

NOTES ON PUERTO RICO FOR SNCC

May 1, 1967

(These notes are in no sense a full study of the island; they mainly cover three areas which should be of particular interest to SNCC people. These areas are: 1) colonialism and the Puerto Rican independence movement; 2) the Puerto Rican plebiscite coming up in July, 1967; 3) anti-draft activity in Puerto Rico.)

BASIC BACKGROUND:

Total population: 2.7 million

Population of San Juan (capital): 600,000

Resident Americans: 50,000

Resident Cubans (mostly anti-Castro): 40,000

The class structure of Puerto Rico does not suggest a colony at first glance.

The population is mulatto, and ranges from white to black. There is no racism comparable to that of the U.S. There are no great landed estates, i.e., plantations; the biggest, with 50-80,000 acres, belongs to the Brewer Co., an American company with large holdings in Hawaii. But: most of the upper-class makes its money in business, importing, banking--all of which have close U.S. ties and depend on U.S. credits. There is a large middle-class, about equivalent to that of Cuba before the Revolution. Many of these people live in housing projects, of both apartments and small private homes. Constant construction gives the impression of "progress." This class is also dependent upon and influenced by the U.S. Those least affected by the Americanization of the island are the rural people and urban slum-dwellers (like people in La Perla, the community described in Oscar Lewis' book LA VIDA).

Puerto Rico has a typical colonial economy, with small variations. In the past, the island exported--when it exported--only such products as sugar, rum, tobacco, coffee and pineapple. No manufactured goods, and still none. (Stokely(!) Van Camp canned foods.) Today, the trend is toward industrial raw materials: copper, petrol. There is some local industry, producing such items as shoes. Most food is imported, even rice (a diet staple), and food costs run about 1/3 higher than in the U.S. American industry on the island is not taxed, although the government has the power to do so. Up to now, foreign light industry has come

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in and reaped vast profits on the basis of the 10-year tax exemption; then they leave. The government is now trying to promote foreign heavy industry, which is less likely to pull out after the 10-year period. The general policy, however, remains to give all concessions to the U.S. As for labor, more than 50% is not organized. Those who are organized belong to the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO.

Culturally, two things can be said about Puerto Rico:

"There is no place where colonial penetration is more flagrant."

"San Juan today is like Havana was before the Revolution -- the Americans' whorehouse."

Although Puerto Rico speaks Spanish and has its own Latin culture, 90% of the consumer business is dominated by U.S. companies; everywhere, you see signs of the U.S. -- Texaco gas stations, Sears Roebuck, Lerner's for women's clothing, Chase Manhattan Bank, Borden's Milk, shopping centers with English names like "Bargain Town." Private schools in Puerto Rico continue to teach Spanish as a "subject," a foreign language; other classes are held in English. At the Puerto Rican Junior College, one of these private schools, the textbook for the Spanish class is an English textbook -- oriented to English-speaking students. In the public schools, it took a long fight -- from 1898 to 1940 -- to change the official language from English to Spanish.

A special word about the Cuban refugees: they are reactionary and skilled, therefore they have obtained key jobs in the media and other influential areas. They are often involved in demonstrations against the Independence movement -- for example, the attack on the march in which Stokely participated during his visit there.

I. COLONIALISM AND THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony until the Spanish-American War of 1898,

when the U.S. graciously "liberated" it.

In 1900, the Foraker Law was passed regulating the relationship of Puerto Rico to the United States. It graciously allowed the Puerto Rican people to elect a Resident Commissioner. In 1917, this law was changed and U.S. citizenship was "granted" to Puerto Rico (Jones Act). The upper classes said this was a big concession granted in response to intensive demands by the people. This is not true; the Union Party, for example, opposed citizenship because it would close the door to independence. The Resident Commissioner, Munoz Rivera, opposed it although he was basically a reformist. Even the Legislature rejected citizenship after it was "granted"; later, they began rewriting history to make an imposition into a concession.

There was nothing resembling an independence movement at that time; it began in 1907-13, when the Liga de Patriotas (League of Patriots) was formed. But they basically advocated "autonomy" or statehood (like Hawaii, Alaska) rather than independence itself.

In 1922, the Nationalist Party was born. It flowered from 1930-50, with organized, armed uprisings. Led by Albizu Campos. This was the period of the Ponce Massacre, when 18 Nationalists were killed and 200 injured by machine-gunning cops. The Governor had revoked their permission to have a march in the town of Ponce and they began marching anyway; the cops mowed them down (but 2 cops got it, too). In 1950, the Nationalists took several towns and the Governor's mansion before the National Guard bombed them out. In 1954, Nationalists shot at Congressmen in Washington, D.C. -- the last armed uprising.

