RADICAL IMAGINATION, RADICAL HUMANITY

PUERTO RICAN POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN NEW YORK

ROSE MUZIO

Radical Imagination,
Radical Humanity

SUNY series, Praxis: Theory in Action

Nancy A. Naples, editor

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Puerto Rican Political Activism in New York

ROSE MUZIO

Cover photo of Operation Move-in Rally, 1971; taken by Máximo Colón.

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Foreword

by Victor Quintana

This book tells the story of El Comité-MINP (*Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño,* Puerto Rican National Left Movement)—the story of its founders, members, and leaders. For those who were members, such as myself, our participation in this organization was a pivotal period in our personal and political lives. It forever shaped us as people and political actors.

To understand the motivations of the individuals who founded El Comité and its members and supporters for over a decade, it is essential to understand the history and the social, economic, and political context from which the organization arose. A starting point for that analysis is the late 1940s.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States from Puerto Rico, primarily to New York City. Most of those migrants were young people in their twenties and thirties. Many came with young families. Most had been raised in rural communities, where subsistence farming or working in sugar cane plantations was the way of eking out a living. Some of their children would become the radicals of the 1960s and '70s.

The impetus for the mass migration was a series of policy decisions made by the first Puerto Rican–elected government under U.S. colonial rule. Luis Muñoz Marin, who for many years before becoming governor supported independence for Puerto Rico, was the head of the government. Encouraging migration was a central feature of the Muñoz government's economic development strategy, known as Operation Bootstrap. The government's goal was to transform Puerto Rico from an economy based on sugar cane production, which was losing market share to other sugar cane producers in the United States and internationally, to a manufacturing center for U.S. corporations seeking

cheap labor. For its strategy to succeed, the Muñoz administration determined that it had to do two things: reduce the number of "excess" workers on the island, but also retain a critical mass of skilled and semi-skilled workers that could be the workforce for a new manufacturing-based economy. The reality was that tens of thousands of workers were underemployed or unemployed, a daunting economic and political problem for the Muñoz government.

As is the case with all immigrants, those who participated in the mass migration from Puerto Rico to New York City were risk-takers. However, the decision to face challenges of language, culture, and survival was made easier by the opportunity to escape poverty and deprivation. What made the risk-taking a plausible option was that in New York City in the late 1940s and 1950s, unlike now, manufacturing and service jobs were not difficult to find. However, despite low-wage employment opportunities in New York City and elsewhere in the United States, Puerto Ricans, Blacks, and other people of color faced racist discrimination, poverty, and social marginalization.

The children of the risk-takers, who were raised in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s, were taught a sanitized history of the United States. The founders of the nation were portrayed as lovers of democracy, equality, and justice. Never mentioned was their fealty to the rights of property owners and the wealthy over the rights of working people, as well as their opposition to women having any civil rights. There was also little mention of the fact that most of the founders were slaveholders and that embedded in the Constitution they crafted was a provision that legitimized counting Black slaves as three-fifths of a person. The history we were taught portrayed the genocide of native peoples as a struggle between courageous pioneers advancing civilization while battling barbarians, that is, the indigenous peoples of North America.

Also, in the sanitized version of American history to which we were exposed, the wars that were waged to create a nation that spans from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans and that has territories in the Pacific and Caribbean Oceans were the results of righteous crusades against an authoritarian and tyrannical Mexican government and a decadent imperialist Spanish monarchy.

Another feature of being raised in the 1950s and 1960s was being culturally and politically marinated in anti-communism and Cold War hysteria. The Soviet Union, along with countries in the socialist camp, was the hated, godless enemy, and people in the United States who espoused "communist" ideas or sympathized with the "Reds" were traitors. Any cause that the "Russians" supported was suspect, particularly the movements of Asian, African, and Latin American peoples for self-determination and sovereignty, even if those struggles were against brutal colonizers, old or new.

The social movements that developed in the 1960s and 1970s challenged this historiography. This was particularly true for those, like myself, who joined the U.S. military and served in Vietnam. As a result, many young people, particularly from minority communities, were open to different interpretations of American history that explained why the United States was rife with racial discrimination, extreme poverty in a sea of wealth, and wars of intervention in foreign lands, such as Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. The change of consciousness we experienced resulted from confronting the real nature of the American political economy: a political economy that is steeped in systemic racism, male and class privilege, and intent on safeguarding the international political and economic hegemony of the United States.

The people's struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s for civil rights, worker rights, decent and affordable housing, quality and accessible health care, and to end the Vietnam War spawned many grassroots organizations, particularly in communities of color. El Comité was one of those organizations.

In the summer of 1970, the individuals who formed El Comité engaged in their first collective action. After a routine pickup softball game in Central Park, they collected money from among themselves and local residents and bought ice cream for neighborhood kids on West 87th Street and Columbus Avenue, where they usually gathered to socialize and drink beer. That selfless action was the genesis of El Comité.

The organization soon followed the "ice cream action" by supporting two hundred families who were occupying various city-owned buildings across the street from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. With that action, El Comité undertook its first political campaign. Motivated by the success it had in stopping the demolition of those buildings, El Comité became a leader in the Squatters Movement in the Upper West Side to prevent other city-owned buildings from being demolished under the guise of promoting urban renewal. Throughout its history, El Comité made a concerted effort to have its members engaged in grassroots community and workplace struggles—sometimes with success, and other times not.

El Comité's role in the Squatters Movement led to its involvement in the struggle for a bilingual program for public school students in New York City's District 3, which consisted of neighborhoods in Harlem and the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Some of the members of El Comité had children attending schools in the district. After a number of parent mobilizations and meetings with elected and educational officials, the campaign for a bilingual education program in District 3 succeeded. Significantly, the victory included the right of parents to oversee the program. A key reason that the campaign

succeeded was the alliance achieved among progressive white parents on the West Side and Black and Latino parents in Harlem and the West Side. Subsequently, El Comité became involved in education struggles on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

El Comité's early victories in housing and education in the West Side and education in the Lower East Side eventually spurred the transition of the organization from one focused mainly on local community struggles to one having a broader and more radical agenda. Although the West Side and Lower East Side communities won a few significant victories in which El Comité played a leading role, too many residents continued to face underemployment, unemployment, discrimination, poverty, and other injustices. These realities generated discussions in the organization about the struggles taking place in other parts of the city around housing, jobs, education, health care, and other issues. It also led to an awareness of other groups involved in those struggles. Some of those groups had a race and class analysis; others did not. As a result of those discussions, El Comité emerged committed to addressing the systemic causes of the inequality and political marginalization that plagued Puerto Rican communities.

At the same time these broad social justice discussions were occurring, El Comité became aware of organizations in the city engaged in efforts to support Puerto Rico's independence, particularly the *Movimiento Pro-Independencia* (MPI, Pro-Independence Movement). El Comité's membership was diverse, but a predominance of the members and close supporters were Puerto Rican, and those who weren't were raised among Puerto Ricans or had Puerto Rican relatives or spouses. This reality made support for Puerto Rico's independence emotionally, intellectually, and politically compelling.

Among the organizations whose activities attracted the attention of El Comité early on were the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party. Both organizations openly declared that they were committed to advancing socialist principles and goals, including supporting independence for Puerto Rico. Other influences in transforming the ideological and political agenda of El Comité were the self-determination struggles of the Cuban and Vietnamese peoples, both of which were frequently covered in Left newspapers and periodicals and had strong supporters among progressives and radicals of all stripes.

Like many similar organizations across the country, El Comité quickly morphed into a radical organization as it responded to the zeitgeist of the moment, which was about questioning established institutions and their worldview. It adopted a class and racial critique of U.S. society and its governmental institutions and rejected U.S. foreign policy, while at the same time opposing the role that U.S. multinational corporations were playing in shaping the poli-

cies of international capitalism. As a predominantly Puerto Rican organization, El Comité believed that it had a particular responsibility to support the Puerto Rican independence movement and to educate broadly about the U.S. colonial rule of Puerto Rico.

In 1975, in an assembly of its members, El Comité defined itself as a Marxist-Leninist organization, aspiring to become El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican National Left Movement). In the 1970s, Marxist-Leninist organizations, like El Comité, were active in every region of the United States and in every major city. The young people involved with these organizations were imbued with the idealism of youth and the belief that radical social transformation was possible.

In 1977, a group of El Comité-MINP members, including three founders (among these was Federico Lora, a founder of the organization and its initial leader), relocated to Puerto Rico. For a couple of years prior to their departure, these individuals had made it known that their priority was to live in Puerto Rico and participate in the island's independence and workers' movements. Their departure deprived the organization of a number of skilled and committed political leaders and organizers. More important, the leadership roles these individuals played in shaping the culture of the organization were never adequately filled.

Once in Puerto Rico, two of the former members, Noel Colón and Pedro Rentas, joined the island's Teamsters Union, Local 901, which had members in the hotel industry, trucking, the docks, and manufacturing firms. Over the course of nearly two decades of rank-and-file organizing, they contributed to making the union more democratic and a leader in Puerto Rico's social justice issues, such as the campaign to oppose the privatization of public utilities and to end the Navy's use of Vieques, a small island off the northeast coast of Puerto Rico, as a firing range. In 1999, Colón was elected president of the union. Unfortunately, in November 2001, a corrupt organizer, who Colón intended to fire, murdered him. Colon's death was an irreplaceable loss to the union, to Puerto Rico's labor movement, and to the independence movement.

Like many other organizations of its day, El Comité suffered an organizational division that contributed to its demise. Nevertheless, it contributed to advancing social justice in this country, particularly in New York City and Long Island, and to raising awareness of and support for ending Puerto Rico's colonial status, which has distorted its history, created mass migrations to the United States, and limited the quality of life for millions of Puerto Ricans on the island and in the United States. Puerto Rico has never experienced sovereignty or self-determination. A cornerstone of El Comité's political priorities was to help change that reality.

Throughout the history of El Comité-MINP, the young people who dedicated years of their lives to its principles were representatives of the community they aimed to serve. As the organization matured and expanded its mission, objectives, and geographic reach, it strove to stay connected to the Puerto Rican community. Most members came from neighborhood, workplace, or educational struggles. A minority came from international solidarity causes, such as support for the Cuban Revolution. The members were products of different life experiences and had a variety of skills. There were housewives, students, artists, ex-marines, ex-offenders, gays, straights, and numerous other identities. But they were all bound together by their determination—some more than others—to serve their community and make a better world.

El Comité-MINP shaped the political consciousness of hundreds of people who either served as members or interacted intimately with the organization. Their lives were forever informed by what they learned and did while involved with the organization. Many former members, in their own ways, have tried—in the words of the Black Panther Party—to serve the people "mind, body, and soul!" In many instances, their children share their concern for social and economic justice and act on those beliefs in the ways that they find effective and possible.

Historical amnesia and mythmaking are all too prominent in American culture. It is important that an accurate as possible documentation be made of the organizations, peoples, and personalities that have taken the risks to advance equality, democracy, and justice in the United States. This book by Rose Muzio, who was an active member of El Comité-MINP, is a contribution to that accounting. It adds to the knowledge of the challenges radicals faced, and alerts current and future activists for social justice to the need to be adaptive in the face of state and non-state institutions that can use their enormous resources to discredit, isolate, and dismantle social and political movements.

This book is being published at a time when Puerto Rico's colonial reality is vividly highlighted by an economic and political crisis, which dramatically exposes the limited political powers that Puerto Rico's elected officials have to make decisions that benefit the interests of the Puerto Rican people rather than those of U.S. corporate interests. It also highlights the role of migration during periods of crisis.

Since the Great Migration of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the largest migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States has occurred in the past fifteen years, numbering nearly 400,000. This time the overwhelming majority have not relocated to New York City, Chicago, or Philadelphia, which were the most common post–World War II destinations. The latest migrants have

settled in Florida, Texas, North Carolina, and Virginia, because these states offer them the possibility of obtaining employment to support their families.

Like their counterparts in the 1940s and 1950s, many recent migrants are young families. However, unlike the participants in the first Great Migration, who were primarily former sugar cane workers and subsistence farmers, among the current migrants are many professionals and skilled workers. The reason for this mass exodus of Puerto Ricans from the island is an economy that has been in recession for decades. For years, Puerto Rico has suffered from double-digit unemployment. The current official unemployment rate is 15 percent, but that number does not capture the people who have dropped out of the workforce after years of failing to obtain employment and those who work part-time or make a living in the underground economy of services and products, some of which are illegal.

Operation Bootstrap succeeded in the 1950s and early 1960s in attracting American manufacturers interested in increasing their profits by employing skilled and semi-skilled workers at wages significantly lower than those paid in the United States. In the 1970s and 1980s, those employers left Puerto Rico for countries where they could pay their workers even less. What allowed Puerto Rico in the 1980s and 1990s to stem the hemorrhaging of jobs was a tax benefit in the Internal Revenue Code, known as Section 936, which allowed U.S. corporations operating in Puerto Rico to obtain tax-free profits. Many corporations took advantage of 936, particularly pharmaceutical firms. In 1996, Congress voted to sunset Section 936, officially ending the program in 2006. Since then, most of the corporations that had established operations in Puerto Rico to take advantage of 936 have left entirely or downsized extensively.

Between 2001 and 2007, Puerto Rico's economy experienced a precipitous decline in its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the standard measure of economic growth. The rate of growth dropped from 10 percent in 2001 to –3.3 percent by 2007. During the same years, the Puerto Rican government, with the complicity of Wall Street financial firms, issued billions of dollars in bonds at high interest rates to fund major capital projects. The 2008 financial collapse of Wall Street, triggered by the subprime mortgage schemes, dealt yet another severe blow to Puerto Rico's economy. The Great Recession, as it came to be known, intensified the crisis Puerto Rico was facing. Companies failed or reduced their activities, tens of thousands of workers lost their jobs (including public employees), migration to United States increased dramatically, and government tax revenues plummeted. In 2014, to make interest payments on its debt, the Puerto Rican government closed a hundred public schools, fired hundreds of teachers, and reduced scores of public services.

These drastic measures failed to close the budget gap. By the beginning of 2015, the debt had ballooned from 63 percent of the island's GDP in 2000 to $72 billion, 100.2 percent of GDP. Currently, austerity is the government's operating principle. Despite budget cutting, raising fees, and increasing the sales tax, the governor, Alejandro García Padilla, has declared that the debt is unpayable in full. But the government is restricted in its options for two reasons: it is unable to declare itself eligible for Chapter 9 bankruptcy protection unless authorized by Congress, which would allow it to restructure its debt payment priorities, and Puerto Rico's Constitution states that bond holders who own General Obligation Bonds (GOB) must be paid before the government pays any other creditors. Emboldened by these realities, Wall Street hedge funds that own GOBs, which they bought at a discount from other creditors, want full payment. To obtain their portion of the debt, this group of creditors has called on the Puerto Rican government to reduce support for public education by billions of dollars, which would cripple an already inadequate system.

The economic crisis that Puerto Rico is facing and the mass migration it is generating could be the factors that give rise to new organizations like El Comité-MINP and the Young Lords, though this time they might arise in Orlando and Dallas, San Juan, Mayaguez, and Ponce, rather than Chicago and New York. Already many young Puerto Rican activists have become involved in the campaign to free the last remaining Puerto Rican political prisoner of the generation of radicals of the 1960s and 1970s, Oscar López Rivera. Oscar has been in jail for thirty-five years for organizing and advocating for Puerto Rico's independence. The movement to free Oscar has energized and motivated young people in Puerto Rico and the United States.

The young people who formed El Comité and many similar organizations in the 1960s and 1970s clearly have counterparts today. These progressive activists are as idealistic and committed as was the generation that joined the radical organizations of the 1960s and 1970s. Their ideological, organizational, and political challenges are at least as daunting—and probably more so—as those faced by prior generations of the U.S. Left, including El Comité-MINP and its cohorts. We hope that they have success in advancing participatory democracy and a transformative social and economic justice agenda for this country and internationally. Their success would benefit all the world's most vulnerable nations and peoples. A new world is possible! A new system is necessary!

Victor Quintana
First Secretary of El Comité-MINP, 1978–1982
Member, 1973–1982

Preface

This book recovers part of the political history of the Puerto Rican and Third World Left in New York in the 1970s through the lens of one organization, *El Comité-MINP* (*Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño*, Puerto Rican National Left Movement). I say Puerto Rican *and* Third World Left because El Comité was both. Most members were Puerto Rican, and their political activism was concentrated in Puerto Rican communities. Like other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left, El Comité called for the liberation of Puerto Rico from U.S. colonial rule, but that was only one part of its political agenda; its revolutionary ideology and politics were rooted in the counterhegemonic, antiracist, and class-conscious movements that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in communities of color across the country. For over a decade, El Comité was an integral part of struggles for quality housing, education, health care, and jobs, and at the same time contributed to a critique of U.S. capitalism and militarism and built momentum for a multiracial/multiethnic movement for socialism.

I was motivated to research and write about El Comité-MINP and the movements of which it was a part for several reasons. Before 1999, when Andrés Torres and José Velázquez published their volume, *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora*, several scholarly works on the Left in the 1970s associated Puerto Rican radical politics solely with Puerto Rico's independence movement. Even after the contributions in Torres and Velázquez's work discredited this assertion, the mischaracterization persisted that the Puerto Rican Left did not address the issues of concern to the people of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Besides these notions, which I knew to be untrue, in two decades of teaching I have found that many young people know a little about the Civil Rights Movement in the South in the 1960s but nothing about the movements and aspirations of the radical organizations that formed on the heels of that movement or about the history of the U.S. Left in general.

In the past decade, many studies have excavated the stories of the struggles for civil and human rights and the class analysis of Puerto Rican and other political power movements of the period. Recent work on the Young Lords has revived the conversations on the complexities of organizations of the Puerto Rican Left, their significance during the period, and the lessons that may be drawn from their experiences. Following my first interview in Puerto Rico in 2004, I was convinced that relating the story of El Comité's political activism would add multiple dimensions to the historical memory of protest politics in the 1970s and to a greater understanding of the breadth and scope of the Puerto Rican Left.

My personal and political connections to El Comité-MINP and many of its former members extend over many years. As a member from 1975 to 1981 (or 1984, depending on when one marks the ultimate demise of the organization), I participated in student protests at SUNY Old Westbury; was a member of CUANDO, a youth organization that ran cultural and college preparation programs in the building it occupied in the Lower East Side of Manhattan; and participated in the U.S. delegation to the XI International Youth Festival in Cuba in 1978. As a part of the Lower East Side Chapter, I attended weekly meetings where members discussed our political work and engaged in the year-long preparation for the organization's Assembly in 1978. For several years, I served in the "Propaganda Commission" and wrote for *Obreros en Marcha*.

My associations produced advantages and challenges for my study. Because of my involvement in the organization, I was attuned to the close relationships that existed between El Comité and the communities it helped mobilize, the deep bonds between members, and the devastating political and emotional rupture of its split in 1981. I understood, and have tried to convey in this book, the intensity of political education and commitment expected of participants. My familiarity with the organization enabled me to raise issues in interviews that otherwise might not have been addressed.

Nonetheless, despite my years of participation, I knew very little about the organization's formative years or the political environment in which it formed, and I had many questions. What conditions of nationality, race, and class gave rise to a militant, Puerto Rican organization that associated itself with the movement for socialism in the United States? How was the organization's trajectory shaped by internal processes, activism, and ideology? Were communities receptive to El Comité's politics in its different phases? What conditions changed (if any) in and beyond Puerto Rican communities as a result of this activism? To what extent, and how, were local outcomes constrained by changes

in the political environment in New York and the United States during the 1970s? I knew only a few of the founding members and had no knowledge of their early motivations or struggles. One of the difficulties in my research was setting aside my personal recollections and impressions in order to hear people's various interpretations of their experiences.

Over a span of ten years, I conducted more than three dozen individual and group interviews with former members, sympathizers, and acquaintances of El Comité who resided in a geographical spread that included all the boroughs of New York City, Long Island, upstate New York, and Miami. I traveled twice to Puerto Rico to talk with several of the founders. My interviewees represented a cross-section of the organization's membership through the years: besides the founders, members who left the organization at various stages; some who participated from start to end; members from most chapters and from both sides of the "split"; workers, students, and intellectuals; and participants of every racial and ethnic background. Some of those who shared their experiences have since passed, and I regret they did not see their recollections in print.

Drawing heavily from those interviews so that readers can hear the voices of the activists themselves, and from the organization's newspapers and internal documents, I examine El Comité's formation in the context of the political and economic environment of the period, the outcomes of its political activism, and the impact it had on its members and those who were close to it. For further historical context and to verify and supplement the accounts based on memory, I searched the collections at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at the City University of New York, Hunter College, as well as public records, media archives, and newspapers of many organizations.

El Comité was a product of historical and structural relations that oppressed national minorities in ways that were not experienced by white workers. Although its activism produced some tangible reforms, many of the conditions that gave rise to El Comité and similar groups still exist. Today, organizations such as Black Lives Matter, movements against climate change (many of which are led by indigenous peoples around the world), new immigrants and their advocates, among others, are building responses to ongoing racial injustice, marginalization of the poor and steep inequality, environmental assault, and setbacks to reproductive rights. While the separate but related struggles persist, so too does the question of how to build a broader, multinational movement of working people for more fundamental democratization.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, this book is dedicated to Carmen Ines Martell, and to all the children and grandchildren of the former members of El Comité-MINP, including my own children. Carmen accompanied this project from its inception, when she arranged the first interview of founders of El Comité in Puerto Rico in 2004, to its concluding interviews in 2015, also in Puerto Rico. She gave me her friendship and advice, while constantly reminding me that I was irritating her brain with so many questions. She used her skills as the former Secretary of Organization of El Comité-MINP to help me get organized and added key reflections in many of the group interviews I conducted. The respect and love people have for her were evident as doors opened to me simply on a word from her. Carmen continues to inspire many women by her dignified example of how to rise, time and again, to face adversity. This book would not have been possible without her.

