose Stevens. Constance Ullman, who writes for the Guardian, was there representing SDS. I was told that SNCC sent several people but I didn't see any of them. Ramparts was represented as well as the Guardian. None of these people stayed around the political centers during the week-end. I visited the different MPI missions, the newspaper office, the magazine office, and talked to most of the leaders.

One of the main reasons for my trip was to firm up arrangements for a tour of one of the FUPI leaders. 25 students, including most of the FUPI leadership, are being accused of "inciting to riot," "destroying private property," and other charges as a result of a demonstration in September of 1967. The demonstration was attacked by the cops and a taxicab driver was killed, four students shot, and many beaten. FUPI had originally invited YSA, SDS, and the Anti-Imperialist Coalition to help build a defense committee here and set up a tour for one of the defendants. We have been trying unsuccessfully to get SDS to act on this with us, but since the trial is November 12, we wanted to go ahead and set up the tour. FUPI was unable to give us a definite name and date, but I am confident that this will come through shortly. They were very anxious to arrange the tour.

The FUPI leadership is extremely friendly towards the YSA. They consider us the most important socialist youth group in the United States and agree with us on many questions. For instance, I attended a FUPI Executive Committee meeting, and was the only American invited. They consider themselves Marxists-Leninists, pro-Castro, and are very hostile to the Stalinists, especially the Latin American Communist Parties. They are very internationally conscious. Manuel de J. Gonzales, President of FUPI, became a sponsor of the Committee to Aid the French Students. I got an interview with him which will appear in the November Young Socialist. They are familiar with the Militant, the Young Socialist, and the USLA Reporter, even though it is difficult for many of them to read English. When I asked the Editor of their newspaper, Claridad, if he got the Militant regularly, he said, "Of course, I get a lot of my articles from there." I do want to make it clear that when I speak of FUPI and FEPI leadership I am referring to 15 or 20 people and that there is a gap between the leadership and the rank and file members.

The buttons I took were very popular, especially the VIVA CHE button and the Black Panther button. The JCR button was also popular. Our campaign material was not so popular, but that is because they are in the midst of a boycott campaign.

While they do call for draft resistance, they do not criticize our orientation towards the troops, but are in fact very interested in it and impressed with its effects. An interesting thing happened along these lines. When the bus stopped for lunch a few American soldiers were walking by and the students began to shout, "Yanqui go home!" The soldiers replied, "We're trying, we're trying." The students thought that was great.

I was very impressed with FEPI and the high school activities. I stayed at the home of one of the FEPI leaders and was therefore able to learn quite a bit about FEPI. The 6 or 7 members of FEPI that I met were extremely political and very friendly towards us. In one newsletter put out in a high school, the YSA was mentioned as having sent a statement of solidarity and offering to sponsor a tour. The leader that I stayed with was openly anti-Stalinist and his analysis of France sounded as though it came straight from the Militant, although I found out later that he hadn't read it.

About 15% of Puerto Rico is black, although a much larger percentage is part black to varying degrees. I found three different levels of consciousness on this question. By far the large majority of Puerto Ricans, including rank and file members of MPI and FUPI, say that there is no racism in Puerto Rico and say it very adamantly. They will say that there are class prejudices but no racial prejudices and point to the fact that they all have some black heritage.

The FUPI and MPI leadership are on a different level. They say that there is some racial prejudice, that it is very complicated, and that it is not an open, clear-cut problem. They have not analyzed it as a separate political problem in Puerto Rico but are to some degree conscious of it.

Thirdly, I spoke to one of the 25 Accused who is black, and who saw the problem completely differently. He not only felt that there was racism in Puerto Rico, but spoke of what he called an Afro-Puerto Rican culture which he thought was slowly developing. He felt there was a need for a black organization -- meaning mainly a cultural rather than a political organization. I spoke only to two people who were thinking on this level in regard to the black struggle.

In spite of the difference in levels on the black struggle in Puerto Rico, all the pro-independence Puerto Ricans identify very closely with the black struggle here. Carmichael spoke there last year and the point that he made is cited over and over -- that blacks are an exploited colony within the U.S. and the Puerto Ricans are an exploited colony outside. They follow the black struggle in the U.S. with great interest. They ask about Newton and Carmichael and it seemed that it was well known that black soldiers had refused to go to Chicago. The Black Panthers were very popular.

The leaders were very interested in our relations with the Black Panthers. I mentioned our work with them in Seattle, the coverage in the Militant and the Young Socialist, the fact that they spoke at our forums in different cities, our work in the Newton defense, etc. I got the feeling that they partly judged our seriousness towards self-determination and colonialism by our attitude towards the black struggle.