Albizu was brought to trial but not convicted the first time; for a second trial, the jury was picked in the Governor's mansion with all Americans or Uncle Toms (called "pitiyanquis in Puerto Rico), and Albizu Campos was convicted. They sent him to a federal penitentiary in Atlanta, Georgia, on the charge of conspiring

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to overthrow the government (good old Georgia), where he stayed from 1936-46.

He was released; went back to Puerto Rico; was imprisoned again. Got sick, released; jailed again. He was released in 1965 because he was dying anyway; after his death, 100,000 people came to pay their respects at his casket.

In 1946, the P.I.P. (Partido Independencia Puerterriqueno) was formed to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of the Nationalist Party. It became the second largest political party in Puerto Rico and polled second in the 1952 elections. But it was a reformist, old-Left, electoral-type party which rejected violence. Some of its members left and formed a new group which became the M.P.I. -- MOVIMIENTO PRO INDEPENDENCIA. This is one of the two groups with whom SNCC has signed a pledge of mutual support. Formed in 1959.

Three years before, the F.U.P.I. -- FEDERACION UNIVERSITARIOS PRO INDEPENDENCE, university students for independence -- was formed. This is the other group with whom SNCC has signed pledge of support.

Meanwhile, in 1950, the U.S. had passed "Law 600" granting Puerto Rico the right to make its own Constitution -- with the limitation that it couldn't make a constitution for independence. "Law 600" was put to a referendum of the Puerto Rican people and they accepted it. An election was held to choose a Constitutional Convention, which then drew up the Constitution. The U.S. objected to some articles in it, such as one on the right to work -- said it was "Communist." The Constitutional Convention accepted the change and so did the people. That Constitution established the present status of Puerto Rico, called "Estado Libre Asociado" or COMMONWEALTH. This is what Puerto Rico is today. Nothing changed except that Puerto Rico had a Constitution.

In 1962, Kennedy corresponded with Governor Munoz Marin (son of Munoz Rivera), who told JFK that it was time for Puerto Rico to have more autonomy. JFK agreed. A plebiscite was planned. The Puerto Rican legislature passed a resolution establishing certain standards that Commonwealth status would have to meet; these

included having certain functions of decision-making pass to Puerto Rico. But the statehood people were opposed; also the U.S. Navy, Dept. of State, Dept. of Commerce and Dept. of Agriculture. Needless to say, no plebiscite was held.

Later, a Status Commission was set up, also to provide for growth "within the commonwealth status." It included 7 Americans and 6 Puerto Ricans. Of the Puerto Ricans, 3 were from the Popular Party, 2 from the Statehood Party, with an American, James Rose, as Chairman, and 1 Independista. The Popular Party, which was formed in 1938 by the United States as an answer to the Nationalist Party, has been for some years the #1 party on the island.

This superbly balanced commission studied the status of Puerto Rico for 2 years, and came out with a report in 1966. What did it conclude and recommend in its report? --

- 1) That all three forms of status -- commonwealth, statehood and independence -- had equal dignity.
- 2) That whenever problems came up, a commission should be appointed to study them.

M.P.I. AND F.U.P.I.:

M.P.I. calls its long-range goal "national liberation" rather than independence. This is because they seek political and economic independence, not just formal independence such as you find in other Latin American countries. They want "the second independence," which means getting rid of economic dependence on the U.S.

They want nationalization of all U.S. enterprises, big land-holdings, banks. They do not at present call for nationalization of all domestic Puerto Rican enterprises, except for the big public services; this position is now up for revision.

They also want freezing of the public debt: at present, every Puerto Rican
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owes the U.S. \$500 apiece of national debt.

Program: M.P.I. has only a short-range strategy, which includes demonstrations, education, and some civil disobedience. Little grass-roots organizing has been done in the past, although M.P.I. has often gone into slum-areas and helped residents protest some threat such as "urban renewal-Negro removal." One member of M.P.I., Ana Livia Cordero, has recently started a grass-roots organizing program with the goal of creating a cadre of organizers to fan out around the island after a training period in the San Juan area. M.P.I. is mainly composed of "middle-class intellectuals" but this does not mean what it would mean in the U.S. There is less of a gulf between intellectuals and masses in Puerto Rico than between white college and black student, sharecropper in the U.S.; for example, because the issue is clearer (liberation of all nationals and intellectuals have been involved from the beginning. They're not doing something "for the masses" but for themselves too, and directly.