To the younger generations whose parents and grandparents spent a period of their lives in a political organization dedicated to fighting racial and economic injustice, especially those whose childhood coincided with the life of El Comité, I hope this book helps in some small way to deepen your understanding of their political passions and the struggles that shaped the values they continue to embrace. *The future is yours.* My son, Joseph, and daughter, Carmela, have lived with the saga of my graduate studies, two dissertation projects, and this book for most of their lives. Joseph, your humor and optimism (in contrast to my lack of both) kept me laughing through the decades. I am awed by your personal and professional achievements and thankful for your support of my pursuits. Carmela, you have been the most vital sounding board for the ideas in this book, with your political sensibilities, intellect, and writing skills, all greater than my own. Your patient and critical reading of every chapter, insightful comments, and many editorial changes have made this book far more readable, and your belief in the value of the project made

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The original photographs from the 1970s of Máximo Colón grace the pages of this book. For the past few decades, Máximo's photography has been exhibited in countless journal articles and books and most recently in a three-museum exhibit on the Young Lords in New York City and the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. In allowing his work to be reprinted here and elsewhere, and in his generosity to the movements to which he has dedicated his life, he makes a unique contribution to documenting the lives and struggles of people in New York.

Irving Leonard Markovitz, my advisor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, has been a welcome voice in my head for many years. Lenny negotiated my reentry into the doctoral program after some years of separation, agreed to sponsor my second dissertation attempt from which this book is derived, and convinced colleagues to participate. This book and my academic career are in many ways a product of his faith in me. I thank him for his mentorship and friendship. Running a close second in credit (or blame) for yet another doctoral dissertation and book is Kenneth Paul Erickson, who provided a steady flow of critical insights during the dissertation process. I am grateful for his good humor, kindness, and belief that this was

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The counsel of my oldest and dearest friends not already mentioned has sustained me more than words can say. J. Patrice McSherry skyped with me from Chile at a desperate moment's notice, read chapters, and provided critical comments. Nancy Sutherland gave meaning to the words "comic relief." Every day her positive thinking helped me to overcome procrastination and all of the personal episodes that shook my determination to complete this book. Judy Adolph soothed my anxieties, from the unique perspective of her own challenges. My dear friend, Debra Pucci, has always had confidence in the value of this project and my ability to get it done. In my world, and I suspect in the private and professional orbits of countless individuals, women hold up more than half the sky. In no way does that diminish my appreciation for Raúl Molina and Jeffrey Adolph, whose professional and personal counsel I have relied on. To my family of choice I am deeply grateful.

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1

Introduction

Puerto Rican Radical Politics in the 1970s

In the summer of 1970, a spontaneous squatters' movement known as "Operation Move-In" erupted on Manhattan's Upper West Side in opposition to New York City's urban renewal plans. For nearly two years, a loose-knit coalition comprised mainly of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American tenants fought displacement and gentrification by occupying buildings and rallying in the streets. The support they received from local churches, tenant advocates, students, and sympathetic politicians helped to sustain the prolonged resistance to the policies of redevelopment that had already removed thousands of families from other city neighborhoods.

In the subsequent decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the alliance between real estate developers, banks, and city agencies ultimately succeeded in eliminating affordable housing on the Upper West Side. But in the 1970s the squatters of Operation Move-In reduced the impact of "urban removal" by halting the demolition of some buildings, negotiating the transfer of ownership of others from the city to local tenants, and obtaining the city's commitment to reserve a higher percentage of units in new developments for low-income tenants. From that movement emerged a community action collective, *El Comité,* which several years later became *El Comité-MINP* (*Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño*, Puerto Rican National Left Movement), one of the most enduring, revolutionary organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in the United States.

For over a decade, from 1970 until the early 1980s, El Comité played a key role in grassroots campaigns that grew directly out of people's experiences with racial and ethnic discrimination and class inequality. Its activists initiated, participated in, and led mobilizations to expand democratic rights—understood as access to good jobs, quality housing, education, and health care. Often using disruptive tactics, they opposed the removal of low-income families from zones earmarked for urban redevelopment, fought to democratize school boards, and pressed for policies that were more responsive to children ill-served by a discriminatory and underfunded education system. They pushed for Latino/a representation in the media and, together with African Americans, demanded jobs on construction sites where the city and union bosses chose to ignore federal affirmative action guidelines. The protests extended from East Harlem, where a community coalition refused to allow the closing of a hospital, to suburban Old Westbury, where students shut down a college campus to defend the progressive policies that were under attack by opponents of those policies. Coming on the heels of the civil rights' gains of the 1960s, these democratic rights' struggles of the 1970s put political elites on the defensive against claims of discrimination and attracted mainstream allies concerned about inequality and social and environmental injustice.

As they engaged in community activism in their early years, the members of El Comité grappled with difficult questions about their political beliefs and goals. What were the fundamental political interests of Puerto Ricans residing in the United States? What were the long-term objectives of their activism? In their first newspaper, *Unidad Latina*, they frequently wrote about their shared conditions with Blacks and other minorities in the United States, but also called for Puerto Rico's liberation from U.S. colonial rule and identified with the struggles of other Latin Americans. How should the organization relate to the struggles of other minorities in the United States and the independence movement in Puerto Rico? Other groups of the Puerto Rican Left were asking the same questions, and answering in distinct ways.[1]

With a strong nationalist inclination but unresolved ideological and political questions, in 1973 El Comité announced in *Unidad Latina* its start of a "two-year period of transformation to develop a 'political' organization clearly identified with Puerto Rico's struggle for national liberation."[2] However, the intense political studies and internal debates during that period yielded a more complex result. At its Formative Assembly in 1975, El Comité announced its transition to a Marxist-Leninist organization with the long-term objective of contributing to a socialist movement in the United States. It changed its name to El Comité-MINP and adopted a structure then known to the Left

as a cadre organization. For the duration of its political life, its revolutionary ideals were manifested in a political program designed to "defend the interests of Puerto Ricans in this country and integrate them into the class struggle," to form alliances with other "oppressed minorities," and to engage in dialogue with the broader U.S. Left.[3]

Although it had come to view Puerto Ricans living in the United States as part of the multinational U.S. working class, El Comité-MINP's support for Puerto Rico's independence remained central to its political commitments. Often in alliance with other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left, it worked to secure the release of Puerto Rican nationalists imprisoned in U.S. jails, sponsored forums in New York and other cities on Puerto Rico's colonial status, and mobilized against the U.S. naval occupation of the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. Understanding U.S. colonialism as one of many links in the chain of U.S. exploits in Latin American, African, and Asian countries, El Comité united with other groups to support resistance movements in these regions and to oppose the U.S. blockade against Cuba.

In tracing the origins, evolution, achievements, and challenges of the protest politics of El Comité-MINP, this book recovers a little-known chapter in the history of Puerto Ricans, along with others, fighting for social, political, and economic justice in New York and for deeper structural change in the United States. The members of El Comité, and the broader movements of which they were a part, embraced the idea that lasting social change would require constant pressures "from below"—from organized workers, students, and progressive allies—against racism, sexism, and unequal economic and political relations of power. Building those movements required an ideology that resonated in their communities and inspired organized political action. It called for making adjustments in political strategies as the economic and political landscape shifted in New York and the nation over the course of the decade. It also meant setting aside individual aspirations and accepting personal risk, especially in light of government surveillance and disruption, of which the organizations of the Puerto Rican Left were well aware.

Like similar organizations of the period, El Comité rejected the dominant narrative that the United States was a champion of democracy at home and abroad and provided equal opportunities for upward mobility and a political system accessible to all. Its activists came to believe that vast inequality in wealth and power as it existed in the United States depended on the subjugation and control of working people, with the most oppressive treatment reserved for U.S. minorities and the people of nations in the global south. The counterhegemonic narrative of El Comité, like that of the organizations known at the time as the

Third World Left, denounced oppression and proposed that class, race, and gender liberation was possible through a revolutionary movement for a new society built on the principles of social justice and cooperation.

In some instances, the protest movements in which El Comité was involved achieved meaningful reforms; in others, the gains were limited or less tangible. Nonetheless, in the 1970s, El Comité-MINP was important not only because it coordinated and led protests but because it challenged elite explanations for asymmetrical power relations. It critiqued the exploitative relations of capitalism and imperialism, and the racial and gender oppression that reproduced the inequities in the economic system. Through the years, El Comité built collective spirit and momentum for social change, which profoundly impacted its members and those who, though not members, were drawn into political action by its efforts. Its revolutionary expectations at the time may have been imbued with idealism, but its political practice was deeply rooted in the communities it came from and aligned with the aspirations of millions of people in the United States for a more egalitarian world.

Puerto Rican Radical Activism

As early as the first large wave of migration from Puerto Rico in the 1920s, Puerto Ricans in New York were involved in workplace and community organizing, in efforts to support the liberation of Puerto Rico from U.S. colonial occupation, and in socialist politics.[4] In the decade following the Great Migration of 1940 to 1964, when nearly one-third of Puerto Rico's population left for the United States, Puerto Rican participation in socialist-oriented political organizations grew in numbers and influence. Some among the Puerto Rican Left were students or intellectuals. Others were workers—employed and unemployed—whose experiences as first- or second-generation immigrants from a U.S. colony, as racialized minorities and low-paid, underemployed workers, led them to question the dominant pluralist narrative about U.S. society.[5]

This is not to say that Puerto Ricans were politically homogenous or united in a leftist orientation in New York. Some sought to incorporate into Democratic Party politics, and by 1970 several had achieved prominence through local Democratic Party clubs, attained leadership positions in antipoverty programs, especially in the South Bronx, and even held elected office. In 1970, Herman Badillo from the Bronx became the first Puerto Rican elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Characterizing the progress made by Puerto Ricans in mainstream party politics as "a pluralist story," José Cruz proposes

that, despite ongoing ethnic discrimination, Puerto Ricans "have achieved incorporation in ad hoc political bodies, within the municipal bureaucracy and administration, within labor unions and political parties, and at the municipal, state, and congressional levels."[6] In another study, Cruz notes that some political leaders tried to improve their constituents' electoral clout by forming groups organized around ethnic identity."[7]

However, the idea that these inroads in political institutions translated into political power is highly debatable. Despite the fact that some Puerto Ricans entered mainstream politics, especially under liberal city administrations, in 1976 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics concluded that Puerto Rican appointees or elected officials were unable to improve the socioeconomic profile of Puerto Ricans.[8] The pluralist success story is further contradicted by voter registration rolls and turnout that show that many "stateside" Puerto Ricans remained outside of formal, institutional political processes for most of the latter part of the twentieth century.[9] The Puerto Rican Left (like many other groups in the 1970s) shared the view that electoral politics did not provide a viable path to meaningful reform or structural change.[10]

Moreover, while the pluralist theory of Puerto Rican political activism exudes optimism over achievements in the electoral arena, a contrasting narrative that Puerto Ricans were passive and uninterested in political participation is also mistaken. Edgardo Meléndez captures the activism of Puerto Ricans in New York dating back to the 1920s, '30s, and '40s:

> Contrary to widespread views of Puerto Ricans as lacking organizational and leadership capabilities, this was not an apathetic, disorganized, and marginal community in need of leadership. As [Bernardo] Vega and others have elaborated, this was a vibrant, well-organized and politically militant community. The community was represented by radical and militant workers, artisans, merchants, intellectuals, and professionals. There were many community and political organizations, many of them espousing radical ideas and independence.[11]

Notwithstanding low institutional participation, protest politics was on the rise in New York's Puerto Rican communities in the 1960s and continued throughout the remaining decades of the twentieth century. As recent studies illustrate, Puerto Rican and Black activists, understanding their shared conditions and mutual interests, often came together to demand recognition and enforcement of their civil rights. For example, Milagros Denis-Rosario talks about the

convergence of African American and Puerto Rican civil rights advocacy in the efforts of the Brooklyn chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the United Bronx Parents (UBP) to rally Blacks and Puerto Ricans against discrimination in education, among other things:

> The African American civil rights struggle influenced many aspects of the Puerto Rican community in the United States. Documents from several organizations such as the United Bronx Parents Association (UBP) are clear testimony of how Puerto Ricans' grassroots groups adapted and introduced the Civil Rights lexicon to their institutions. The founders of UBP understood that discipline and cross-racial coalitions were crucial to battle discrimination and achieve social justice. Unquestionably, Boricuas realized that they were not alone in this fight."[12]

In more radical quarters, the resurgence of a U.S.-based movement in support of independence for Puerto Rico played a key role in exposing the civil rights and "Black Power" generation to the idea that colonial rule could and should be resisted.[13] By the 1960s and '70s, the challenge to U.S. colonial rule posed by nationalist organizations was sufficiently formidable for the FBI to subject them to constant surveillance and harassment through its covert counterintelligence program known as COINTELPRO.

One of the principal organizations of the pro-independence movement was the *Movimiento Pro-Independencia* (MPI, Pro-Independence Movement). MPI was formed in Puerto Rico in 1959 by nationalists who scattered in the aftermath of the decline of the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico or were disillusioned with what they viewed as the religiosity of the Nationalist Party even before its decline.[14] The newly formed MPI, heavily influenced by the Cuban Revolution, embraced socialist ideals but differed from the *Partido Socialista* (Socialist Party) in Puerto Rico that in earlier decades was allied with the American Federation of Labor in the United States and supported statehood rather than independence.[15] In the 1960s, MPI established a branch in the United States to generate support for independence and recruit Puerto Ricans to the movement. MPI's national leadership was headquartered in Puerto Rico, while the leadership of its U.S. branch was headquartered in New York. In 1971, with a large student base, MPI held a founding assembly as a political party in Puerto Rico, changing its name to the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP). In the 1960s and 1970s, first MPI and then PSP held meetings in

neighborhoods throughout New York City to talk about Puerto Rico's colonial status and sponsored street rallies commemorating key historic rebellions of nationalists against U.S. occupation.

Meanwhile, a very different Puerto Rican movement emerged. In 1967, the Young Lords of Chicago, inspired by the Black Panther Party and led by José "Cha Cha" Jiménez, transformed itself from a street gang to a militant political action group fighting for community control in their neighborhoods. Nearly two years later, East Harlem activist and SUNY College at Old Westbury student Mickey Melendez drove to Chicago with a college admissions officer to recruit Latino/a students to Old Westbury.[16] There Melendez met Jiménez for the first time, initiating a network of communication between New York activists and the more organized Chicago group. In 1969, the newly formed East Coast chapter of the Young Lords Organization exploded onto the scene in New York, denouncing poor housing, inadequate health care and sanitation services, and inferior schools in East Harlem. From 1969 to 1971, the Young Lords staged highly visible actions in the streets of East Harlem to protest education, housing, and sanitation conditions.[17]

By the time El Comité formed on the West Side of Manhattan in 1970, the more militant protests of the Young Lords had already begun to subside. In 1971 the Young Lords decided that their political priority was the liberation of Puerto Rico, which eventually led to a split in its ranks and the formation by some of its members of the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO). But in 1970 the actions of the Young Lords, the forums held by the pro-independence groups, and the protests against the Vietnam War added to the sense that popular power was on the rise and helped to galvanize Puerto Ricans into radical political action.[18] On Manhattan's East Side, in *El Barrio*, it was poor sanitation services that triggered political protest; on the West Side, it was the city's disregard for low-income residents in the urban renewal zones that sparked resistance.

Narrow Readings of the Puerto Rican Left

There has been little analysis of El Comité's politics of resistance and revolutionary perspective despite over a decade of community and workplace activism, collaboration with radical groups across the country and internationally, and the publishing of dozens of newspapers and position papers. As Rodriguez-Morazzani noted back in 1998: "[The Puerto Rican organizations of the Left]

have not left a clear record of what they accomplished or the impact they had" on Puerto Ricans in the United States, on their own lives, on other oppressed groups, and on the North American Left.[19]

In the absence of this record, until recently, two misconceptions about the Puerto Rican Left have prevailed in studies of Puerto Rican political activism and radical movements in the United States. First is the idea found in studies of the radical Left of the 1960s and '70s that the Puerto Rican Left was interested almost exclusively in building support for the independence movement in Puerto Rico and that this political nationalism did not correspond to the economic and social interests of the Puerto Rican diaspora.[20] One scholar's sweeping claim that Puerto Rican radical groups were "*using* local issues to rally Puerto Ricans behind the cause of independence" is somewhat misleading.[21] No doubt the Puerto Rican Left worked to galvanize support for independence. But, especially as it relates to El Comité, a reductionist view ignores the role that many Puerto Ricans on the Left played in advancing civil rights and community and workplace reforms, in forming coalitions against U.S. foreign policies, and in advocating a social justice agenda in the United States. A related misconception is that the "New Left" of the 1970s, unlike their forbearers of the 1930s, did not try to organize within the working class. Treating the U.S. "New Left" as a homogenous whole misses entirely the role of the community-focused Third World Left and, in the case of El Comité, its working-class origins and the roots it retained throughout the decade.[22]

More recently, studies of the Young Lords Party that emphasize its local impact, diverse composition, and interaction with the Black Panther Party and other radical activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s have helped to redress the more narrow interpretations of Puerto Rican political activism. Lorrin Thomas finds, for example, that "at the level of radical activism, ties between African American and Puerto Rican youth were stronger than they had ever been by 1970. Young Lords and other Puerto Rican militants organized and socialized not just with Black Panther Party members . . . but also with militant black cultural leaders like Amiri Baraka and the Last Poets."[23] Darrel Wanzer-Serrano develops his thesis on the Young Lords as a representation of "decoloniality," or delinking from Eurocentrism.[24] New interest in the aims and beliefs of the Puerto Rican Left has been aided, also, by the three-museum exhibit in New York in the summer of 2015 showcasing photographs and artifacts of the Young Lords of New York in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Still, studies of urban protest and radical movements that view the Puerto Rican Left solely through the activism of the Young Lords are also incomplete. Matthew Gandy rightly places the Young Lords at the center of early 1970s

struggles for environmental justice in their "garbage offensive" in East Harlem, but assumes that Latino radical activism ended in New York when the Young Lords faded.[25] José Ramón Sánchez credits the Young Lords as the main group in the period to actualize a power potential because of its effective use of "mediated politics," meaning that the Young Lords grasped the reach and power of militant tactics designed to gain media attention.[26] The claim is not without merit. Though in existence for less than three years before it split and some of its members formed PRRWO, the Young Lords' confrontational tactics in New York City garnered extensive popular and media attention and inspired others to become politically active. Bearing in mind the Young Lords' influence, the history of the El Comité as an integral part of the radical tradition of Puerto Ricans in the United States and the Third World Left adds to the understanding of the scope and significance of protest politics in the 1970s.[27]

Ideological Inspirations

In the late 1960s and early '70s, some sectors of the U.S. population believed that institutional racism and inequality had been adequately addressed by civil rights legislation and affirmative action programs. But communities of color—or national minorities, in the language of the period—continued to face police brutality, mass displacement under urban renewal plans, inferior and unresponsive schools, high unemployment, and fewer job opportunities due to exclusionary practices. In Black, Chicano, Native American, Asian, and Puerto Rican communities, young people resisted the entrenched power relations they identified as reproducing racism, ethnic discrimination, and economic marginalization. The Cuban Revolution, the Black Power movement that arose in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and anticolonial, democratization, and revolutionary movements abroad inspired activists and elevated the sense that radical social change was on the horizon. The organizations they formed launched militant, grassroots challenges to oppressive conditions in their communities and workplaces, fought to expand civil rights, and coordinated solidarity networks to oppose Cold War politics and support international liberation movements.[28]

These revolutionary, and in many cases nationalist, organizations saw community-based activism as a principal form of resistance—to take the conditions of life out of the hands of absentee landlords, school boards that favored an intolerable status quo, and government officials unresponsive to the need for adequate services and fair treatment.[29] They rallied people around the idea

that economic and political inequality was based in racial hierarchies as well as class relations with political agendas that ranged from protesting police brutality to supporting liberation movements abroad. Collectively, they were known as the Third World Left, with a membership that mainly (but not entirely) shared a racial or ethnic identity as a "minority" group in the United States with origins in the global south.

During the same period that the organizations of the Third World Left developed, similar groups embracing socialist principles also formed in cities around the country, comprised mainly of white students and intellectuals who had admired the mass mobilizations of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) or whose own political activism had begun in the university-based anti-war movement.[30] With few ties between the white-dominant organizations and minority communities, the anti-imperialist solidarity networks and mobilizations around national issues were the main arenas in which whites and national minorities of the Left interacted.[31] In the mid-1970s, some of the groups on the Left began a dialogue with each other geared toward eventually forming a new political party they hoped would unite small groups and raise working-class consciousness and support for socialism. Believing that a viable socialist movement would not grow spontaneously from the multitude of local struggles, they agreed to share their political experiences and seek ways to coordinate their work. In Max Elbaum's terms, this "new communist movement" had become disillusioned with the prospects for meaningful change through formal, institutional means.[32] They viewed existing "communist parties" as either too removed from popular movements and steeped in theoretical dogma or too entrenched in reform struggles within existing institutions like trade unions with no vision for more fundamental change. Collectively, they called themselves the "anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist party building trend," which brought together organizations from across the Left.[33] El Comité-MINP was part of the party-building conversations that brought together the Third World and white radicals of the period.

Counternarratives

The organizations of the Third World left were organized mainly along racial or ethnic lines. But shared racial or ethnic identity, or even shared material conditions, does not explain the formation of groups that reject the dominant pluralist narrative about political incorporation. An ideological counternarrative must be in play.

Ideology, as defined by Swedish Marxist Göran Therborn, is the set of ideas people hold that are drawn both from everyday life as well as from

institutionalized and intellectual doctrines that inform social and political behavior.[34] Maintaining the hegemony of the pluralist doctrine by suppressing and repressing countervailing ideas and alternatives is the ongoing project of dominant political, economic, and ideological institutions.[35] The rearticulation of ideas (a counterhegemonic ideology) becomes a tool of resistance to subordination. For groups with few resources and no control over the institutions that manufacture consent—like schools, media, and mainstream political parties—collective environments must exist or be created where "common sense" interpretations of reality can interact with specialized (expert, intellectual, or ideological) interpretations to develop alternative perspectives on power relations and plans of action that challenge those relations.[36] The interaction between political experience and intellectual reflection on that experience, in historically specific conditions, helps explain how countervailing ideas and a newly constructed political identity become articulated in corresponding forms of organization and resistance.

This discourse on ideological hegemony-counterhegemony is rooted in the early twentieth-century writings of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Extending Marx's analysis of the hegemonic rule of the bourgeoisie in capitalist societies, Gramsci argued that organic, counterhegemonic movements in the cultural arena, as well as political and economic spheres, were essential in order to challenge the dominant, elite-led conceptions of life as it is and that permeate the dominant institutions of society. Gramsci emphasized the role of organic intellectuals in social change, who can inform and be informed by political practice; that is, the role of theory in developing a revolutionary political practice:

> Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an élite of intellectuals. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organisers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people "specialised" in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas. But the process of creating intellectuals is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersals and regroupings, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried.[37]

Applying the Gramscian framework to the interaction between politics and culture, J. Patrice McSherry theorizes that the New Song Movement (*la*

Nueva Canción Chilena) in Chile of the 1960s and '70s was instrumental "in uniting people in common cause," for democratization in Chile, by articulating through music a counternarrative that denounced the status quo, encapsulated the aspirations of the masses, and inspired people to pursue the political changes that spoke to those aspirations. McSherry contends that, as the New Song Movement ascended in Chile, it "represented a rising challenge to the hegemonic conception of life in Chile. Culture became an arena of political contestation and hegemonic-counterhegemonic struggle. . . ."[38]

The Gramscian framework has also been useful in analyzing new social movements. William Carroll and R.S. Ratner explain Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" as rooted in the "practical need for subordinate groups to move beyond a defensive understanding of their immediate interests, to create their own *hegemonic* conception of the 'general interest,' capable of guiding a transformative politics."[39] They argue that contemporary social movements that advocate for "globalization from below" are "agents of counterhegemony in their organized dissent to the existing order."[40] In contrast to the successful movement for democratization in Chile that culminated in the election of Salvador Allende in 1970, the narratives of social movements that oppose neoliberal globalization are, as of yet, mostly ones of potential. Their significance, for example in relation to climate change and environmental justice, is in the momentum and fierce political contestations they have fueled around the world.

Gramsci's recognition of class dominance and contestation in all spheres of social life is a useful framework for thinking about the rise of counterhegemonic movements in communities of color, in response to the intersections of race and class oppression and in contrast to the traditional workplace-based politics of the Left. In the United States in the late 1960s, the liberal coalitions that had embraced the Civil Rights Movement could not deliver on promises of economic fairness and expanded political space in the face of powerful interests that did not share redistributive goals. Even before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the emerging Black Power movement began to articulate an ideological challenge to the dominant pluralist doctrine of inclusion. Asserting that asymmetrical power relations could not be redressed through routine political processes, Stokely Carmichael (later named Kwame Turé) and Charles Hamilton urged Blacks to organize themselves within their communities and form independent political organizations if they wanted to improve their socioeconomic conditions and acquire political power in the United States. The white power structure would not voluntarily accede to the demands of an unorganized community; and well-intentioned white liberals who were steeped in white-skin privilege could neither understand the manifestations

of racial oppression nor secure racial and class power transformations without Black self-organization.[41] The significance of the Black Power movement was not merely that it considered mobilization based on racial identity a precondition for political incorporation. Rather, the essential aspect of the doctrine of self-determination was that it brought into focus that institutionalized racism reinforced domination and oppression.

The racially specific organizational forms and ideology of Black Nationalism were integrated with a class analysis that rejected the idea that political power could be acquired by joining, and trying to reform, mainstream political parties or by vying for the spoils of social programs. It maintained instead that the political party system in the United States was designed to "manage conflict" and was not interested in altering the imbalance of power in social structures and institutions.[42] The Black Panther Party's call for community control of the means of production in its Ten-Point Program bared the systemic critique that distinguished it from many of the participants and reformist goals of the Civil Rights Movement and from the ethnic identity groups that sought higher voter turnout.

Many of the nationalist and revolutionary organizations of the Third World Left were rooted in this political perspective, though each of them devised political agendas that corresponded to their communities' unique experiences and grievances. In her comparative study of Black, Chicano, and Japanese organizations in California in the 1970s, Laura Pulido talks about the different ways race and class interacted for each of those groups and produced distinctive forms of resistance, in contrast to the white-dominant Left:

> Given their political histories, these activists were unwilling to privilege race or class, and they developed ideologies that reflected how the two intersected to create unique historical experiences. The insistence on addressing both race and class equally is a primary distinction between white and third-world left organizations.[43]

Addressing the most salient issues in their respective communities, each group pursued distinct political programs. Pulido observes that the Black Panther Party stressed community control and self-defense; the Chicano organization *El Centro de Acción Social y Autónomo* (CASA) promoted labor organizing, immigration reform, and cultural identity; and the Asian group East Wind emphasized community service, gang intervention, solidarity work, and multinational party-building. The Thirteen-Point Program of the Young Lords Party of New York paralleled the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party in

demanding community control over police, health services, churches, schools, and housing; opposing capitalism; and calling for a socialist society. The Young Lords added the demands to free political prisoners and end colonialism in Puerto Rico.

El Comité-MINP's Political Path

The movements and ideological counternarratives that inspired the Third World Left shaped the radical politics and revolutionary ideals of El Comité. In the chapters that follow, I contextualize El Comité's political path by considering the factors that shaped its formation, its ideological and political evolution, and the impact of changing structural conditions in New York, the nation, and the world on its approach to political organizing and protest in the 1970s. Chapter 2 locates the origins of El Comité in the conditions that led to Operation Move-In, including the national political economy, the harsh conditions Puerto Ricans families faced since migrating to New York, and the political movements of the period. I present El Comité's role in the Squatters Movement and show how activists used disruptive tactics effectively to redress the city's disregard for their claims. Interwoven in my account of Operation Move-In are the stories of the early activists who recall the personal and political circumstances and influences that drew them into political activism.

Chapter 3 explores the interaction of colonialism, migration, and nationalism that moved El Comité to support liberation for Puerto Rico, almost simultaneously with its formation. The colonial-structured industrialization in Puerto Rico that fueled mass migration to the United States in the 1940s and '50s, the repression of the nationalist movement during the same period, and the activities of the New York–based independence movement were among the multiple factors that politicized Puerto Ricans in New York and led to El Comité's collaboration with other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left as early as 1971. In combination, Chapters 2 and 3 show that El Comité's initial political identity was forged by national origin, family history, the racial and class inequality in New York, and the politicized local and national environment.

Chapter 4 presents the democratic rights' campaigns in which El Comité became immersed in the first half of the 1970s and its transition in the same period from an informal collective to a Marxist-Leninist political organization. Using an array of historical archives and first-hand accounts, I reconstruct the movements for parent empowerment in the Lower East Side and bilingual education in the Upper West Side; the boardroom takeovers at Channel

13 against media exclusion of Latinos; and the workers' mobilizations that fought for democratic unions and decent jobs. The chapter also explores the organic dynamic of the collective in El Comité's radicalization and transition to a Marxist-Leninist cadre organization, and the range of issues the members confronted, including what it meant to be a revolutionary, how to overcome sexism, and how to sustain a physical presence with few resources.

In Chapter 5, I turn to El Comité's local activism and revolutionary politics in the second half of the 1970s. The importance given to incorporating women into political action is illustrated by the example of the Latin Women's Collective, formed by members of El Comité, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, the *Movimiento Popular Dominicano*, and unaffiliated activists. The prolonged campaigns of the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital and the student activists at SUNY Old Westbury yielded important victories. However, beginning in 1975, New York City's worst fiscal crisis, together with more conservative electoral coalitions, national recession, and economic restructuring, intensified competition for scarce resources, constrained local and state budgetary prerogatives, and negatively impacted the national discourse on entitlements and rights. Many progressives and radicals in New York were forced to shift their agenda from the democratic rights' demands of earlier years to protests against severe budget cuts and racial scapegoating. But, by the late 1970s, militant protests were more difficult to launch and sustain.

Chapter 6 focuses on El Comité's solidarity with Puerto Rico over the course of the decade, and its dialogue with the U.S. Left in its later years about building a national revolutionary party. Regardng solidarity work, although the differences between the groups of the Puerto Rican Left sometimes provoked heated debates, they worked closely together to free political prisoners, to oppose the U.S. naval occupation of Vieques, and to get the United Nations Decolonization Committee to condemn colonial rule in Puerto Rico. On party-building, I examine the unique contribution El Comité made to the dialogue within the U.S. Left with its proposal to establish "Centers for Communication, Cooperation and Collaboration."

Chapter 7 looks at the political and organizational dilemmas that contributed to the demise of El Comité-MINP in the early 1980s. In addition to the resurgence of conservative politics in the nation, government surveillance in the 1970s had pushed some of the Left organizations inward, which was exacerbated by an organizational form that inhibited the types of discussions that were needed to assess the changing environment. The frenetic pace of multiple endeavors exhausted activists and discouraged organization-wide reflections on their accumulated political experience. In short, El Comité was affected to some degree by all of these conditions and ultimately could not survive.

The book concludes with reflections on the significance of El Comité-MINP in the 1970s and how the politics of their youth shaped the lives of its members. What I hope to convey above all is that El Comité achieved its greatest success when it stayed close to the people it meant to serve, and that dedicated, politically active individuals achieved meaningful social change and spread counterhegemonic ideas that nurtured collective action for social justice.

2

Operation Move-In and the Making of a Political Movement

"We had just come out of the park. It was a hot summer day, and we wanted to drink a beer," recalled Pedro Rentas, a retired Teamsters Union activist who lives in Puerto Rico.[1] On a June afternoon in 1970, a group of young men in their early twenties, all Puerto Rican except for one Dominican, gathered to play softball at a Central Park sandlot in Manhattan's Upper West Side. They left the field thirsty and began calling on neighborhood residents to chip in for their beer money. "Someone started with, 'Hey, I got a dollar.' Here's two, then three. We started horsing around, and people from the windows started throwing us money. Before you knew it, we had almost $100!"

In the summer of 1970 the Upper West Side of Manhattan was a densely populated, ethnically diverse, predominantly working-class area. Russian, Polish, Irish, and Italian ethnics and African Americans lived in close proximity to the newest arrivals—Puerto Ricans, who had fled growing unemployment in Puerto Rico a decade or two earlier, and, in lesser numbers, Dominicans who had left the Dominican Republic following the U.S. military invasion in 1965 and subsequent liberalization of U.S. immigration policy.[2] On the western border of the Upper West Side, along West End Avenue and sparsely interspersed within the two-square-mile neighborhood, more affluent newcomers (mainly professionals) had been lured to the area by investment incentives offered by New York City's Department of Real Estate.[3] In the throes of summer's heat, with little air conditioning and no elevators in the five- and six-story tenements, neighborhood residents leaned out of their windows or relaxed on stoops while children played on sidewalks and under the fire hydrants.

Rentas continued:

> We felt like this was too much money. At that time a beer cost us a quarter. So we stopped the ice cream truck and bought ice cream for all the kids. It was marvelous, right? I mean, everybody just came down. We must have bought something like eighty or ninety ice creams that day. And everybody had a great time. . . . So we did it again the following week.

The ballplayers were excited and inspired by the satisfaction they felt in this one small, collective act. They decided to do something more, as Rentas explained:

> We cleaned up this little basketball court in the lot. Some guy loaned us a movie, we borrowed a projector, and someone gave us light. On Friday night, everybody came down to see the movie, even the Gringos. You know, at the corner it was Puerto Ricans, but further up it was middle-class Gringos. They came down, and they really enjoyed it.

In the prior decade, territorial gang fights had plagued the area. According to Luis Ithier, who grew up in the neighborhood, the Goddard Riverside Community Center worked with the 24th Police Precinct to engage neighborhood youths in activities aimed at reducing tensions between the "downtown group" on West 85th to West 96th Streets and the "uptown group" north of West 96th Street that had sometimes resulted in injuries and deaths from knife stabbings.[4] As a teenager, Ithier was involved in trying "to stop the fighting and push things in a more positive direction." The first movie shown on the empty lot, *Planet of the Apes,* provided not only free entertainment but an opportunity for people to gather on neutral ground. The event was repeated the following week.

The softball players were not part of any community group or political movement. They did not participate in tenants' associations or student protests, nor were they students or intellectuals whose activism began on college campuses. Several were armed services veterans; one worked in an automobile factory and another at a steel plant; others were unemployed laborers. The sole Dominican in the group, Marine Corps veteran Federico Lora, had enrolled in an architectural program at Pratt Institute upon returning from his tour of duty in Vietnam. The friends had not discussed politics and had no political aspirations. But when a tenant protest movement dubbed Operation Move-In

erupted in their neighborhood, they spontaneously joined in, embracing the cause of tenant empowerment as their own. Given the deplorable conditions their own families had endured since migrating to New York, they saw the tenants' movement as a struggle of "the people" against the "system." They squatted in a storefront on Columbus Avenue and West 88th Street and within several months became principal agitators for tenants' rights in their neighborhood. Joined first by companions and friends and gradually by other activists, they called themselves *El Comité,* and in the coming months they deepened their involvement in Operation Move-in as well as in campaigns for bilingual education and parent power in local schools and against police brutality in New York City.[5]

Adopting the symbolic dress of black berets worn by other young militants of their time, they were often mistaken for the Young Lords in those early days. Only a year earlier, the Young Lords had formed across town in El Barrio (Manhattan's East Harlem). Although the two groups shared similar beliefs, El Comité chose to remain separate from the Young Lords and the others, and distinguished itself as a distinct political force in several neighborhoods and worksites and through the pages of its first biweekly newspaper, *Unidad Latina*.

This chapter locates the origins of El Comité in the conditions of inequality and discrimination in New York in the 1960s and '70s and the political movements of the period that influenced many young Puerto Ricans to embrace political protest to address their grievances. The civil and human rights movements taking place throughout New York were plentiful and complex, and my sketch is not meant to be comprehensive. My aim is to create a sense of the historical moment and context in which Operation Move-In occurred and El Comité formed as a community organization.

Puerto Ricans and New York's Political Economy: 1960s–1970s

Although the U.S. economy boomed after World War II, by the early 1970s a combination of national and international conditions began to impede economic growth and threaten the rising standard of living that had been attained, especially by unionized workers in major industries. But economic prosperity at the height of post–World War II growth, as well as the hardships of the 1970s recession, were not equally shared by U.S. workers. In 1960, the median income of Puerto Rican and African American families was approximately 60 and 70 percent, respectively, that of whites; by 1970 the gap widened to 53 percent for Puerto Ricans and 69 percent for African Americans.[6] The average

income of Puerto Rican families dropped from 71 percent of the national average income in 1960 to 59 percent in 1970. African American families did not fare much better.[7] Despite the 1960s "War on Poverty" and affirmative action legislation, in 1974 one-third of all stateside Puerto Rican families lived below the poverty line.[8]

By the 1970s, the population in New York City had changed. During the Great Migration from the South in earlier decades, the African American population in the city increased by more than two-thirds. The Latino population soared in the 1940s to 1960s as a result of mass migration from Puerto Rico and, following the 1965 Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, from the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries in smaller numbers. These increases brought the total population to nearly 8 million by 1970, but the steep decline in the white population from the 1950s through 1970s actually resulted in a 10 percent drop in the city's population by 1980.[9] The gradual transition from a manufacturing to a service economy in the United States affected minorities first in the form of economic contraction. Simultaneous with a massive outflow of one million whites, largely to the suburbs, in the 1960s and 1970s, New York City lost 500,000 jobs, mainly in the manufacturing sector.[10]

In the 1960s alone, the percentage of the Puerto Rican workforce employed in manufacturing dropped from 55 to 41 percent.[11] Although office jobs increased slightly, the housing shortage encouraged some large corporations to leave the city and discouraged others from locating their headquarters in Manhattan. Puerto Rican workers took what was available in the low-wage service sector, as waiters, kitchen help, porters, and hospital workers, and in light industry sweatshops.

The Puerto Rican experience in New York's job market was similar to that of African Americans. Both were excluded from many of the private sector jobs where unions had negotiated job security and career ladders through collective bargaining. This was especially true in the construction trades where white immigrant workers and their descendants, aided by union leaders, blocked union entry and opposed affirmative action programs by aligning with the Nixon administration against the more liberal policy proposals of Mayor John Lindsay.[12] In spite of Puerto Ricans' labor activism in New York going back as far as a century earlier, as Clara Rodriguez notes, "but it is fairly clear that with the exception of low-level jobs like garment workers and food services, most skilled or crafted unions [were] closed to Puerto Ricans."[13] To make matters worse, the encroaching fiscal crisis in New York City in the mid-1970s

threatened to disproportionately affect recently hired minorities in the public sector and those who depended most on public health care, education, and welfare programs. Throughout the 1970s, the unemployment rate for Puerto Ricans was twice the national average.[14]

Housing deterioration in neighborhoods with low-income residents had become critical by the late 1960s. Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and African Americans lived in the worst of the city's public and nonpublic housing stock, even in the less-segregated neighborhoods of the West Side, and often paid higher-than-average rents. One housing study found that the

> . . . essential nature of the housing into which dark-skinned [*sic*] newcomers are funneled can be described very simply. The larger and poorer the family unit, the less living space it has, and the more dilapidated the housing. In one typically overcrowded sector of the West Side, for instance, 62 percent of the Negroes and 42 percent of the Spanish [*sic*] lived in one or two rooms. . . . [O]f those Spanish families in one- or two-room apartments, 68 percent had one or more children.[15]

Moreover, the federally subsidized, high-rise housing projects built in the 1950s under the direction of Robert Moses had failed the city's poor. Neighborhoods were devastated when sites were cleared for public housing. With few small businesses and low-rise buildings remaining, the areas surrounding the projects spiraled downward, effectively marginalizing thousands of city residents. Yet even though the projects were chronically undermaintained, thousands of applicants lingered for years on waiting lists for the chance to get out of a slumlord's building and into an apartment in the projects.

On Manhattan's West Side, many of the crumbling buildings had been constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as single-family homes and converted in the mid-1900s to rooming houses by absentee landlords. The city collaborated in the West Side's rapid increase in population density by approving, time after time, zoning changes that allowed absentee landlords to subdivide larger apartments into smaller units. Interspersed between these buildings were private tenements, public housing units, abandoned buildings, and some owner-occupied brownstones. The plumbing, heating, and electrical systems in hundreds of city- and privately owned buildings were antiquated. Residents were frustrated by frequent power outages triggered simply by turning on a toaster at the same time a fan recycled hot, stale air; many families lived

without functional kitchen and bathroom facilities. Epidemic rat infestation and lead poisoning threatened the health of children who were already underserved by resource-strained health providers in poor neighborhoods.

School conditions for most Puerto Rican and African American children were equally dismal by the time the first Puerto Rican, Joseph Monserrat, was appointed President of the New York City Board of Education in 1969. Puerto Rican and African American children attended the most densely populated schools. Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling and the persistent national myth that segregation was a southern problem, racial segregation in education worsened in the New York region in the 1960s (and is even more acute today).[16] In disproportionate numbers, minority students were tracked into special education programs as early as the first grade and, if they did not drop out, ended up in vocational rather than academic high schools. Though Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided federal funds to schools with large numbers of children who were poor and/or not fluent in English, the children needing those resources most did not benefit because the funds were often used to provide regular instructional services financed by local funds in other schools. According to School Superintendent Monserrat, "Puerto Ricans were thought of not as people but as 'the Puerto Rican problem,' as welfare recipients"; and students whose primary language was other than English were "barred from meaningful participation in education programs."[17] Between 1960 and 1970, the high school dropout rate hovered around 30 percent for Puerto Rican students and 25 percent for African Americans, while it remained under 10 percent for whites.[18]

African Americans made greater inroads than Puerto Ricans into the public sector as civil servants, but Blacks and Latino/as were the first and worst hit by the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. They paid the highest rents for the worst housing and were stuck either in the poorest schools or in districts controlled by entrenched elites that refused to fairly allocate resources, reform curricula, or share power on community boards.

Political Protest in New York in the 1960s

Political protest in New York City in the 1960s was, in broad terms, structurally conditioned by the contradictions engendered by national economic expansion and the capital outflows from inner cities to outlying suburbs: on the one hand, economic growth, rising incomes, and low unemployment for some sectors;

on the other hand, embedded poverty, poor services, high unemployment, and police repression for others, predominantly minorities. Although in the early to mid-1960s, especially after the murder of Malcolm X, the center of the Civil Rights Movement was in the South, Black and Puerto Rican activists formed alliances in New York based on shared grievances to protest the conditions in their communities, advocate for workers' rights, and demand access to and more inclusive curricula at private and public universities.[19] The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) remained active in Harlem and Brooklyn and, among other things, raised the profile of police brutality against minority youth. When a Black youth was killed by an off-duty officer in 1964, the NYPD arrested CORE's leaders at a protest rally in Harlem. Five nights of riots followed the arrests, during which 15 Blacks were shot by police (one fatally) and 116 people were injured.[20] For the next few years, spontaneous and organized rallies in several communities responded to incidents of police brutality.[21] CORE was also instrumental in uniting Black and Latino parents in the Ocean Hill section of Brooklyn to demand greater community input into their children's education. As Frederick Douglass Opie describes it, the battle "was part of a nationwide movement by blacks and Latinos to reform school curricula, introduce black history, boost black and Latino/a parent participation, and win greater control for local communities over the operations their school districts."[22] The struggles spread to the Bronx and Manhattan later in the 1960s and early 1970s.[23]

The first few years of the 1960s were also known for tenant rent strikes. Tenant advocates and community groups such as Mobilization for Youth, CORE, Harlem Tenants' Council, Metropolitan Council on Housing, University Settlement, and *Puertorriqueños Unidos* distributed information on tenants' rights and led or supported rent strikes throughout the city. Although strikes were frequent, tenant militancy was difficult to sustain. Tenant actions resulted in few reforms and did not stop the spread of slums or significantly increase the supply of desirable public housing. By the late 1960s, tenant councils and advocates wanted to explore more aggressive solutions to the escalating housing crisis.