F.U.P.I.'s goals and program are essentially the same. There is also a group of high school students for independence, called F.E.P.I., with the same goals and program. F.U.P.I. is not recognized on campuses. There are 3 universities in Puerto Rico, the most liberal being the University of Puerto Rico at San Juan. Student agitation was intensive there in the 1940's; there followed a period of repression. In 1964, there was a big student sit-in with "rioting." Afterward, the President of the University appointed a new, liberal Chancellor named Diaz Gonzalez. He allows the F.U.P.I. certain freedoms -- lets them use the Amphitheatre (Stokely spoke there). F.U.P.I. is following a wait-and-see policy with him.

Students who have put up independence posters have been harassed or arrested -- the government doesn't want visitors, especially tourists, to see that there is any independence movement. But otherwise there is relative freedom

of speech; the press can publish what it wants. Main pressures are psychological and economic. The government denies there are any political prisoners today, but there are some -- among them, people imprisoned since 1950 insurrection.

II. PLEBISCITE OF JULY 23, 1967

All through the 20th century, independence groups tried to get a plebiscite. Some of them were essentially conservative; they just wanted people to have a chance to choose. Now there is going to be one, to see if the Puerto Rican people want 1) commonwealth status, 2) statehood, or 3) independence. Why are they finally having a plebiscite? Let's look at the U.N. a minute.

In 1953, M.P.I. tried to raise the question of the colonial status of Puerto Rico before the U.N. The U.S., pointing to the Constitutional Convention of 1952, said "But they've had a plebiscite." There was a close vote, with the Latin-American satellites supporting the U.S.

In 1966, M.P.I. tried to reopen the question at the U.N. The Committee of 24 (Committee on Colonialism) agreed to hear their case. Two weeks later, at the end of a special legislative session on agriculture, the Governor of Puerto Rico suddenly introduced a law to have a plebiscite. It came out of the blue; many were opposed but were bought off, and the law was passed in record time. It seems clear that the U.S. decided to have the plebiscite in order to undercut the case of Puerto Rico at the U.N.

There are 3 choices in the plebiscite: 1) commonwealth status, as they now have; 2) statehood; 3) independence. All independence groups are opposed to the plebiscite, so \$250,000 was offered to anyone who would campaign for independence in the plebiscite (you got to make it look like real choices, you know).

The commonwealth status is almost sure to win -- the Popular Party, founded

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by the U.S. in 1938, will use its machinery to take care of that.

Some groups in the Popular Party, particularly youth groups, oppose the plebiscite. In the Statehood Party, one group opposes it. Among the people, there is widespread apathy. M.P.I., which is urging people to boycott the plebiscite, will use this period to create political discussion and raise questions about the electoral process.

Meanwhile, back at the U.N., Puerto Rico had the support of Tanzania, Mali, the U.S.S.R., Syria -- about 7-8 countries out of 24. A resolution was proposed which would have put Puerto Rico on the list of "colonies," and therefore made conditions open to investigation. But the Committee of 24 tabled this resolution. M.P.I. has never had any illusions about what the U.S.-controlled U.N. would do; they just wanted to use the U.N. as a platform and make the U.S. uncomfortable internationally.

III. THE DRAFT AND ROTC

Puerto Ricans living on the island have been eligible for the draft since 1917, when U.S. citizenship was "granted." Until a few years ago, hundreds of Puerto Ricans had refused to be drafted but their cases never went to court. A letter saying, in effect, "I refuse to be drafted because I don't recognize the sovereignty of the United States" was usually accepted and they were allowed not to serve. So no cases went to court until the case of Sexto Alvelo; MPI wanted to force the issue. Lawyers for Alvelo were Rabinowitz and Boudin of New York. The Comite pro Defense de Sexto Alvelo was formed, independent of MPI and led by Bill Fernandez (now on the U.N. Committee of 24).

The plan was that Alvelo would take the physical, and then refuse to swear allegiance to the flag. He did, was arrested shortly after. But: when the case finally reached the court (U.S. Federal Court), the Court ruled that Alvelo had

been mistaken: as long as he stepped across line, he could serve without swearing allegiance! The case was shelved. Alvelo and 6 others free.

Anti-draft activity has continued, with demonstrations in a number of towns. The biggest demonstration in the recent history of Puerto Rico was held on April 16, 1967 with 10-15,000 people; it was the 50th anniversary of the death of Jose de Diego, a Puerto Rican hero of the early independence movement.

Demands were:

- 1) Elimination of compulsory military service
- 2) Reject U.S. citizenship and recognize P.R. citizenship
- 3) U.N. Committee on Colonialism should examine the case of Puerto Rico
- 4) Condemnation of contracts being secretly made between government and subsidiaries of the American Metal Company and the Kennecott Company (also U.S.) for development of copper mines. These were secret until MPI revealed negotiations
- 5) Rejection of plebiscite