This was also a period of heightened labor activism, especially among health care and municipal workers. In the health care sector where Blacks and Latinos formed about 80 percent of the workforce, workers went on strike on several occasions in the early 1960s until they won recognition of union representation by Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union.[24] On January 1, 1966, the first day of Mayor Lindsay's tenure, the Transit Workers' Union and Amalgamated Transit Union began a twelve-day strike for higher wages and better work environments. In some instances, job actions by municipal

unions exposed a growing rift between white union members and minorities interested in job access and education reform. The strike of the United Federation of Teachers in 1968 drew a clear line of hostility between the union on one side and the parents and other activists in minority-dominant districts on the other side. Black, Asian, and Puerto Rican parents wanted Board of Education power decentralized into local community school boards in order to have greater control over educational policy and advocate for improvements in their local schools.

Indeed, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the political environment in New York City was volatile. The writings of Malcolm X, the southern-based Civil Rights Movement, the ideas of affirmative action, and the emerging Black Panthers' platform of community control inspired collective action in communities of color. These powerful influences coincided with students demanding open admissions to the City University system, insisting on the incorporation of Puerto Rican and Black Studies programs, and protesting the Vietnam War. City government and especially the New York City School Board became alarmed when community activists from Harlem and the Upper West Side joined forces with Columbia University students to protest the war and to denounce Columbia's proposal for a new gymnasium in Morningside Park. In April 1968, police forcibly and violently removed hundreds of students from the buildings they had taken over on campus.[25] Expressing concern for "escalating rebellion" among "radical fringes" in the schools, the School Board directed teachers to attend workshops on how to control unrest, walkouts, and school takeovers.[26] Internal discussions between the Board and the High School Principals' Association focused on developing strategies to "isolate militants."[27] Fearing youth reactions, New York City schools were shut down the day after four student anti-war protesters were killed by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University in May 1970. Tensions heightened around the city when, eleven days later, state police killed two students and injured others at Jackson State, Mississippi.

Responding to the pressures from community activists, in 1967 Mayor Lindsay convened a conference of Puerto Rican community groups, asking for recommendations for improving living conditions in Puerto Rican neighborhoods. Despite several proposals made by the conference participants, the Lindsay Administration pursued no reforms in housing, sanitation conditions, education, or other services.[28] Frustrated with routine political avenues and skeptical of the mayor's avowed commitment to progressive policy measures, the newly-formed Young Lords felt compelled to act. By their own accounts, the "Garbage Offensive" of 1969 was designed to show local residents that

bold action that disrupted business as usual was needed to force the city to act on just demands.[29] As Miguel Melendez recounted:

> [A]rmed with large brooms, the Lords and some volunteers swept the street and stockpiled large quantities of garbage. [But] . . . the trucks of the Department of Sanitation did not come. When at last they did, half the garbage was left scattered all over the area. . . . [W]e started to sweep the garbage into the streets, particularly around the bus stops and the center of Second and Third Avenues, near 106th, 111th, 116th, and 118th Streets. . . . [T]he garbage formed a five-foot-high wall across the six lanes of Third Avenue, causing an unexpected traffic jam. Some drivers cursed and screamed at the piles of garbage and at us. Others nodded their heads and blew the horns of their cars in admiration of this never-before-seen strategy in ghetto politics. The only choice we had was confrontational politics. . . . The torching of the accrued garbage offensive was about to take place. . . . Every single Young Lord threw a match."[30]

Through the media attention garnered by this and similarly disruptive actions over the next two years, the Young Lords dramatically raised the profile of Puerto Rican grievances in New York City.[31] No doubt, their militancy influenced many activists just around the time a revitalized housing movement on the West Side chose squatting as its strategy for confronting the city and private slumlords. Although the Young Lords did not participate directly in the Squatters Movement, their actions on the East Side emboldened others and escalated the growing awareness, especially among Puerto Ricans, that contentious protest effectively commanded the attention of the city as well as the media, forcing confrontation on grievances otherwise ignored.

Urban "Renewal" or Urban "Removal"?

Following World War II, the demand for a federal response to housing shortages and urban decay made by a broad coalition of progressive political forces and organized labor led to the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, which stated that every American deserves a "decent home and a suitable living environment."[32] However, the implementation of the Act, under Title I, proved controversial in the nation's cities as federal funds were used mainly for "slum clearance."[33]

Whereas the earliest projects conceived under the 1949 legislation entailed complete neighborhood demolition and new construction, federal legislation in 1954 expanded federal housing support to include urban renewal projects that combined demolition and new construction with neighborhood preservation and renovation. New York's mayor, Robert Wagner, Jr., established the Urban Renewal Board to oversee a pilot project in the West Side Urban Renewal Area (WSURA) that ran from West 87th to West 97th Streets between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenue.[34]

As approved in 1959, the project was to build 7,800 low- and high-rise, public and private housing units, of which 1,000 (about 13 percent) would be reserved for low-income; 4,200 (about 54 percent) for middle-income; and 2,600 (about 33 percent) for upper-income residents. The plan was a compromise between the Urban Renewal Board and the Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council, which represented seventeen tenant and neighborhood groups in the WSURA and had negotiated an increase in the number of units earmarked for low- and middle-income residents. However, a few years later, in 1962, the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee, comprised of five Puerto Ricans who worked in city agencies and formed to study the impact of the plan on Puerto Rican residents, concluded that no less than 30 percent of the 7,800 housing units (2,340 units) should be allocated to low-income occupants and that minimal demolition and relocation of area residents should occur. Although the Committee was not a grassroots organization with representatives from affected neighborhoods, its position was widely publicized by local newspapers and tenant advocates. Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council, from the West Side, endorsed the position of the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee and urged the city to reserve 30 percent of new units for low-income families, minimize neighborhood disruption from new construction, and commit to rehabilitating existing housing for working-class residents. These demands became the goals of the housing movement in the ensuing years.

By the time Mayor Lindsay took office in 1966, the city had acquired dozens of two-story buildings and tenements whose landlords preferred to abandon the properties rather than make city-mandated repairs.[35] But the WSURA plan contained no provision to renovate salvageable abandoned buildings for tenants living in inferior housing.[36] Instead, the plan envisioned redevelopment only through the demolition of thousands of housing units, the building of mostly high-rise, subsidized apartments, and tax incentives for banks and private investors to construct market-rate housing. Rather than admitting that low-income residents would not have access to the new housing, the city promised that families removed from selected sites for the duration of repairs would be welcomed back to their neighborhoods.

The central premise of "urban renewal" was that new and improved housing would be occupied by no more than 30 percent low-income families paying income-adjusted rents, mixed with a majority of upper- and middle-income families, which would stabilize communities and ensure long-term prosperity. Everyone would benefit: the city's deals with private developers would stimulate construction and real estate investment; housing would be upgraded for low-income residents and made more attractive to middle- and upper-income families. The influx of investment funds and class integration would invigorate the local economy. But West Side residents' prior experience with Title I projects cast doubt that the city would honor its commitment to reserve even 30 percent of new housing for low-income residents. Earlier in the decade, 4,000 residential units had been demolished from West 97th to West 100th Streets, between Central Park West and Amsterdam Avenue (the Park West Village Development); and despite promises to the contrary, the majority of displaced residents could not afford the rents in the newly constructed buildings. Urban scholar Joseph Lyford predicted the outcome:

> The urban renewal area undergoes a nervous as well as a physical breakdown. . . . In the midst of the collapse, the Puerto Ricans and Negroes of the side streets and the Irish in the tenements on Columbus and Amsterdam Avenues drop into an invisible stream of immigrants to some other place inside or outside the city. Although nearly three-quarters of the people in the [urban renewal] Area questioned about their plans indicated they wanted to remain on the West Side, most of the Negroes and Puerto Ricans will not be able to afford to live in the new community or qualify for the limited public housing. The ineligibles will move again and again, the records on them will be lost, and they will become mired in a gray, deteriorating area in another borough with neither the will nor the energy to retrace their steps. The unemployed Negroes and Puerto Ricans leaving the area are the people always found in neighborhoods being torn down, rehabilitated, or renewed for someone else."[37]

The city's dismal record of dislocation and broken promises was evidenced as well by the earlier Lincoln Center renewal project, in the area that stretched from West 62nd Street to West 67th Street between Amsterdam and Sixth Avenues where redevelopment was primarily nonresidential and uprooted families could not return.[38] When asked to explain the failed promise, the city insisted that all known, eligible residents were given the opportunity to apply for the new housing if they could afford the rent—the operative principles

being "eligibility" and "affordability." The federal Housing and Urban Development Act of 1970 redefined subsidy guidelines by increasing the percentage of income public-housing tenants were required to pay, which together with higher-than-expected rents kept families who relied on Section 8 out of the new housing developments.[39] In the West Side and Morningside Heights, where many buildings were slated for demolition, the city had ignored tenants' grievances or, at best, assigned insufficient numbers of inspectors to issue fines (which tenant advocates considered too low to be effective) to unresponsive slumlords. "Urban removal," as it was dubbed by local activists, increased racial and class segregation rather than integration by forcing long-time tenants out of salvageable buildings and relocating them to inferior housing in the outer boroughs. Those who remained in overcrowded and often unsafe tenements gleaned no hope from subsequent redevelopment plans.

Adding to the disillusionment with "urban removal" was the growing appearance of collusion between private developers and Puerto Rican political or antipoverty agency leaders, particularly Herman Badillo, Ramón Velez, and Amy Betances, who denied the deleterious impact of urban renewal on low-income communities.[40] In 1962 Badillo was appointed commissioner of the newly formed Department of Housing Relocation. As commissioner until 1965 and Bronx Borough President from 1965 to 1970, Badillo worked with real estate developers on an agenda of urban revitalization that vulnerable residents of Manhattan viewed as gentrification:

> As part of an overall plan by the government to keep both industry and the professional, administrative and managerial classes in the City, certain communities in Manhattan were selected to undergo a complete structural overhaul, and racial and class transformation. . . . Families were uprooted to make way for communities designed to attract professionals. . . . [L]ess than 10 percent [of uprooted families] were "granted" their rights to a home in the newly built apartments. . . . Badillo operated not in defense of working class interests, but in defense of large corporations who [did not want to] lose their skilled employees to suburban jobs.[41]

Community activist Dorothy Pitman Hughes commented in the documentary film *Break and Enter* (*Rompiendo Puertas*) that working-class residents paid in taxes and blood for the war in Vietnam and for a national space exploration program while the city colluded behind their backs with private investors and speculators.[42]

Operation Move-In

The Squatters Movement in Manhattan's Upper West Side and Morningside Heights erupted in the spring of 1970 when groups of residents seized possession of vacant buildings. Although the initial move-ins were more spontaneous than part of a deliberate strategy of an organized movement, anger and frustration over the city's housing plan had been swelling for some months. Institutional political processes had produced no results. When a young boy, Jimmy Santos, died from carbon monoxide poisoning in a first-floor apartment on West 106th Street, anger exploded and protests escalated. On the evening following the street funeral march held for the child, local antipoverty and tenant advocate groups helped several dozen families break into nine sealed buildings designated for demolition on and around Columbus Avenue and the West 80s in the WSURA. While squatters moved at night with crowbars to peel off the seals covering doors and windows, supporters cheered on the streets as furniture was moved with ropes through windows from the Santos residence into one of the closed buildings.[43]

Figure 2.1. Operation Move-In Rally, 1971 *(also cover photo).* (Máximo Colón, photographer)

For years, tenants and advocates had pleaded with the city to alter its urban renewal plan. Now, residents fed up with the city's inattention to their concerns forced negotiations by occupying buildings slated for demolition or abandoned. As word of the action spread that month and the next, more families—mostly Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American—joined the movement. Local residents, together with veteran tenant and community agencies, mobilized support for the defiant actions. The veteran organizations in the area, including Community Action, Inc., the Mid-West Side Community Corp., and several churches, provided essential material and moral support to the squatters. Former tenant advocate Tom Gogan recalled the political atmosphere:

> There was documentation of the vast amount of dislocation that had already occurred in that neighborhood and the reality that very few people had actually been able to return, despite all the struggle. That became the theme—that the city made these promises and we're going to hold them to it. So, squatting was a logical development at a certain point, especially given the tenor of the times. The students were taking over the campuses in protest of the invasion of Cambodia; Jackson State and Kent State hit—spring of 1970. The country was in ferment. Only a year and a half earlier we had the Columbia student takeovers and other student protests. Taking these buildings was almost the natural thing to do.[44]

Initially, the city threatened the squatters with forced eviction and sent squads of maintenance workers to apartments and buildings not yet occupied to break fixtures, remove stoves, refrigerators, and sinks, and wreck electrical wiring in an effort to deter additional move-ins.[45] But the squatters refused to vacate the apartments. Two weeks after the initial occupations, the city reversed course, saying the squatters would be allowed to stay temporarily, but no further actions would be tolerated. New locks were installed, and some fixtures were replaced. Operation Move-In, however, was in full swing.

In June 1970 the softball players who organized Friday night movies at the local sandlot joined the squatters by breaking the lock and prying open the door of a vacant storefront. Marine veteran Federico Lora was among the crew:

> I remember one of you guys came up with the idea of a storefront, because Operation Move-In was already functioning. They had taken over apartments. And we knew that the storefront on Columbus and West 88th Street was empty. We moved in on a weekend and began to clean it up. (Lora)[46]

Figure 2.2. El Comité's Office, Columbus Ave. and W. 88th St., 1971. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

From the moment they occupied the storefront, neighborhood residents stopped in to meet the new group. Luis Ithier, for example, was curious:

> The day they broke into the storefront, I was coming from Under the Stairs [a local bar]. I'm hearing this commotion in front of the storefront. I knew all these guys. I thought it was going to be something like a social club. Many of the other guys thought so too, to be quite honest. (Ithier)[47]

As a public sector union employee, Ithier was one of the few original members of El Comité who had prior political experience: "I was already involved with Congressman Ryan," he explained, "and campaigned for JFK too."[48]

The ballplayers who squatted at 577 Columbus Avenue had no clear political agenda other than a vague idea that "the people" were justified in taking direct action against the political establishment to control their own destiny.[49] They had been touched by the bravery of the families confronting the tactical police squads sent by the city when a building was taken and went as a group to each site to help defend the occupations. Carmen Martell recalled:

> Nobody took over the storefront so that we could become a political organization. People were squatting. There was a lot of territory open to take. . . . We ourselves, our families, were affected by the housing situation and by Operation Move-In. Once we took the storefront as squatters ourselves, we became part of that movement.[50]

Within several weeks of opening, thirty or more individuals began meeting daily at the storefront to strategize about how to sustain the "people's" movement. Although many in the group were English-dominant or bilingual, choosing a name in Spanish reflected their strong cultural affinity and national identity. Who the "people" were seemed clear: the poor, struggling families—their own families—who were mainly Latino and African American.[51] Not included in their view, national identity notwithstanding, were the few Puerto Ricans in city government who they believed had betrayed the community by advocating the interests of banks and real estate speculators.

While many individuals and groups in Operation Move-In were from the Upper West Side, others were not. El Comité wanted to ensure that families who had already been moved out of the neighborhood or expected to be removed would have priority access to apartments in buildings that were taken over as well as to new public housing. Pedro Rentas explained:

> We went to a meeting between Operation Move-In and Strycker's Bay. The thing was that people from the West Side, people we knew, had been moved out. They were sent to the Bronx, Long Island, wherever. And some of the people coming in had nothing to do with the West Side. The West Side was Puerto Rican, Irish, and a lot of Russians. In fact, the building in front of El Comité was the old Russian Embassy. So, Federico spoke at that meeting. And we asked, 'who guarantees that whoever gets an apartment in these spaces is from here?' We started getting apartments for the people who used to live here. We brought them back.[52]

The influence El Comité swiftly gained among veteran activists and local residents can likely be attributed to its neighborhood roots and outspoken insistence that the Squatters Movement should benefit local residents before newcomers. The members and their families lived in West Side tenements and projects. Some had children who attended local schools. They tended to be older than the students from Columbia University and the Young Lords from the other side of town (East Harlem) and matured, in some cases, by their

military experience. Though some were not Spanish dominant, they still communicated easily in Spanish and shared cultural bonds with other Puerto Rican and Dominican residents. Whites in the movement, even if tenant advocates, did not have similar credibility, especially if they did not live in the neighborhood or had moved to New York only recently.

In Federico Lora, both El Comité and the movement found a charismatic and, before long, respected leader. Ana Juarbe, a long-time resident of the West Side and secretary at Columbia University when she became involved with the squatters, recalled her first impression of El Comité:

> We used to have women's groups as squatters on W. 111th Street. . . . I was in awe of these articulate, strong, intelligent, leaders. . . . The way they carried themselves. . . . I really wasn't political . . . but, my goodness, all these Latinos were like a breath of fresh air. They were so untraditional; they weren't ghetto. When there were takeovers, all kinds of people would come on the scene. I remember asking, 'who are these people?' That's the first time I saw the people from El Comité.[53]

Motivated by the desire to protect the interests of those who had been displaced or awaited eviction, El Comité became a leading force within Operation Move-In:

> We decided we wanted to confront the housing situation in a more organized fashion . . . [W]e started planning which buildings should be taken over, which families should go here or there. We became more organized rather than spontaneous. (Martell)[54]

One scholar's account of tenant movement history in New York City makes exactly that point about the West Side squatters:

> Ad hoc move-ins occurred on West 15th Street in Greenwich Village [*sic*] and on 111th and 122nd Streets. . . . But squatting became more systematic on West 87th Street and along Columbus Avenue, where buildings awaited luxury conversion or demolition for middle-income high rises as part of the West Side Urban Renewal. At night, blacks and Puerto Ricans, prying open boarded-up entrances and rigging makeshift living arrangements, presented the city with a fait accompli—either recognize their "ownership" or evict whole

> families in front of press photographers. Eventually, the Columbus Avenue Operation Move-In claimed one hundred participating families . . . (and) were supported by elaborate networks . . .[55]

Actually, the West Side squatters grew to over two hundred families on the night of July 25, 1970, when fifty-four families, including one hundred twenty children, occupied two privately owned buildings earmarked for demolition on Amsterdam Avenue and West 112th Street in Morningside Heights.[56] The two buildings and four others were scheduled for demolition to make way for a luxury nursing home to be built by Morningside, Inc., a nonprofit corporation affiliated with the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.[57] Six hundred residents had already been evicted from the six buildings. Operation Move-In, of which El Comité was now a part, provided the organizers of the action with a waiting list of families living in overcrowded and unsafe conditions and interested in squatting. Organizers went door-to-door visiting families in the Manhattan Valley neighborhood to mobilize those willing to move into the buildings. The morning following the takeover, the squatters and supporters greeted churchgoers with news of the occupation. Though St. John the Divine, sitting directly across from the buildings, officially denounced the occupation at the Sunday service, out of the church walked "Episcopalians for the Poor," pledging their support for the action.[58]

For the next few weeks, students in the Urban Brigade, mainly Latinos from Columbia University and Barnard College, and community activists met with squatters in the occupied buildings and mobilized support for them throughout the West Side. Forty-seven community organizations citywide endorsed the actions.[59] On the Sunday morning a week after the occupation, Father David García, a radical priest from the Lower East Side, led a sidewalk Mass with squatters and supporters. Tom Gogan offered contextual insight:

> Lindsay would not move against those takeovers because of the community support. Do you think he would have hesitated if the community opposed this? No way. How would that have looked to the constituents he wanted to appeal to? It was a very strong, very liberal area, except for the newcomers. Don't forget, Congressman William Fitts Ryan represented the district; Bella Abzug became Congresswoman in 1971; there were huge anti-war rallies there in the late 60s. When poor people, working class people, people of color took direct action, a lot of people said, "Yeah, ok, we have to support them." This was not the Upper East Side.[60]

For nearly ten years after the takeovers, Morningside, Inc. tried to repossess the two occupied buildings through the courts, until Judge Bruce Wright threw the case out in 1979 and eventually turned the buildings over to the city.[61] The squatters obtained leases (and eventually deeds of ownership) from the city to apartments in those two buildings.

In the remaining months of 1970 and well into 1971, El Comité's members attended meetings and rallies at St. Gregory's Church where Federico Lora often spoke. They joined door-to-door leafleting to rally residents to resist displacement. Manuel Ortiz, also in El Comité, led the occupation of a building on West 100th Street and West End Avenue.[62] At every public opportunity, activists confronted Betances, Badillo, and other city planners about the neglect of local residents. Badillo was jeered by crowds as "otro pillo" (another thief). When pressed to produce the list of families that had been moved from the West Side to the South Bronx, Badillo claimed the list had been misplaced or lost.[63] In response, on a fall afternoon in 1970, El Comité members informed the police precincts on West 82nd Street and West100th Street that there would be a march to the Urban Renewal Office located directly across from their Columbus Avenue storefront. While several hundred people waited outside, spokespersons entered the office and asked the site manager to request a meeting with Badillo on their behalf. When Badillo refused to meet, El Comité escalated the confrontation by disrupting the flow of commercial traffic. On a Friday in October at 4:30 p.m., the time when food delivery trucks came over the Triboro (now RFK) Bridge and down Columbus Avenue, protesters blocked the streets to prevent the trucks from passing. The action was repeated for several consecutive weeks, without police intervention; but Badillo never met with the protesters. In order to stop further demolitions planned for the Mitchell-Lama development, the movement stepped up the scale of building occupations by moving more families into vacant apartments and targeting the Mitchell-Lama development sites.

The Mitchell-Lama program, begun in the 1950s, provided city and state mortgage, tax, and rent subsidies to developers who agreed to rent units to moderate-income earners. As in the Lincoln Center area, most of the families removed from the West Side to make way for these high-rise buildings were low-income families and could not expect to afford the new apartments. Occupancy rules for the one- and two-bedroom apartments limited the number of persons per apartment, thereby further disqualifying many families. Operation Move-In wanted the city's assurance that it would support the position of Strycker's Bay and the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee by reserving at least 30 percent of the Mitchell-Lama units for low-income residents

previously removed or to be removed to make way for the development. "Site 30" of the Mitchell-Lama sites, on the west side of Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, was chosen for the takeover.

Directly across the street, on the east side of Columbus Avenue and West 90th Street, squatters who had previously entered a completed, but still vacant, Mitchell-Lama building known as Site 20 were removed by police after several weeks. Occupancy by accepted Mitchell-Lama applicants was delayed six months until March 1971 because of the takeover. One of the original Mitchell-Lama residents, Barbra Minch, recollected that the new residents were split in their reaction to the squatters' actions.[64] When the squatters at Site 30 sought support from the new renters in Site 20, the residents' meeting held simply to decide whether to hear the squatters' position erupted into a physical fight between supporters and opponents.

It was not the first time conflicts arose between residents excluded from development plans and newcomers who benefited from the city-subsidized apartments built for urban renewal. But when the occupation of Site 30 elicited an agreement from the city that 30 percent of Mitchell-Lama units still to be built would be guaranteed to low-income families, it seemed that the squatters had won another round. The city promised to construct an additional 946 low-income and 1,117 middle-income units in the WSURA but also warned that future squatters would be evicted from vacant buildings.[65] Carmen Martell of El Comité, who still resides in (what was then) a Mitchell-Lama apartment, summed up the success of the Squatters Movement:

> We were able to get many families into the buildings we took over on 87th Street, many of whom are still there. We stopped demolition for Mitchell-Lama on Site 30 until the city agreed to meet the quota that 30 percent of all units would be reserved for low-income applicants.[66]

Despite its verbal agreement, however, the city managed to reduce the proportion of low-income occupancy in Mitchell-Lama residences to well below the promised quota. According to Minch, one of the city's manipulations was to seek and accept applicants (such as law students) whose long-term projected income far exceeded low-income eligibility guidelines. Another tactic, according to Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado, was setting eligibility rules that precluded most displaced residents from returning to the neighborhood.[67] For example, a family of seven exceeded the occupancy limit for most of the new units. On the other end, a single person qualified only for the few studios and not for

one-bedroom apartments. Also, the city played carrot-and-stick. They conceded more favorable terms for the Mitchell-Lama site and transferred control or ownership of some buildings to the squatters. Dozens of families were permitted to renovate, and rents remained stabilized. Many squatters, however, were taken out by city police. In November 1970, thirty individuals (including Pedro Rentas of El Comité) were removed from a building on West 87th Street and arrested by fifty members of the Tactical Patrol Force. The city said the squatters violated the agreement that no more families would move into buildings earmarked for demolition.[68] But demonstrators at the site maintained that the building had not been sealed by the city because one old tenant remained and, therefore, squatters had not violated the agreement.

The urban renewal plan created schisms not only in the Upper West Side but throughout the city between those who believed the plan's opponents were justified and those who detested them. *New York Times* journalist David Shipler reported the assessment of an unidentified representative of the real estate industry and local landlord: Puerto Ricans are not completely civilized—don't quote me—how can a landlord have those people?"[69] The "brownstoners" in the Committee of Neighbors to Insure a Normal Urban Environment (CONTINUE), many of whom were new owner-renovators and middle- and upper-income professionals, viewed the Squatters Movement as a threat that would reduce the area to "a racially segregated slum."[70] CONTINUE gained the attention of Deputy Mayor Richard Aurelio, Housing and Development Administrator Albert Walsh, and Relocation Commissioner Earl Rawlins by vowing to oppose any urban renewal plans that included subsidized housing for the poor. In its lawsuit to stop subsidized housing altogether, CONTINUE cited the "tipping" theory that too many poor people of color would exacerbate white flight and disinvestments. Though the lawsuit eventually failed, CONTINUE delayed and ultimately discouraged the city from building further publicly subsidized housing on the West Side. The luxury rental building built on the former Site 30 in the 1980s reduced to 20 percent the total number of units set aside for "low- to moderate-income residents . . . 'self-subsidized' by the rents from the rest of the building. . . ."[71]

Ironically, in the long-run, segregation prevailed, though not the type feared by CONTINUE. The city's concessions to the Squatters Movement gave activists partial but short-lived victories, effectively demobilizing the movement and paving the way for the gradual, wholesale gentrification of the West Side. In the subsequent decades of the 1980s and '90s, the collaboration between real estate developers, banks, and city agencies ultimately succeeded in the massive displacement of working class residents and virtually eliminated

affordable housing on the Upper West Side. In the wake of an institutionalized plan that catered to private developers and ignored the housing needs of the working class in New York City, segregation in the form of class and racial gentrification is evident today not only throughout the West Side but in most of Manhattan and significant parts of Brooklyn and Queens.

Still, the power potential and short-term achievements of Operation Move-In lay in the risks taken by men and women, some quite young, who led

Figure 2.3. Children of Operation Move-In, 1971. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

their own parents and siblings by the hand through dark hallways in the night, who for the moment refused to allow the city's political and economic rulers to control their destiny. Activists' ability to expand the movement beyond the initial takeovers was enhanced by two factors. First, the prior Lincoln Center development had already exposed the devastating impact of urban renewal and damaged the credibility of political elites who extolled the virtues of the plan as win-win. Second, the liberal mayoral administration vacillated on using police force exclusively in response to the occupations.

The movement also benefited from the broad support of advocacy organizations and influential allies. As in prior political movements, networking among potential mainstream allies increased the movement's exposure and galvanized support. Future Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, State Assemblyman Albert Blumenthal, and State Senator Manfred Ohrenstein all publicly denounced the city's urban renewal plans. Frequently shouting "power to the people," movement participants were energized as well by the alliances made with students, youth activists, and organizations around the city.[72] Occupied buildings were designated as "liberated zones." The most successful were those that were cleaned out and set up with a community kitchen to accommodate people in apartments with no refrigerators or sinks because of the city rip-outs.[73]

Grassroots organizations such as El Comité and advocates such as Strycker's Bay Neighborhood Council did not initiate the movement. It was widely recognized, though, according to former member Nancy Colón, that "El Comité's impact on advancing a housing justice agenda was significant. For a time, they got poor, working people back into the community."[74] Former members of El Comité, friends, and veterans of Operation Move-In still reside in the Upper West Side and Morningside Heights urban renewal areas, representing the last stronghold of subsidized renters or co-op owners of city-transferred properties in the area. Among the 19,000 working-class families displaced by "urban removal" in Manhattan in the 1960s and 1970s were activists who continued to struggle against gentrification and for decent health care and education in areas such as Williamsburg and the South Bronx, the latter of which remains one of the poorest urban regions in the United States.[75]

Spontaneous to Conscious Political Activism

Today's severely gentrified housing environment in Manhattan obscures the history of resistance by Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, African Americans, as well as low-income whites and tenant advocates, to New York's "urban renewal"

designs. For years prior to 1970, tenants and their advocates in the Lincoln Center and Upper West Side areas urged the city to stop displacing families under the guise of "urban renewal" and devise a plan instead to improve slum housing conditions. Only when hundreds of families on the West Side defied the city and private property owners by squatting in vacant buildings and cultivated the support of various social sectors were limited concessions achieved. Operation Move-In demonstrated the partial effectiveness of sustained, organized protests that used disruptive tactics, persuasive mobilizing strategies, and broad alliances to assert community-based power and force concessions from elites.

El Comité's formation was as an outgrowth of the Squatters Movement. The organization developed organically among predominantly working-class Puerto Rican activists, rather than as a product of *a priori* ideology. El Comité's early political development was conditioned by both the negative elite responses to the demand for quality, affordable housing and the minor victories achieved through spontaneous and planned resistance. The reaction of city government to the Squatters Movement reinforced their perception that elected and appointed officials, Puerto Rican or not, did not represent their communities and that the excluded and powerless would have to represent themselves. El Comité's "anti-system" perspective and claim that decent housing was a democratic right resonated among Latinos and others whose distrust of elites was rooted in a history of broken promises, economic hardship, and social and political marginalization.

Clearly, there have been few sustained victories for low- to moderate-income tenants in Manhattan. Operation Move-In subsided as the police became more aggressive and opportunities to expand the movement diminished. Ultimately, the city was not held accountable for deceiving displaced families with the promise that they would be able to return to their neighborhood to live in decent housing. By the time luxury housing was constructed on Site 30 of the West Side Urban Renewal Area, many of the organizations and activists of Operation Move-In had dissipated and individuals dispersed. While the movement's successes were limited, its impact on El Comité was far-reaching. The tenuous and partial nature of victory affirmed that grassroots activism can launch formidable challenges to oppressive conditions. As organizer Manuel Ortiz noted: "The struggle against urban renewal was never going to be won. But it created an urgent sense of need for community education and long-term organizing."[76]

In 1970 El Comité became recognized on the West Side as a principled group, with no hidden agenda or desire for acclaim, independent of elected leaders and antipoverty agencies that bought into institutional politics and

compromised community interests. The organization increased its contacts around the city, especially in the Lower East Side and South Bronx, and among students who supported the squatters. The most significant outcome of El Comité's early involvement in Operation Move-In was its collective evolution from spontaneous reactor to conscious political actor.

3

Colonialism, Migration, and Nationalism in Political Identity

The West Side Squatters Movement in New York was but one of a host of urban movements in the early 1970s that amplified for activists the sense of political momentum and impending change. In her personal account, Esperanza Martell captured the mood on Manhattan's Upper West Side:

> The West Side was a hotbed of struggle. All along the streets and avenues groups were setting up storefronts in vacant buildings . . . There were lots of creative groups working with the community . . . a women's center run by white radical feminists . . . Asians . . . [called] "Chickens Come Home to Roost," a popular karate school [that] trained women and people of color in self-defense, . . . the Nueva Canción [New Song] cultural center featuring Latin American protest music, [and] a community newspaper and food shop run by hippies. Even the middle class was opening their brownstones for political activities.[1]

In communities of color and on college campuses throughout the city and across the United States, young people were energized by the idea that militant "Third World" movements would be the catalyst for transformative change, not only against racist employment, education, and housing policies, but also in opposition to U.S. interventions around the world.

This chapter explores the interaction of colonialism, migration, and the nationalist narrative in the formation of political identity. Why were some

Puerto Rican activists for community reforms and civil rights in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s drawn to the nationalist critique of the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States? What accounts for the rapid leap made by the early members of El Comité from agitators for housing rights to the revolutionary call for an end to U.S. colonial rule in Puerto Rico, which also deepened their affinity with the Third World Left? No doubt, the politicized atmosphere and the militant stances of Black and Brown power movements were contagious. But the personal accounts of the activists themselves weave a more complex story of the links between colonialism, the treatment of the nationalist movement in Puerto Rico, and the conditions of migration in shaping their political consciousness.

Operation Bootstrap

In 1970, nearly one million Puerto Ricans lived in New York City, the majority of whom came from Puerto Rico during the second of two major periods of migration. The initial waves occurred in the first four decades of the twentieth century, when approximately forty thousand people left the island for the United States.[2] With the supply of cheap European and Asian labor cut off by the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and 1924 Immigration Act, northeastern (especially New York) manufacturers welcomed Puerto Rican workers, whose U.S. citizenship had been established by the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917. The Jones Act also established a senate for local governance in Puerto Rico and a compulsory draft that called twenty thousand Puerto Ricans for military service during World War I.[3] Many thousands more were recruited as seasonal migrant farmworkers for east coast farms.[4] Between 1940 and 1964, the period known as the Great Migration, an estimated one million (almost one-third) of Puerto Rico's population left their homes, relocating to New York City neighborhoods of East Harlem (El Barrio), the Upper West Side, Lower East Side, Chelsea, the Lincoln Center area, the South Bronx, and Brooklyn, and in smaller numbers to Chicago, Philadelphia, Miami, and parts of New Jersey and Connecticut.[5]

While the vast majority of prior newcomers from Europe and Asia were economic migrants seeking better opportunities for work and education than what existed in their countries of origin, the stimulus for Puerto Rican migration was more complex than the "push-pull" dynamic of poverty–opportunity.[6] Post–World War II economic restructuring and worker displacement in Puerto Rico occurred directly as a result of local and federal policies in the late 1940s and early 1950s that incentivized U.S. manufacturing interests to transform

Puerto Rico's agricultural economy into the U.S. "Showcase of the Caribbean." Rapid labor-intensive industrialization under Manos a la Obra, or Operation Bootstrap, as the plan was known, was supposed to reduce unemployment and modernize the country by providing thousands of industrial jobs, thus showcasing the superiority of (state-led) capitalist economic development over any socialist alternative for underdeveloped countries that sought to modernize and raise the living standards of their people.

In Bootstrap's early years, income levels rose in Puerto Rico compared to neighboring Caribbean countries. However, in transforming large tracts of land used for export-based sugar production and subsistence farming to manufacturing centers, capital investors did not create industrial jobs in numbers sufficient to incorporate displaced rural workers and farmers. Although manufacturing jobs increased by thirty-six thousand between 1950 and 1960, a net job loss of fifty-four thousand was due primarily to the decline of ninety-one thousand jobs in agriculture.[7] Official unemployment rates fluctuated between 11 and 13 percent, and labor force participation declined to below 50 percent of the working-age population.[8] The real level of unemployment was likely much higher since the official numbers did not include persons of working age who were unemployed but not actively looking for work.

It was left to the Puerto Rican government, which by the 1950s and '60s had achieved a degree of autonomy in domestic affairs, to find solutions to the human costs of rapid industrialization and the destruction of the agricultural economy. In the first major revision of the terms of U.S. colonial rule since the Jones Act of 1917, in 1948 the U.S. Congress authorized the establishment of a locally elected governor and legislative assembly, and designated Puerto Rico as a Free Associated State, or Commonwealth. The revision left unaltered Puerto Rico's status as a territory under the sovereignty of the United States. The U.S. Constitution and federal laws still exercised supremacy over local legislation, but Puerto Rico's Resident Commissioner in the U.S. House of Representatives could not vote, and no senator represented the island's population in the U.S. Senate. Foreign relations and economic policy were (as they remain today) structured by the colonial relationship. Puerto Rico could not officially participate in international institutions, enter into independent trade agreements with foreign countries, or pass legislation that collided with federal law.

The first elected Governor, Luis Muñoz Marin, who prior to the Commonwealth status change had supported independence, responded to massive unemployment and the proliferation of urban-like slums across the island with theories of the deleterious effects of "excess population."[9] Government reports and speeches advanced two "remedies": emigration and government-sponsored

sterilization programs. As Edgardo Meléndez documents, "In effect, by late 1947, the Puerto Rican government had decided to promote migration to the United States."[10] Indeed, by 1965, the outcomes of Operation Bootstrap included massive emigration and chronic unemployment of nearly 25 percent of the remaining population.[11] More than one-third of all women in Puerto Rico were sterilized, many without their knowledge or consent.[12]

By the 1950s, the U.S. presence in Puerto Rico had been deeply entrenched for half a century—in institutions of political and military rule and in economic domination, with increasing business ownership in manufacturing and tourism-related projects. Yet Puerto Rican migrants found that they were treated like strangers, with the majority of the U.S. population unfamiliar with Puerto Rico (except as a vacation destination) and unconcerned about the U.S. role there. Many young Puerto Ricans had witnessed their parents' struggles with inadequate employment (both in Puerto Rico and the United States) and were themselves facing a contracting labor market and inferior education in New York City in the 1960s. The nationalist resistance to U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico some remembered from their childhood in Puerto Rico or learned about from their families and from the pro-independence organizations in New York helped shape their political consciousness.

Nationalism in Political Identity

The bulk of Puerto Rican migration to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s followed a period of acute political repression on the island. From the 1930s to 1950s, support on the island for independence was at its peak. U.S. policy aimed to eradicate the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party and silence its popular leaders, especially Pedro Albizu Campos. In the 1930s, thousands of people gathered in town plazas to hear Albizu Campos, known as "El Maestro," charge the United States with illegal occupation. The Nationalist Party held the position that the 1898 Treaty of Paris, in which Spain ceded possession of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam to the United States as war booty, was illegitimate because a year earlier Spain had recognized Puerto Rico's political autonomy.[13] Puerto Ricans did not participate in the Treaty negotiations, nor were they consulted; and the Nationalists maintained that Spain violated international law by transferring an autonomous nation to another colonial power. In the event this legalistic rationale did not prevail, Albizu Campos, who held law and doctoral degrees from Harvard University, pointed to the example of the Boston Tea Party to justify armed struggle against the United

States. Despite President Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy" toward Latin American and Caribbean nations in the 1930s, which purportedly marked a turning point away from the "Dollar Diplomacy" of frequent U.S. military interventions in the Caribbean during the prior three decades, in Puerto Rico the U.S. military did not hesitate to use force against those who espoused separation from U.S. rule. The Nationalist Party championed or led workers' strikes against U.S. companies, boycotted colonial elections, and claimed the right of the people to take up arms against the colonizers.[14]

The battles between the Nationalist Party and the U.S. government lasted for over twenty years. In 1934, under the command of U.S. Colonel E. Francis Riggs, four nationalists were killed in Rio Piedras. The Nationalists accused of killing Riggs in retaliation two years later were arrested and executed several hours later at a police station without a trial. Albizu Campos was arrested, along with several other Nationalists, tried, and convicted for "seditious conspiracy to overthrow the government of the United States" in Puerto Rico. In the Ponce Massacre that followed in 1937, police fired into an unarmed crowd gathered to protest the arrests of the Nationalists. Nineteen marchers and bystanders were killed; two hundred were wounded.[15] Albizu Campos was imprisoned until 1947.

In 1948, Public Law 53, passed by Puerto Rico's Senate and commonly referred to as La Ley de La Mordaza (the Gag Law), modeled after the Smith Act of 1940, made it a felony to "print, publish, edit, circulate, sell, distribute, or publicly exhibit any writing or publication which encourages, pleads, advises, or preaches the necessity, desirability, or suitability of overthrowing the insular government."[16] The Gag Law's passage was timed to stifle opposition to the first election for governor, which marked the transition from direct colonial rule to the current Commonwealth status.

The Nationalists struck back at the Gag Law and what they viewed as the deception of the democratic institutions established by the Commonwealth with an attempted insurrection, the Jayuya Rebellion. On October 30, 1950, nationalist forces occupied the town of Jayuya, declaring the right to self-determination and proclaiming the "Republic of Puerto Rico." Simultaneously, nationalists attempted to occupy La Fortaleza, the old Spanish fort in San Juan. A day later, in a desperate attempt to call the attention of the world to their cause, Nationalists Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola attacked Blair House, the temporary residence of President Truman in Washington, D.C.[17] One guard and Torresola were killed; Collazo was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison. At La Fortaleza, four nationalists and one police officer were killed. The U.S. air force bombed Jayuya for six days. Military tanks rolled across

the island; hundreds were wounded and arrested; and Albizu Campos was jailed again, convicted of conspiracy, and sentenced to eighty years in prison.

Both the Gag Law and the swift suppression of the Jayuya Rebellion reflected Puerto Rico's growing geopolitical importance as well as the U.S. desire to showcase the colony as a development model.[18] In the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s, the liberation struggles in Indochina and Korea and anti-regime movements from Greece to Guatemala greatly troubled the U.S. national security apparatus. In oil-rich Iran, the nationalist movement was gaining strength against the U.S.-friendly regime of the Shah. The deeply entrenched U.S. and other foreign capital investors in the Caribbean and Central America, especially in Puerto Rico, Cuba, Jamaica, and Guatemala, urged the U.S. government to oppose movements for land reform, nationalization of resources, and democracy throughout Latin America and elsewhere.[19] In the context of the Cold War containment policy of the Truman Doctrine, the strategically located military bases in Puerto Rico gave the United States easy access to neighboring Caribbean and Central American countries and control over the Panama Canal. Uprisings in Puerto Rico did not align with the geopolitical interests of the United States in the region.

The defeat of the Jayuya Rebellion and the repression that followed cultivated a climate of fear and a reluctance to express pro-nationalist sentiments in Puerto Rico. Still, in a second startling attempt to draw the world's attention to Puerto Rico's struggle, on March 1, 1954, four nationalists who made their way into the U.S. House of Representatives Gallery fired thirty shots from automatic pistols onto the House floor, wounding five members of Congress. As Nationalist Lolita Lebrón unfurled a Puerto Rican flag from a balcony, she shouted, "Viva Puerto Rico Libre."[20] Lebrón, Irving Flores, Rafael Cancel Miranda, and Andrés Figueroa Cordero joined Oscar Collazo as political prisoners in U.S. federal prison for the next twenty-five years.[21] Governor Muñoz Marín revoked the pardon he had extended to Albizu Campos a year earlier and ordered him back to prison, and dozens of Nationalist Party members were rounded up and charged with seditious conspiracy.[22] Ironically, FBI files released years later to U.S. Congressman José Serrano revealed that Muñoz Marín was himself a subject of FBI surveillance and "alleged to have used Communist Party leaders and principles to gain political power."[23]

Although the Gag Law was repealed in 1957, according to Ronald Fernández, its effects were felt for decades after:

> Accompanying the law was an enforcement apparatus that had—and continues to have—a chilling effect on Puerto Rican society. In

> 1991 [the year of his study], many islanders, whether on a street in Ponce or a bar in Hartford, still refused to openly discuss their independence sentiments. It has become a widespread assumption of the culture that espousing these beliefs means definite trouble for the speaker and potential problems for his or her family.[24]

Whether or not they supported independence or any of the other status configurations for their homeland, Puerto Ricans who migrated to the United States in the 1940s through 1960s were at least familiar with the colonial critique and aware of the United States' and local government's treatment of the Nationalist Party because they had lived through it on the island. U.S. House Representative Vito Marcantonio, on behalf of his Puerto Rican constituents in East Harlem's congressional district in the 1940s, frequently denounced U.S. colonialism on the floor of Congress.[25] The young men and women who formed El Comité or joined in its first two years either migrated to New York with their families in the 1950s and '60s or were born here of migrant parents. Most came from rural areas outside of old colonial towns, such as Ponce and Mayaguez, or from emerging urban centers near San Juan, such as Bayamón. Some had families who were sympathetic to the Nationalist Party; others did not but struggled with questions about their place in U.S. society while growing up in New York. Nelson Gómez, a former construction worker and the oldest member of El Comité, supported the Nationalist Party as a child in Puerto Rico: "I was influenced by the barber in Mayaguez who used to talk about Don Pedro [Albizu Campos], and so I posted signs for the Nationalists in my town."[26] Frank Velgara, a Lower East Side community activist who joined El Comité in 1972, credited his mother and grandmother for his nationalism and activism:

> In those days, I was pro-independence, no doubt about it. I used to tell people in El Comité that I'm in the movement because of my mother and grandmother. They came here when Truman ordered the liquidation of the Nationalist Party. Why? Because my grandmother was an organizer, and they were fleeing for their lives. Here in New York, my mom founded the first Puerto Rican self-help organization in the Lower East Side. (Velgara)[27]

Pedro Rentas, who was an automobile factory worker in Tarrytown when he joined El Comité, described himself as "a stone [firm] nationalist." His mother lived in Ponce at the time of the 1937 Massacre and was one of the women

who sewed hats for the Nationalists. "She always talked about that. When she found out I was getting involved, she got scared, really scared. She knew what happened down there [in Ponce]. People got hurt."[28]

Like others, Elizabeth Figueroa, who came to New York from Puerto Rico at age three and grew up in East Harlem, gathered her first impressions of the nationalist movement from her father, though he never directly said he was pro-independence. Rather, he often mentioned Albizu Campos admiringly and had posters displaying Puerto Rican pride in their home. As a teenager, she witnessed the Young Lords' Garbage Offensive near her Madison Avenue home and remembered liking their "gutsiness." Raised as a Pentecostal, Figueroa did not believe in war and was deeply affected by the media coverage of the Vietnam War and by a walkout of students against the war at her junior high school. When she joined the Puerto Rican students' club at Lehman College, her random political thoughts began to gel as she learned more about Albizu Campos and the independence movement in Puerto Rico.[29]

Julio Pabón, also a student at Lehman College in the late 1960s, by his own account was an unlikely candidate for college. Pabón migrated from Puerto Rico to the South Bronx in 1956 at age four. Raised primarily by his father, he lived in considerable poverty. He attended a Civil Air Patrol boot camp program at Miller Air Force Base in Staten Island while he was in high school, intending to enter the Air Force after graduation. He wanted to go to Vietnam to "avenge the deaths of [his] older, big brothers from the streets of the Bronx" whose caskets he witnessed coming home from Vietnam. But his path shifted abruptly when a guidance counselor—to Pabón's surprise, "this white guy"—encouraged him to take advantage of CUNY's new Open Admissions policy and apply to college. He submitted the paperwork but still intended to join the military. The same counselor (who Julio later suspected was "one of those SDS progressives who snuck their way into the schools") also let him know about anti-war demonstrations taking place nearby. In the summer he had to choose between high school and the military, he stumbled upon a poster saying, "Free Puerto Rico":

> I never heard anything like that before. And then I went to Lehman's orientation, and saw grass, more grass than I'd ever seen. And Puerto Rican women passing out flyers and speaking about Puerto Rico. This was all new—a college campus, beautiful women, and freedom for Puerto Rico. I said, "ok, I'm in." (Pabón)[30]

As a child in South Ozone Park, Jaime Suárez's closest friends were African American, and he was drawn to the Black Power movement that

introduced him to Malcolm X's *Autobiography*. When his family came to the United States from Puerto Rico, his father and uncles joined a social club in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Though not overtly political, this club and others like it functioned as self-help societies, the founders of which were often either anti-Franco exiles from Spain or Puerto Ricans previously associated with nationalist or socialist politics in Puerto Rico. After moving to Long Island as a teenager, Jaime chose college over Vietnam at his brother's insistence. He met one of the Young Lords distributing the newspaper *Pa'lante* at Suffolk Community College and later met an instructor at SUNY Stony Brook who was a member of the PSP. Apart from the mobilizations taking place in the city around independence for Puerto Rico and quality of life issues, similar stirrings were felt in the heavily Puerto Rican–populated, Long Island town of Brentwood:

> The 60s created an environment where people just started reacting to their conditions and started doing something about them. [In Brentwood] you didn't have political movements like El Comité or the Young Lords. But people started dealing with their problems, feeling like we have a right to do this. There was a Puerto Rican cultural center that brought the community together. It wasn't politically motivated at first; but by 1970–71 it became political around the issue of police brutality. [Activists] started challenging the authorities. . . . There were also individuals who had been involved in the Nationalist Party who got involved in education issues. So in my case, I was influenced by nationalism and by community and was involved politically for about two years before joining El Comité. (Suárez)[31]

Placing the repression of the Nationalist Party and migration in the context of McCarthy-era efforts to hush dissent from all quarters, Army veteran Luis Ithier captured the concerns of his parents' generation:

> You have to remember that our parents came here during repression of the independence movement in the 1950s when everybody was getting killed or imprisoned. No matter what, if you thought freedom in your mind, you were jailed. They sent the militia and everything else. That dissuaded a whole lot of people who had nationalistic feelings from expressing them. Even here in the U.S., nationalism was a bad word because you remembered what happened to the Nationalists in Washington.[32]

The common thread running through these and other stories is the indignation Puerto Rican activists felt as their understanding of the colonial history of Puerto Rico deepened, and the sense of empowerment they gained from their exposure to the independence movement. No doubt, cultural identity was (and is) strong among Puerto Ricans in the United States, as it has been for generations of immigrants and their descendants. And it was strengthened by the air bridge between Puerto Rico and the United States, which facilitated an enduring attachment to their land of origin that did not exist for immigrants from Europe. However, the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, including the annihilation of the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico, added a unique dimension to Puerto Rican *political* identity, the extent of which is still little understood in the larger society.

The independence movement in New York in the 1960s and '70s, holding celebrations of key rebellions and movement leaders, exposed many young Puerto Ricans to a counternarrative of history and heritage to the one presented in public schools in the 1950s and early '60s, where educators and textbooks ignored or misrepresented the relationship between Puerto Rico and "the mainland." The colonial legacy discredited the school-book story of U.S. democracy that professed Wilsonian ideals as the basis for U.S. conduct in the world.[33] For some, exposure to the movement and identity with it opened the door to psychological liberation from the messages they had received about their life's prospects from school professionals. Maria Collado, one of the early members of El Comité, was Spanish dominant when she started school in New York. Her father spoke to her in Spanish as a child because he felt she and her siblings would learn English in school and should not forget their original language.

> Unfortunately for me, when I went to public school not speaking English, they treated me like a dummy. There were no bilingual programs that embraced different cultures and nationalities, and I was placed in a special class for "los dummies." I caught on to the language quickly, of course, but it kind of stayed with me always that I was stupid and had to prove myself. (Collado)[34]

Because a large concentration of Puerto Ricans lived in the West Side and had participated in Operation Move-In, the Puerto Rican flag was a common sight in the windows of some of the buildings. It is not unusual in the multiethnic New York environment to see flags of countries of origin displayed, especially to symbolize pride in an accomplishment of the home country or

to celebrate heritage. But to activists the Puerto Rican flag was also a symbol of defiance and the struggle for self-determination.

Federico Lora and Pedro Rentas were among the founders who encouraged El Comité to embrace the cause of independence for Puerto Rico. Lora's family left the Dominican Republic during the repressive rule of the Trujillo regime and settled on West 99th Street. With no job or specific plans after high school, he enlisted in the Marines, was wounded twice in Vietnam, and achieved the rank of sergeant. In letters to his wife from Vietnam, Lora talked about the high numbers of casualties of very young Puerto Ricans. Upon his return in 1968, he and his family lived in the projects on Amsterdam Avenue.

> Carmen [Martell] and I were in El Barrio with Richie [their son], and Antonio Irizarry was speaking about Albizu Campos and distributing a little book about him. I heard that speech and said, "hey, that old man was alright." And then we began to speak about independence. I would go to the marches against the Vietnam War. The war was influencing all these people, and little by little Puerto Ricans who were not active in the anti-war movement joined that movement. We were influenced by all the people and movements that came before us. (Lora)[35]

After attending the commemorative rally for Albizu Campos, Lora, who held the position of First Secretary of El Comité from 1971 to 1977, began to study Puerto Rico's history and urged the organization to do the same:

> At the time I was working at an architectural firm downtown. José Torres [journalist for *Nuevo Día* in Puerto Rico] had published a column about Puerto Ricans, "Seeing Red," and I read the column. At my job where drafts were made, you could enlarge things. So I enlarged the column on thick paper. We posted it in front of the storefront, and people began to read about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. . . . That's how we came about. It had nothing to do with some of those things I read about. (Lora)[36]

Lora's remark about "some of those things I read about" referred to Juan González's mischaracterization of El Comité in his book, *Harvest of Empire*, as "young Dominicans, following the example of Puerto Ricans who founded the Young Lords, [and] started their own radical organization."[37] González, a founding member of the Young Lords Party in New York, erroneously wrote

that El Comité was a Dominican organization whose members were "more aware of politics than the average Puerto Rican or Mexican." The mistake likely stems from the fact that Lora, a founder and principal spokesperson of El Comité, was in fact Dominican. Although it became more diverse in later years, at the start El Comité was comprised almost entirely of Puerto Ricans, displayed the Puerto Rican flag above its storefront door, and collaborated with the Young Lords on many occasions. González was correct, however, that El Comité "spearheaded a large tenant squatters' movement on the Upper West Side against New York's new urban renewal program. . . ."[38]

Lora made his first visit to Puerto Rico with Pedro Rentas, traveling around the island and learning about the independence movement. Based on their report to El Comité after the trip, and on all of the conditions and influences participants encountered personally and collectively up to that point, the organization established that it was, foremost, an independence organization. In Maria Collado's words:

> At some point, we wanted to do more than get fair housing and education and eliminate the rats. We wanted to free Puerto Rico. . . . Between the moment we opened that front door to the moment we realized we were talking about freeing Puerto Rico, it was no more than a year. By 1971, Américo [Badillo] was there, and he brought us further into our study of Puerto Rico. We talked about being Puerto Ricans and what that meant in this country. At first, we were all over the place. When Américo began to give us classes on the history of Puerto Rico, then we were political.[39]

Some of the early members joined the organization after they were exposed to the issue of independence through the other New York independence groups. Carmen Martell, El Comité's Secretary of Organization for many years, described herself as apolitical growing up in New York City. She came to New York from Bayamón in 1952 at the age of eight with her sister and mother. Upon their arrival, she and her family lived in single-room-occupancy dwellings in Manhattan. Her mother found employment in a plastics factory. For Carmen and other children who started school not speaking English, the first few years were disorienting; students were not allowed to communicate in Spanish even among themselves. In eighth grade, like many Black, Puerto Rican, and poor white students at the time, Carmen was tracked into a vocational school rather than an academic high school. Her interest in Puerto Rico developed when her cousin and anti-war activist, Esperanza Martell, brought her to a

pro-independence activity held by MPI.[40] Although MPI (later named PSP) forums helped her to understand Puerto Rico's nationalist movement and the colonial context that shaped mass migration from Puerto Rico, she chose to join El Comité because she related better to its community roots and felt distanced culturally from the island-based speakers she met at MPI presentations. Frank Velgara, from the Lower East Side, was similarly drawn to El Comité:

> I was on the staff of the Frente [*El Frente Unido*] and once a month one of the organizations would talk to the staff. As part of the Frente, I saw how the people from El Comité behaved, and I found a real affinity with their way of being . . . down to earth, real clear, real humble, but smart. That's what I remember—smart. Before long, I ended up in a study group. When I was asked to join, I was like, thank you. That's when we started to have a real presence in education on the Lower East Side.[41]

The Young Lords attempted to recruit members of El Comité, inviting them to their meetings and trying to persuade them to become a Lords' chapter. The Lords were respected for their militancy, and several early El Comité members credit the Lords as their political inspiration. Some attended Lords' meetings and vice versa, and several of the Lords joined El Comité. But El Comité was not interested in becoming part of the Young Lords. Its members tended to be slightly older than the Young Lords and preferred to remain independent. Also, by early 1971 the Young Lords were focused primarily on Puerto Rico's independence, while El Comité was deeply entrenched in local community struggles, even as it embraced the independence movement. As Lora explained:

> We always kept that link with the community. Most of the people who supported us didn't support independence. But they liked us because we were part of the struggles in the community. We were able to deal with the issues that affected the community without bringing in Puerto Rico.[42]

The "National Question"

While Puerto Rican political and cultural nationalism remained strong in El Comité throughout its history, in the early days members grappled with difficult questions about their political role in the United States. Should

Puerto Ricans fight for racial justice and civil rights and leave issues of class to other workers? How should Puerto Ricans in the United States relate to the independence movement in Puerto Rico? In 1973, El Comité suspended publication of *Unidad Latina* for six months to allow more time to reflect on its political experiences and the questions emerging within its ranks about political identity. When it resumed publication of a monthly paper in 1974 with the name *Obreros en Marcha* (OEM, Workers on the Move), the duality of El Comité's politics and identity—as both Puerto Rican and part of the U.S. Left—was clearly established and guided its political work for the remainder of the decade.

The organization took the position that Puerto Ricans in the United States constituted a predominantly working-class national minority whose long-term material interests coincided with those of the U.S. working class as a whole.[43] At its Formative Assembly in January 1975, the organization formalized its view that, while it would continue to support the independence of Puerto Rico, its central role was to contribute to a socialist movement in the United States. It would focus on local workers' and students' movements and engage in dialogue with other Marxist organizations. In their organizing work, the worker and student sectors would attempt to form alliances across racial and ethnic lines. The Assembly changed El Comité's name to El Comité-MINP (Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño). "Puerto Rican" in the name signified the organization's focus on Puerto Rican communities; "National Movement" intended to convey the idea that the movement for socialism was ultimately national, not local. (For ease of reading, I frequently refer to the organization simply as "El Comité throughout the book.)

El Comité shared its view on the national question in its pamphlet, *The Process of Puerto Rican Migration and the U.S. Working Class*:

> As a migrant group, Puerto Ricans in the U.S. have left their nation of origin and have become incorporated into the socio-economic structure of another nation. The material reality of Puerto Ricans in the United States . . . [is that] of North American capitalist society. . . . Puerto Ricans participate in the economic, social, political, and even cultural life of this country. . . . [They] are predominantly a working class people, a national group whose majority belong to the working class of the U.S. . . . [A]s one generation follows another, the assimilation of elements of the proletarian and dominant culture becomes more pronounced.[44]

In this view, Puerto Ricans residing in the states had become integrated into the socioeconomic structure of the United States, with features that distinguished them from workers in Puerto Rico. As part of the multinational U.S. working class, their objective interests lay in fighting for social justice in the United States.[45] At the same time, as a national minority, Puerto Rican workers were oppressed in ways more closely aligned with the experiences of African Americans, though their workplace conditions were the worst of all.[46]

Most of the articles in *OEM* linked local issues and reform campaigns to the national political economy and the objective of building a multinational, class-based revolutionary movement in the United States. Like other nationalist organizations of the period, El Comité believed that both institutional racism and the attitudes of white supremacy impeded class unity but provided an objective basis for common cause among "third world peoples." Laura Pulido makes a similar observation in her study of the Third World Left in Los Angeles:

> Though there is a long history of organizing by leftists of color, the Third-World left of the late 1960s and 1970s was perhaps its most consolidated expression. Inspired by anticolonial revolutions, the US third-world left was an outgrowth of the black, Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, American Indian and Asian American power movements, all of which were antiracist and fairly nationalist.[47]

El Comité's two-pronged political strategy stemmed from this perspective on the national question. On the one side, it worked to expand democratic rights, focusing especially in communities and workplaces with a significant Puerto Rican presence. At the same time, it worked toward building a broader multiracial/multiethnic socialist movement in the United States by making alliances where possible and networking with the broader U.S. Left.

El Comité was not alone in questioning how Puerto Ricans in the United States should relate to the island-based independence movement and progressive movements in the United States. The U.S. Chapter of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, which originated as MPI in Puerto Rico, defined itself as an extension of Puerto Rico's independence and socialist movement. It held the view that Puerto Ricans in the United States were "forced residents" and therefore part of a "divided nation" whose long-terms interests lay in Puerto Rico's liberation from colonial rule. Therefore, Puerto Ricans should organize primarily to advance the liberation struggle.[48] For El Comité, viewing Puerto Ricans in the United States as part of a "divided nation" mistakenly treated

the concept of nation as a "spiritual" entity based on the "sense of nationality" and ignored the changed circumstances of migrants.[49] Both organizations believed their positions were grounded in objective analyses that validated their divergent strategic visions and political programs. Consequently, especially in the mid-1970s, the two groups sometimes engaged in heated debates that limited their practical interaction. However, the organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in New York often found common ground and worked together on many issues throughout the 1970s.

One of their first notable collaborations was the Puerto Rican Day Parade on June 13, 1971. Along with MPI, the Young Lords and El Comité objected to the parade's appearance as a spectacle of Puerto Rican compliance with what they viewed as institutions of oppression. They devised a plan to "take the front" of the parade at its starting point on Fifth Avenue and 59th Street, intending to thrust into the spotlight the colonial question and the conditions of working class people of color. In advance of the date, *Unidad Latina*, El Comité's newspaper, published an article that announced the intention to gather at 59th Street prior to the parade's starting time. This lengthy passage quoted from the article illuminates the passion and tenor of the times:

> [What] are we celebrating? We celebrate the deaths in our communities . . . the housing conditions, the lead poisoning of our children, poisoning that slowly puts them to sleep. We celebrate the long lines in search of a job or the monthly wait for a check. We celebrate those of us that have been murdered in jail. The drunkenness, the fights, the highs, and the long hours of work and restless nights. The exorbitant rents and the cold winters, the radiators that don't work, the broken down mail boxes, the sirens and red lights . . . the clothing we make but cannot buy, the sewing needles in our fingers, the eyesight we slowly lose. We celebrate our children that play in the streets, in brick and glass and stone; our workers that rise at dawn . . . those that understand about layoffs, about the boss and the Latino foreman that is worse than the American, and all the hard work that dissolves illusions. . . .
>
> All of these things we are going to celebrate on Fifth Avenue, that avenue that does not belong to us, that avenue . . . of high rise luxurious apartments, built and maintained by our sweat, the sweat of the poor. An avenue where Blacks and Puerto Ricans are an exception. We march up an avenue of insult and indignity. . . . At one o'clock the police department begins to march.

> The same ones that protect the property of my landlord. . . . At one o'clock the politicians smile and begin to count the votes, while they forget the budget cuts, the rent decontrol law, the poor health services. . . . They forget that it is [we], the poor, [who are] marching. . . . See you there: 12:30 at 59th and 5th.[50]

The *New York Times* reported that, as approximately "eight hundred to fifteen hundred" [*sic*] unarmed demonstrators marched to the head of the parade, "about 125 helmeted policemen pursued them, swinging clubs . . . and ran up and down the avenue and along the side streets grabbing the fleeing demonstrators."[51] Noel Colón of El Comité was among the twenty participants arrested for "inciting a riot." His companion, Maria Collado, staffing the Columbus Avenue storefront office for the day, gave birth to their son several hours after hearing of the arrests. In subsequent years, El Comité continued to criticize the collaboration between the parade's organizers and the corporations that subsidized it. But starting in 1974, when parade officials reluctantly agreed, El Comité joined the parade with large banners in support of independence. PSP and other nationalist groups did the same, and for the remainder of the 1970s

Figure 3.1. Protesters' Confrontation with Police, Puerto Rican Day Parade, 1971. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

the parade was as an opportunity to dissent from the dominant image of the happy partnership that politicians and private companies wanted to project.

El Frente Unido (United Front) was a different type of collaboration among the Young Lords, MPI, the Puerto Rican Students' Union, *El Pueblo del Vladic* from the Lower East Side, *Resistencia Puertorriqueña*, and El Comité to raise the issue of colonialism and urge support for independence. In contrast with the disruptive, symbolic type of action taken at the parade, El Frente focused on organizing educational forums in neighborhoods throughout the city and on college campuses. This first sustained political venture beyond Manhattan's West Side provided El Comité with opportunities to recruit new members and expand its political reach, both as a significant voice in the independence movement as well as in other contentious issues, especially education.

Political Evolution

A qualitative leap in political awareness that occurs at a moment in time is difficult to capture. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the civil rights and anti-war movements claimed the attention of many young activists. As these movements ebbed, the college campus and student clubs provided the intellectual space in which scores of students learned to think critically and question social inequality, racial oppression, and imperialism. For youth of color in New York City, both on and off college campuses, antipoverty and affirmative action programs helped to elevate their political and social consciousness and heighten their frustration with the limited positive outcomes of these programs. Some of the period's activists turned to Democratic Party politics or continued to work with community agencies funded by city, state, or federal government, to implement service programs. Others, like El Comité, sought to answer the question of how subordinate sectors acquire meaningful power and fundamental change within a system that is structurally and institutionally designed to resist such change.

While early members of El Comité may have acquired their views on Puerto Rico's colonial dilemma through individual experiences, their collective study of the history of colonialism and the structural underpinnings of migrations to the United States shaped their political identity and agenda. As the group studied the history of Puerto Rico, the experiences of Puerto Ricans (and others) in the United States, as well as Marxist texts, they developed a race and class analysis of the limited access to good jobs, the difficulties of joining and organizing unions, the divergent impact of the encroaching fiscal crisis on New York's working-class communities, and U.S. imperialism in

Puerto Rico and around the world. As more activists drifted into the storefront, political action moved beyond housing and Puerto Rico to other local, national, and international issues and struggles, and the gradual transition to a cadre organization began.

4

From Community Organizing to Radical Politics, 1971–1975

> We wanted to free Puerto Rico. By reaching people through the bilingual program, they would have a better understanding of who we were.
>
> —Maria Collado[1]

The demand for decent and affordable housing in New York City neighborhoods in the early 1970s represented an expansive interpretation of democratic and civil rights, beyond the institutional emphasis on outlawing discrimination, legislating affirmative action, and expanding means-based social programs.[2] The idea that quality housing should be available to all had been embraced in such diverse quarters as the federal government, in the Housing Act of 1949, and the Black Panther Party in its Ten Point Program of 1967.[3] Yet urban renewal plans removed thousands of people from their homes with little concern for the disruptions to families and communities or for securing quality, alternative housing for displaced residents. The West Side Squatters Movement affirmed what many people already knew—that racism and disdain for poor people permeated the structures of power despite the public expressions of empathy and commitments to reforms made by some elected officials or representatives of city agencies.[4] This chapter presents the expansion of El Comité's activism beyond housing issues to education, cultural inclusion, and workers' rights, and its transformation from a community action group to a radical political organization in the first half of the 1970s.

Part I: Think Globally, Act Locally—Struggles for Democratic Rights

In characterizing El Comité's political program, Andrés Torres observed:

> [El Comité] addressed the gamut of issues affecting the community, linking local issues to international forces. Years later, this notion, common to the Left, would be recycled in the slogan, Think Globally, Act Locally. In the sixties and seventies, this was the normal mode of analysis for cadre organizations.[5]

By framing demands for better living and working conditions as legitimate claims for democratic rights, El Comité exerted pressure on public and private institutions of power that were vulnerable to charges of discrimination, especially given the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. In the early 1970s, the demands for parent power and bilingual education resonated widely in school districts in the Lower East Side and Upper West Side of Manhattan, and sustained campaigns achieved noteworthy successes. Rallies against media exclusion of Latinos resulted in a concession by a major network to produce a series on Latino realities. The idea of workers' unity was effective in uniting Black and Puerto Rican construction workers to fight for jobs based on the obstacles they faced in common. These campaigns were often strengthened by the support of progressive students from around the city who were engaged in their own battles to reform the curricula in colleges throughout the New York metropolitan area.

Community Control in Education

Por Los Niños

In the 1960s, communities of color in New York waged a prolonged battle for community control of schools as an alternative to the forced busing experiment recommended in a report commissioned by the State Department of Education to find ways to desegregate New York City schools.[6] The reluctance of the Board of Education to undertake desegregation policies urged by the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* aligned with the interests of fearful white parents and real estate developers. But Puerto Rican and African American parents were no less resistant to the one-dimensional plan that would

Figure 4.1. El Comité Democratic Rights Banner. (Photographer unknown, El Comité's Archives)

remove their children from their neighborhoods to attend predominantly white schools. In the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn's Ocean-Hill/Brownsville, parents and advocacy groups such as United Bronx Parents, ASPIRA, and the East Harlem Coalition for Community Control wanted direct input into curriculum planning, budgeting, and hiring practices in their local schools. Activists knew that, by itself, the creation of thirty-two school districts ordered by the 1969 New York City Decentralization Act would not empower parents. As El Comité later described the education empowerment movement in *Obreros en Marcha* (OEM):

> Fed up with schools that "tracked" their children, miseducated them, graduated them unable to read or write, and denied them their cultural identity, language and history, working people throughout the city (particularly in Black and Puerto Rican communities) demanded a public school system responsive to the needs of local communities and under the control of the parents and residents from those areas.[7]

The education power struggle in the Lower East was accelerating right around the time El Comité was transitioning from a community activist group to a more politically anchored, cadre organization. Lourdes García, a Lower East Side resident and only eighteen years old in 1971, joined El Comité while taking classes at the Lincoln Center campus of Fordham University. At Fordham and other colleges, by this time, El Comité was involved in efforts to establish Puerto Rican and Black Studies programs, and García attended a conference at Princeton University to coordinate strategies among student organizations in the northeast region. When El Comité decided to form chapters in communities outside of the West Side, especially where anti-racist, empowerment struggles similar to the Squatters Movement were developing, García and Frank Velgara formed the Lower East Side chapter:

> I grew up in the Lower East Side and knew first-hand the conditions Puerto Rican children faced in the schools I attended. There was a need to begin to define ourselves politically. Chapters allowed for a continuity of the work; it allowed us to recruit; it allowed El Comité to have a presence and expand its base, rather than be based only in the Upper West Side. You couldn't just send an organization based on the Upper West Side to struggle in the Bronx or the Lower East Side. You had to have a base in the communities where struggles were happening. (García)[8]

In the Lower East Side's District 1, the campaign known as Por Los Niños/For the Children brought together Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Asians, and progressive whites who wanted a community school board that was demographically representative of the community. They were opposed by the all-white community board and the United Federation of Teachers, and met with fierce resistance from the Jewish Defense League, which opposed any change to the status quo. García and Velgara described the attacks against the community slate of Por Los Niños candidates:

> This was the most racist, miserable campaign against us you can possibly imagine. They began to portray us as thugs and gang members, saying that if the parents take control of the schools, the gangs and thugs are going to be running the schools, and there will be drugs in the schools.[9]

In a two-pronged strategy to change the power dynamics, the parents and other activists decided to disrupt School Board meetings where they were

excluded from decisions on issues that affected their children, and to participate with their own slate of candidates in the School Board elections. The parents understood that if they did not change the actual composition of the Board, as García explained, "they would always be in the audience shouting up at the Board with no one up there saying, hey, we need to listen to these parents."

Besides battling the local power structure, El Comité wanted to ensure that parents in the community devised and retained control of their own agenda, especially because political groups from outside the community sometimes tried to impose their own agendas:

> We realized that the white Left was sending people to sort of colonize communities where they didn't live. They would show up in bunches of ten and outnumber the local community folks with their votes. . . . The Socialist Workers' Party [SWP] had a history of doing this. You knew one of them was with SWP because they would introduce themselves, but others would pretend to be from one organization or another and would outvote people from the community. Meanwhile, we lived in these communities; we should be giving political direction to those struggles. It was legitimate that we would do so because we were not coming from outside. We were from the Lower East Side; we went to school there; our parents were there. We had plenty to say, not because somebody sent us there but because we had a stake in what was happening. (García and Velgara)

The Por Los Niños slate opposed the UFT-sponsored slate of "candidates [who] were exclusively white, middle class, with no actual ties to the schools other than that their relatives had jobs in the schools as teachers."[10] But with limited resources and fierce, well-financed opposition, only one of the Por Los Niños slate was elected to the local School Board on its first try. Anthony DeJesús and Madeline Pérez describe the significance of the campaign in this way:

> [Por Los Niños] was successful in advancing the goals of parent participation, professional development for teachers, school accountability to community interests, and bilingual education. The message conveyed through the activism of the Por los Niños coalition included the concept that the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of children were an essential component of effective pedagogy in public schools.[11]

As part of their reform agenda, Lower East Side parents and advocates wanted bilingual education (Spanish-English and Chinese-English) incorporated into District 1's curriculum. Initially, school principal (and later superintendent) Luis Fuentes supported the idea simply because parents wanted it. Subsequently, he became convinced that speaking in a familiar language empowered children, improved literacy, and enhanced students' interaction with their peers.[12] Bilingual programs were conceived by academics and advocates as long-term programs where literacy in two languages and cultures could develop.[13] It was later that TESOL programs shifted to transitioning speakers of languages other than English to English-only instruction. District 1 was first to offer a bilingual program in New York City in this period.

Bilingual Education in District 3

> [T]he United States is one of the few countries in the world in which a man [*sic*] can consider himself educated and speak but one language, this despite the fact that the United States has probably been the outstanding country in receiving . . . millions of people who have spoken all of the modern languages of the world.
>
> —Joseph Monserrat[14]

Inspired by the goals of bilingual education and the involvement of its new recruits in the Lower East Side education struggles, El Comité expanded the fight for bilingual education to District 3 in the Upper West Side. Those with children in P.S. 84 raised the issue at PTA and local school board meetings. Many parents were receptive to the idea, as were the principal, Sid Morrison, and community board member Diane Morales. Federico Lora provided El Comité's rationale for its involvement in the issue:

> We wanted our kids to be able to read and write Spanish. And we had the support of the teachers, especially the unemployed teachers who wanted to teach in a bilingual program. We were already organized because of the housing issue. And Dominicans who lived in the community as well also wanted their children to be taught in Spanish. So we had the support of part of the educational system, then the parents, and eventually the school board. The parents moved with us from one issue to the other. When we moved, we moved not as revolutionaries but as part of the community because we were part of the community.[15]

Figure 4.2. Rally for Bilingual Education, District 3. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

The campaign for bilingual/bicultural education in essence was part of the struggle for quality education and viewed by advocates as a democratic right. They believed that the New York City School Decentralization Law of 1969, passed ostensibly to increase community control, was designed by city government "to maintain, on the one hand, the existing educational structure (the Central Board in particular) and . . . to isolate, divide, and divert the progressive demands of the people."[16] The claim was reasonable in light of the many instances in which the Central School Board intervened to overrule a local school board. During the mid-1970s fiscal crisis, parents in several districts protested the decision to close schools at 2:15 p.m. twice a week rather than 3 p.m. (a provision negotiated by the UFT following its 1975 strike). In District 3, El Comité joined parents in a series of sit-ins that spread to ten schools and to District 6, convincing local boards to defy the Central Board's order and dismiss children at 3 p.m. Ultimately, the parent activists were successful and the Central Board overturned the policy of closing schools early.[17] To activists, quality education meant the incorporation of bilingual education, nutrition and reading programs, and decent facilities, supplies, and instruction. The demand for quality education could not be satisfied merely through the creation of buffers between communities and school administrations. Bilingual/

bicultural education represented a pedagogical philosophy on how to improve the literacy, cultural awareness, and opportunities for children with strategies that concretely addressed their needs.

The victory in District 3 was achieved through a broad-based community alliance, mobilizations, and disruptive tactics. From 1972 to 1973, El Comité brought parents to school board meetings, disrupted agendas by speaking out from the floor, demanded votes on the issue, and led pickets on the street. Parents occupied P.S. 84 for several days, preventing classes from taking place. On several occasions, the flow of traffic on local streets was halted by parent protesters. The distinctive feature of the parent coalition in District 3 was its multiracial makeup, based on the philosophy embraced by many advocates of bilingualism nationwide, including ASPIRA, Inc., that multicultural education enriched all children.[18] Barbra Minch, a Mitchell-Lama resident originally from Brooklyn and a sympathizer of El Comité, enrolled her daughter in the program upon its inception in 1973. From kindergarten through sixth grade, bilingual classes were attended by children from all backgrounds. The program was unprecedented in New York City in that it was implemented district-wide, whereas District 1's program in the Lower East Side operated in one school. The victory empowered residents and bolstered El Comité's approach of creating tactical alliances with sympathetic sectors. The organization engaged in similar campaigns in Boston and Long Island later in the decade.[19]

In school districts around the country, academic interest in multiculturalism surged in the 1970s, seeming to affirm Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan's thesis that cultural pluralism better explained the prevailing mode of immigrant assimilation than the "melting pot" theory.[20] The main premise was that ethnic and racial groups did not simply give up or reject their ethnic identity or language and melt into one homogenous American identity. Cultural pluralism was defined by scholars, and widely celebrated, as the unique capacity of the United States to appreciate many heritages. This reinterpretation of immigrant incorporation cited the universal embrace of the democratic ideal rather than the rejection of ancestral heritages as the unifying factor among diverse groups. When local budget cuts and creeping conservatism in the nation created a backlash against bilingual education and other affirmative action programs, political activists were forced to defend existing programs from retrenchments.

In the fog of today's conservative fears about bilingualism and Anglo-anxiety over the preservation of "American" culture and customs, it is important to recall that the movements for bilingual education and cultural representation by Puerto Ricans, as well as Mexican Americans, across the country was hardly without precedent. Generations of Jews, Italians, Germans, Irish, and

African Americans fought in both public and private realms for the preservation of their diverse languages and cultural heritages.[21] More than a theory of immigrant incorporation, bilingual education, though constantly under attack and undergoing reformulations, has been integral to combating racism and to providing meaningful and equal education.

Latino Programming at PBS and Gypsy Cabs in New York

In the early 1970s, anti-discrimination movements in New York City confronted major media for the lack of culturally representative programming. As a result of a collaborative effort that included meetings with the staff and executive board members of WNET (PBS), picket lines at the network's office at West 58th Street and Broadway, and a disruptive takeover of a live show, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting agreed to fund and air the series, *"Realidades,"* focusing on the history, life, and culture of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos.[22] Eulogio Ortiz recalls:

> I signed the agreement with Channel 13, representing El Comité. The problem then was that there were few Latinos who knew television. People knew film, but not television. I was still unemployed, and they [PBS Executive Board] asked me if I'd like to work as a production assistant on the show. I said sure, I'll do it. We had a staff of six people and a budget of $100,000, which is nothing. Realidades, a weekly half-hour program, lasted for three years."[23]

Realidades was the first recognition by a major network that it had a responsibility to represent the stories of Latinos, the fastest growing minority group in the nation. Although underrepresentation and bias are still pervasive in the media, the activists of the 1970s markedly advanced the debate.

Another of the prolonged, but ultimately successful, contentious struggles against exclusion in the early 1970s was waged by Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American drivers and community supporters of the unlicensed, non-medallion livery cabs (los taxis del pueblo) that serviced the neighborhoods that Taxi Commissioner Michael Lazar called "the slum areas of the city," according to the *New York Times*.[24] For years yellow cabs refused to service East Harlem, Washington Heights, and Harlem. From Manhattan, they would not go to the South Bronx or parts of Brooklyn. If not for the "gypsy cabs" that drove around the streets picking up passengers who hailed them down, residents were entirely dependent on subways and buses. Whether workers coming out

Figure 4.3. Protest at WNET (PBS) Headquarters, 1972. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

of work late at night—hospital and factory workers—needed a ride home, or a sick child needed to be rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night, the only service the residents of mainly minority-populated communities could count on were local, but uninsured and unaccountable, drivers.

Figure 4.4. Protest of Gypsy Cab Operators, 1972. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

Residents who relied on the gypsy cabs were not unaware of the risks of jumping in an unidentified, unregulated car. But the car service was reminiscent of the "carros públicos" that operated in small towns in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and they knew that many of the drivers lived in their neighborhoods and had no others means to support their families given the scarcity of decent jobs. When the city began its crack down on the gypsy cabs, drivers in the Bronx, Upper Manhattan, and Brooklyn organized to demand legalization and licensing. El Comité helped José Rivera, a leader of the Bronx drivers, mobilize community support for demonstrations throughout the city.[25] Following several years of sometimes violent confrontations and negotiations with Commissioner Lazar, in 1973 the city instituted a series of regulations that not only recognized the taxi "bases" that Puerto Ricans and Dominicans first established in the Bronx and Upper Manhattan, but also permitted the licensing of livery cab drivers.

Workers' Rights

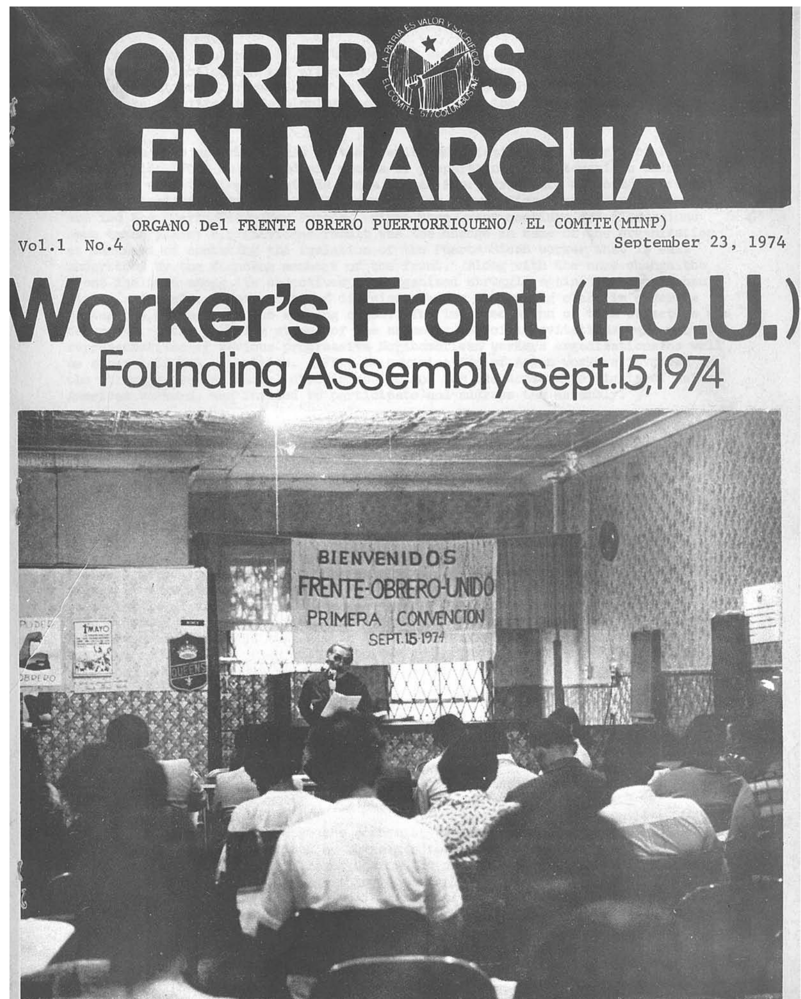
One of the impediments to labor unity in the 1970s and 1980s was the historical racial and gender divisions that were reproduced through labor market segmentation. Alongside a variety of corporate strategies for taming powerful industrial unions, divisions among workers were fueled by seniority rules, job ladders, and labor-management cooperation that isolated low-wage, non-unionized workers.[26] El Comité thought it could contribute to workers' unity by directing its members who were industrial workers to form "rank-and-file committees" at their workplaces to share grievances, push for democratization in their unions, or form unions where none existed. Another approach was for unemployed members to obtain jobs in factories, as skilled or unskilled workers, where they too would try to develop a base of support among their co-workers. Several of those who organized "at the point of production" were Noel Colón, Pedro Rentas, and Victor Quintana.[27] Both Colón, a welder, and Rentas, an autoworker, spent several years attempting to mobilize workers in their plants against dangerous and unhealthy work conditions, layoffs, speedups, discrimination in job assignments, and unresponsive or hostile union leadership. The United Rank and File Committee of UAW 906 that Rentas helped to form at the Ford Plant in Mahwah, New Jersey, described itself as a "multiracial committee of black, Latino and white workers that tries to build rank-and-file unity [in response] to the racism and divisions that the company and unfortunately some union officials try to push."[28] On one occasion of a night shift walkout when temperatures in the plant reached over 100 degrees, the head of the local

ran "to the highway telling the workers to return to work and not listen to the communists."[29] Although the agenda of the rank-and-file committee was not radical, in the midst of the Cold War, red-baiting in the workplace was one of the favored tactics used to isolate outspoken and defiant workers.

Colón worked at the U.S. Metals Refining Company in Carteret, New Jersey. In the Tank House where copper was refined, he and approximately two hundred other workers labored "all day on top of tanks of acid . . . beating sheets of copper."[30] Acid burns destroyed their work clothes every few days. With soaring summer temperatures and little ventilation in the plant, workers breathed harmful fumes that caused frequent ailments. When the plant doctor issued instructions for workers to switch to lighter duties, workers found layoff letters on their time cards. Appeals to the union produced no results. The rank-and-file Concerned Workers at U.S. Metals tried, without success, to challenge and replace the union leadership of Local 837 of the United Steelworkers Union.

Quintana found a job as an unskilled worker at Eagle Electric Company in Long Island City, New York, which supplied electrical equipment to the automobile industry. When the skilled workers held a wildcat striker soon after he started working, Quintana decided to join the picket line. The local union leader picked Quintana off the line and sent him to join the negotiating team. The move came as a surprise because, as a new employee, Quintana had not developed a base of support among the workers in the plant and had no leverage as a negotiator. His participation was, in his words, "meaningless and the union's tactic to defuse problems and neutralize a potential troublemaker." Following a layoff period, Quintana was not rehired at the plant.

Organizing workers required a willingness to risk one's job and many years of commitment in order to cultivate relationships of trust among co-workers. In attempting to mount an effective resistance to workplace conditions and, even more, to make their case for a more militant and united labor movement, workers faced overwhelming obstacles especially in workplaces where union locals in private industries did not want militant intrusions. In 1974, these lessons led El Comité to form the *Frente Obrero Unido* (FOU, United Workers' Front) at the community level, where workers could come together without jeopardizing their jobs. FOU's objective was to address the institutionalized racism that divided workers and provide a forum for members of local unions and unorganized and unemployed workers to share their grievances and strategize about collective responses.[31] Lasting several years, FOU included workers from the construction, garment, service, and light manufacturing industries.[32] Its greatest success was the campaign to obtain construction jobs for minority workers in New York.



OBREROS EN MARCHA

ORGANO Del FRENTE OBRERO PUERTORRIQUENO/ EL COMITE(MINP)

Vol.1 No.4 September 23, 1974

Worker's Front (F.O.U.)

Founding Assembly Sept.15,1974

Figure 4.5. *Obreros en Marcha,* vol. 1, no. 4, September 23, 1974, front cover.

Minority Construction Workers Fight for Inclusion

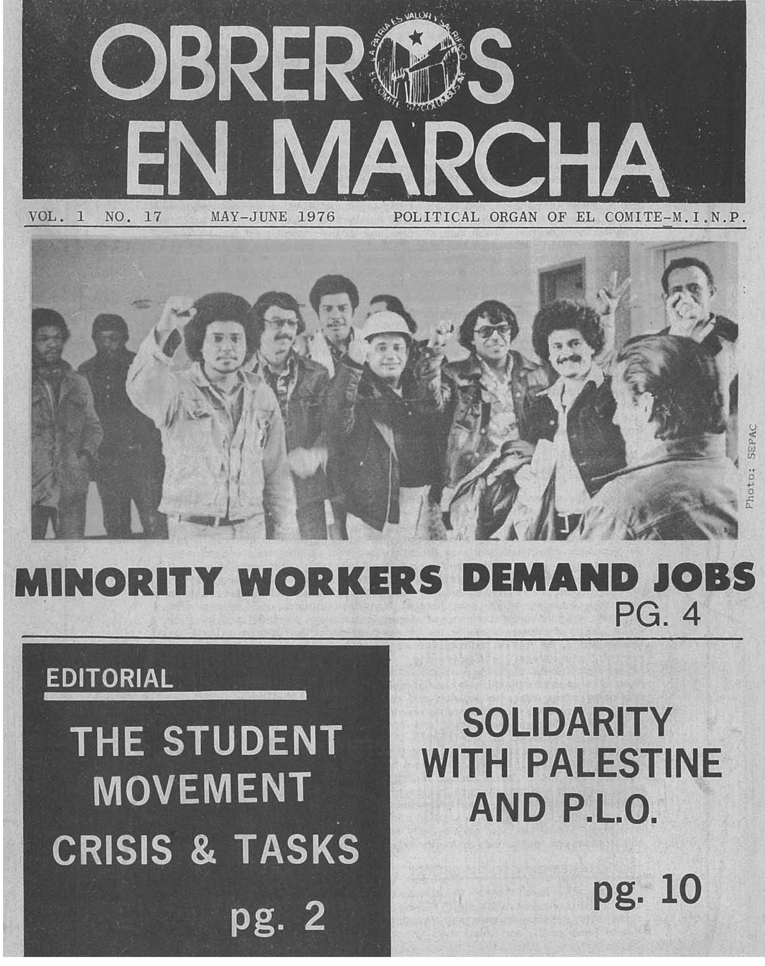
As told by Nelson Gómez, a construction worker and the oldest member of El Comité, FOU had more tangible results than other attempts at workplace organizing. Historically, the construction industry in New York denied minority workers access to jobs, especially in the skilled trades. As a result of protests in

the 1960s, the federal and local governments issued affirmative action hiring goals and obligatory directives for industries that pursued government contracts. In 1969, the Nixon administration mandated construction trades to increase minority representation in their workforces to 20 percent within five years. Localities were free to develop their own plans, as long as these were consistent with the federal mandate. Peter Brennan, President of the New York City Building and Construction Trades Council, lobbied unsuccessfully against the federal program. However, his opposition to Mayor Lindsay's policy initiative to mandate the training of four thousand minorities in the "New York Plan" succeeded in reducing the number to eight hundred trainees. After helping deliver the "labor vote" for Nixon's re-election in 1972, Brennan was appointed Secretary of Labor, where he served until 1975.

Labor Secretary Brennan was known for his vehement opposition to affirmative action and did nothing to enforce the altered "New York Plan." Like many other affirmative action programs, it was treated as an ideal—difficult to achieve and not enforced by any governmental authority. The number of minority trainees and workers incorporated through local affirmative action programs was low, and pay scales tended to fall below the average standards for the construction trades. Minority workers in New York City thought the Plan was a sham. The Building and Construction Trades Council had a closed-door policy toward Blacks and Puerto Ricans under Brennan's stewardship, and little had changed under federal or local affirmative action plans. In the 1970s, Black and Puerto Rican workers, fed up with unemployment, underemployment, and discriminatory hiring practices, were determined to break the barriers.[33]

When the organization Harlem Fight Back called a meeting to discuss the construction underway at Lincoln Hospital mainly by white workers from outside the Bronx, FOU workers attended to encourage cooperation between Blacks and Puerto Ricans:

> First there was an organization, Harlem Fight Back, of mainly Blacks led by Jim Haughton. There was a big job at Lincoln Hospital where all the workers were white and from outside the Bronx. A couple of us, workers from El Comité, went to the meeting called by Fight Back. [Ramón] Velez [an anti-poverty program administrator and City Council member in the mid-1970s] from the Bronx was a racist, and we knew there was going to be a big confrontation between Blacks and Puerto Ricans. The Frente [FOU] knew there had to be cooperation between us if we were going to get anywhere, and we encouraged everyone to work together. (Gómez)[34]



OBREROS EN MARCHA

VOL. 1 NO. 17 MAY-JUNE 1976 POLITICAL ORGAN OF EL COMITE-M.I.N.P.

Photo: SEPAC

MINORITY WORKERS DEMAND JOBS
PG. 4

EDITORIAL

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT CRISIS & TASKS
pg. 2

SOLIDARITY WITH PALESTINE AND P.L.O.
pg. 10

Figure 4.6. *Obreros en Marcha,* vol. 1, no. 17, May–June 1976, front cover.

The Black and Puerto Rican Construction Workers Coalition (BPRC) formed to pressure construction companies with city contracts to hire minority workers. Their main targets were Lincoln Hospital and the dormitory construction site at City College in Manhattan, where the State Dormitory Authority had issued contracts for a $90 million complex of offices, classrooms, and auditoriums on a campus located in the midst of Harlem and Manhattanville.[35] The BPRC joined the Manhattan North Coalition (MNC), a city-wide alliance of workers' organizations and minority contractors whose goal was to

ensure that significant numbers of jobs at the site were given to minorities. For almost a full week in October 1974, workers occupied the site at City College, shutting down construction work while negotiations took place with the contracting agency, the State Dormitory Authority in Albany. Though MNC won the demands that minorities would comprise 50 percent of employees and that 25 percent of contracts would be awarded to minority-owned companies, the State Dormitory Authority did not fulfill these obligations. The leadership of Local 3 of the Electricians' Union resisted the implementation of the agreement, claiming its members would not work if non-union workers were hired. The Dormitory Authority claimed it had no authority over the hiring practices of Local 3.[36]

Following a fruitless period of pleas to the State Dormitory Authority to meet its commitment, on May 8, 1975, the MNC again stopped all work on the site, demanding the immediate hiring of fifty-six workers to comply with the 50 percent agreement. When the Dormitory Authority refused, a rally was held by workers and student supporters who, according to El Comité, were attacked by "goons from Local 3."[37] The police intervened and disbanded the protesters. But the BPRC convinced Local 3 workers to support the fight against racist hiring practices of contractors and union leaders because it was a "struggle for the democratic right to earn a living." Black and Puerto Rican workers were hired at both the Lincoln Hospital and City College sites, and retained those jobs for the subsequent two years.[38]

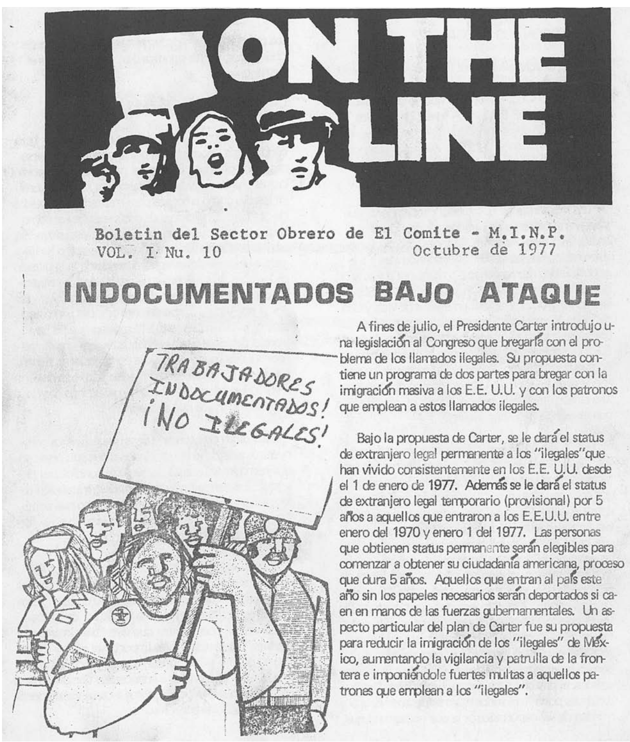
> We understood the problem was class, not race. Some white guys said, "you're not union people." I told them, "we're veterans, we fought for this country, we deserve jobs." (Gómez)[39]

The victory also represented significant accomplishments for El Comité. The first was the progress made in opening employment opportunities for minority construction workers in New York City; the second was the linkages established between Latino and Black workers through the BPRC and the FOU that transcended competition for scarce jobs; the third was the opportunity these networks presented for El Comité to share its perspective on the need for class-based unity.

Shortly after the workers' victory, Pedro Rentas and Noel Colón left New York to live and work in Puerto Rico. The move was a pivotal moment in El Comité when organizing workers became a smaller component of the organization's political work, not intentionally but in practical terms. Few others were employed industrial workers and new recruits came mainly from

community and campus struggles. Still, members were encouraged to seek "point of production" jobs; and some did, working in factories organized by the ILGWU or in unorganized plants in Long Island, Queens, Brooklyn, and New Jersey.[40] Members who did not work in factories distributed the workers' sector bulletin, *On the Line*, early in the morning at the gates of factories where other members were employed.

By mid-decade, all of El Comité's chapters, including one newly formed in Boston, were challenging the quality of education in their neighborhoods, demanding broader access to jobs and higher education, and exposing workplace conditions in factories in New York and New Jersey. The gains made in bilingual education and the construction trades were immediately beneficial only to small groups of people. But, together with the local struggles organized by similar groups around the country, these movements advanced multicultural education and workplace access in the United States and affirmed the power



ON THE LINE

Boletin del Sector Obrero de El Comite - M.I.N.P.
VOL. I Nu. 10 Octubre de 1977

INDOCUMENTADOS BAJO ATAQUE

A fines de julio, el Presidente Carter introdujo una legislación al Congreso que bregaría con el problema de los llamados ilegales. Su propuesta contiene un programa de dos partes para bregar con la imigración masiva a los E.E. U.U. y con los patronos que emplean a estos llamados ilegales.

Bajo la propuesta de Carter, se le dará el status de extranjero legal permanente a los "ilegales" que han vivido consistentemente en los E.E. U.U. desde el 1 de enero de 1977. Además se le dará el status de extranjero legal temporario (provisional) por 5 años a aquellos que entraron a los E.E.U.U. entre enero del 1970 y enero 1 del 1977. Las personas que obtienen status permanente serán elegibles para comenzar a obtener su ciudadanía americana, proceso que dura 5 años. Aquellos que entran al país este año sin los papeles necesarios serán deportados si caen en manos de las fuerzas gubernamentales. Un aspecto particular del plan de Carter fue su propuesta para reducir la imigración de los "ilegales" de México, aumentando la vigilancia y patrulla de la frontera e imponiéndole fuertes multas a aquellos patrones que emplean a los "ilegales".

Figure 4.7. *On the Line,* vol. 4, no. 10, October 1977, front cover.

of disruptive protest. The struggle for bilingual education succeeded when parents disrupted the operation of schools, with the support of some teachers and administrators. The construction workers gained jobs when negotiations failed and they disrupted worksites. People were emboldened by their achievements, often celebrating with dances and songs of solidarity and hope for the future. But the local campaigns never materialized into the sustained challenges of national social movements. The broader goal of multiethnic workers' unity proved elusive in the face of impending fiscal crisis, national recession, union resistance to inclusion, and competition over scarce jobs. As activists learned through their confrontations with unions, institutionalized racism kept working people disunited and often hostile toward one another.[41]

Part II: Development of the Cadre Organization

The movements of the early 1970s inspired the activists in El Comité to develop what C. Wright Mills described as the sociological imagination, meaning the will and analytical skills to understand the relationship between their individual and collective biographies, particularly the history of colonialism, migration, and the conditions of working people in capitalist society.[42] They wanted to know how relations of power based on class, race, and national identity intersected to shape the conditions of Puerto Ricans, and to develop an organizational structure and political program that responded to those conditions.

El Comité's political studies included works of history, political theory, and social analysis that easily matched the reading lists of intellectuals in prestigious colleges and universities. They tackled works by Marx and Engels and Lenin as a collective endeavor in which everyone participated. As a result of these studies, their accumulating political experience, and the inspiration of revolutionary movements around the world, El Comité's political identity evolved in the first half of the 1970s from a community collective focused on addressing local inequality and colonialism in Puerto Rico to an organization with a counterhegemonic ideology and vision of prolonged struggle for social change. Its newspaper, *Obreros en Marcha,* covered topical issues and struggles and contained sophisticated critiques of capitalism in national and international arenas that emphasized the commonality of struggles of working people around the world. The organization believed, as Lenin wrote, that workers who understood their class interests would cultivate class consciousness and the revolutionary potential of the proletariat through propagandistic work among the masses of workers and through participation in the daily struggles of workers.[43] Although the cadre structure

had been adopted by socialist organizations in the United States in prior eras, El Comité's organizational model came from the revolutionary movements of Latin America, especially of Chile and Argentina, and from Cuban Revolution.[44]

By 1975, El Comité had morphed from an informal collective to a Marxist-Leninist cadre organization with chapters in the Upper West Side and Lower East Side of Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Long Island, with small clusters in Camden and Boston. It embraced "democratic centralism" as the principle that governed internal dialogue, decision making, and political action.[45] This meant that the members collectively decided the political platform and program of the organization and that the leadership bodies oversaw the day-to-day implementation of that program and periodically evaluated the direction of the organization. Members were expected not to publicly dissent from the political positions of the organization but could raise questions or disagreements within the established channels of communication, usually their local chapters. In the chapter units, the members explored the challenges of their work and personal lives. They studied, strengthened their literacy and communication skills, and raised funds.

The cadre organization was based in the Leninist principle that the movement needed competent revolutionary leaders, or cadres, who devoted their lives to the revolutionary movement. The commitment required personal sacrifice, collective and self-education, and constant evaluation of how to advance the daily mass struggles for reforms while raising people's consciousness about the need to chart a path toward socialism. Cadres believed that large numbers of people would have to be mobilized for effective political action; but the hard work, dedication, and worldview needed to build and guide those mobilizations would take time to cultivate. The focus of the life of a cadre was the political movement; individuals became cadres over a period of time, as their commitment to the struggle deepened.

In her study of the internal factors that shaped "political consciousness, commitment, and organizational life" in SDS in the 1960s, Rebecca Klatch observed that, "[a]lthough people who enter social movement organizations typically already have formulated political beliefs, once they become active, their consciousness and political identity develop further through participation and interaction with peers."[46] Unlike organizations like SDS, however, El Comité was not formed by people with preconceived political beliefs. Its political perspective evolved through the struggles in which they became immersed. Internal peer processes such as creating a structure, debating values and goals, studying political and historical texts, and analyzing social conditions intertwined to shape its worldview.

Diverse Composition

A main source of recruitment to El Comité in its first year was its Columbus Avenue storefront. With the Puerto Rican flag flying above the front door, most people who stopped in to find out about the new group were Puerto Rican.[47] Some thought it was a social club; others were simply curious. The person on "office duty" (OD) for the day greeted visitors and explained the group's activism around quality-of-life issues and support for independence of Puerto Rico. Eulogio Ortiz, who grew up in Bedford-Stuyvesant and lived on West 83rd Street, was attracted by the community focus:

> I was walking up Columbus Avenue, recently divorced, out of work, and going through a very low period. I was just curious when I walked into the storefront and met Orlando [Colón], who gave me his schpiel. I was apolitical, but learned how El Comité grew out of a community struggle. I found that interesting—helping Puerto Ricans. That's how I got into El Comité. It wasn't a political organization in the sense of Marxism-Leninism. It was just community and independence for Puerto Rico. (Eulogio Ortiz)[48]

Others joined in a similarly informal manner. They were recruited by friends, spouses, or through a conversation at a rally or on a picket line. Some had been squatters at Site 30, or anti-war activists, or *independentistas*. Maria Collado, an early member, was born in New York City of parents who migrated from Puerto Rico in the early 1940s. She quit high school after giving birth to her first child and moved to the Bronx with her mother, siblings, and daughter when they were removed by the city from their West 101st Street apartment. Though she had previously encountered the Young Lords, Maria chose to join El Comité because "it was more real":

> I first met the Lords at Lincoln Hospital where I took my daughter. Their organization was a group of very young kids. I was young too but more mature. When I joined El Comité, I was twenty-one—the youngest, I think, in the organization. (Collado)[49]

The fact that the Young Lords was comprised of young people—teenagers in some cases, with many students among them—spoke to their courage and militant resolve to improve conditions in their neighborhoods and to oppose

colonialism and imperialism.[50] But some people, inspired by the Lords and agreeing with their goals, felt El Comité was a better personal fit for them. The same applied to other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left, which several individuals saw as "too island-based." El Comité tended to attract those who were a bit older, some with children, who related to the issues the group talked and wrote about in its first newspaper, *Unidad Latina*.[51]

In several instances, small groups already in existence merged with El Comité. While growing up in Puerto Rico, Manuel Ortiz was influenced by his uncles, who were *independentistas* during the 1950 rebellions.[52] He first came to the United States when he joined Puerto Rico's National Guard and was assigned to training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina:

> Some guy, the first sergeant, would say, "All Puerto Rican personnel line up. You better keep your noses clean because you're all cowards," and this and that. It's true we had people joining the Guard to avoid Vietnam . . . Back in Puerto Rico, I went AWOL from the Guard, hanging around, unemployed, and my father asked me if I wanted to come to live with him in New York. When I got there, my stepmother bought me a white shirt, pants, white shoes and socks, and announced, "I bought you that because you are now an orderly." (Manuel Ortiz)[53]

At work, Ortiz found himself discussing Puerto Rico's colonial status with older, pro-nationalist co-workers and with his stepbrother. While living in Upper Manhattan, the brothers and their friends formed a club, Hijos de Boricua (Sons and Daughters of Puerto Rico) around the time Operation Move-In was gaining momentum.[54] The group met Federico Lora and Esperanza Martell, joined mobilizations in support of the squatters, and then merged with El Comité.

Orlando Colón, whose brother Noel was one of the original softball players, joined in 1971 upon his release from the Marine Corps:

> My brother was hanging out with these guys, and they were already doing stuff with the community. He would invite me to some of those things. I went as an outside observer, a bystander, because I was still in the military and had questions about getting involved in these types of activities. When I got out, I went to Fordham and met Américo [Badillo] who was teaching Puerto Rican history and had a progressive background. I told him that we had this

> group in Manhattan, and maybe he could come down. When he met the folks, he liked what he saw and began to get involved. (Orlando Colón)[55]

Américo Badillo was the first "intellectual" to join the organization. While growing up in Puerto Rico, he belonged to a Jesuit youth organization and later joined the *Partido Independentista de Puerto Rico* (PIP) before coming to New York to study and teach at Fordham University. With a different socio-economic background than the original members of El Comité, he frequently joked that he was "petty bourgeois," but he was one of the strongest voices in the organization calling for theoretical and historical study.[56] Judging from the fact that several former members credited him with their early "theoretical development," Badillo was a pivotal addition.[57] With experience as a college instructor, he undertook the task of teaching Puerto Rican history at the storefront. For many members this was their first formal class, taught in Spanish, which was challenging for those who were conversationally bilingual but received no formal education in Spanish once they entered New York schools.

Students also joined the organization. On most campuses in the city, including high schools, students were rallying, striking, and taking over buildings to protest issues ranging from the war in Southeast Asia (and the killing of Kent State and Jackson State students) to local tuition hikes.[58] Some later became leaders in the organization. Victor Quintana (who replaced Federico Lora as First Secretary in 1978), Elizabeth Figueroa, and Julio Pabón, who participated in protests at Lehman College against the firing of progressive professors, joined, as did students from Fordham University, City College, and Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), where member Carmen Martell worked as a secretary. Others came from the campuses of Brooklyn College and Columbia University.[59] SUNY Old Westbury on Long Island, where El Comité organizers Manuel Ortiz and Jaime Suárez helped organize and lead student strikes, was a key recruiting ground, especially for the growing Long Island Chapter. Activists from that campus, among them Mariano Ayala and Nancy Sutherland, and a couple of years later, Debra Pucci, all of working-class backgrounds, became devoted activists in the ensuing years. Although the majority of the Long Island Chapter was Puerto Rican, recruitment at Old Westbury increased the racial and ethnic diversity in the organization overall. I, too, joined the organization while I was a student activist at Old Westbury but became part of the Lower East Side Chapter where I lived.

Prior to 1974, Kathe Karlson was the only white member. Karlson grew up in the projects across from St. Mary's Church on West 126th Street in Manhat-

tan. Her parents were members of the Communist Party and blacklisted in New York in the 1950s, causing her mother, Dr. Janet Karlson, to lose her job as a public school principal. Her father was a machinist and union organizer. Why her parents left the Party in the early 1960s is unclear, but Karlson believes it may have been because her mother was deeply involved in community issues, "which the Party probably viewed as reformist."[60] As a "red-diaper baby," Karlson attended the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington and anti-war demonstrations with her mother and closest friends, including Esperanza Martell.[61] She met Esperanza, along with Carmen Martell and Federico Lora, at age fourteen, while hanging out at a local community center and playground:

> I knew Carmen [Martell] and Federico [Lora] when they were first married and when Federico went to Vietnam. They would joke around and make fun of me because I always brought up the political discussion. I said, "Federico, why are you going to Vietnam?" But [Vietnam] probably helped politicize him. When he came back, we continued our political discussions. (Karlson)[62]

When Kathe and Esperanza returned from the third Venceremos Brigade to Cuba in the summer of 1970, Esperanza and several others of their close friends joined El Comité:

> I wasn't in El Comité when my friends joined, which I believed to be because I was white. I understood the importance of the rise in movements across the country based on race and national origin, in response to the racist and economic conditions under which these communities were forced to live. But at the time I didn't fully grasp how my white skin privilege impacted all that I did, and I personalized this separation. The issue of race was not something that I or my friends in El Comité knew how to handle together either. We had been like sisters. We lived together. But we ended up growing apart as a result of not knowing how to handle it. (Karlson)

What Karlson and her friends had difficulty handling was the distance that grew between them as a result of the different political paths they took, with some joining El Comité where Karlson did not think she was welcome because of its Puerto Rican identity. When she moved to Brooklyn after graduating from City College, she stayed involved with anti-war activists in Park Slope

and invited Federico Lora to speak to the group about the work El Comité was doing in the Puerto Rican community. Following his talk, their political dialogue continued:

> Federico approached me about working with El Comité. I asked, "why would you want me? I'm white, not Puerto Rican." I just came out of this very bruising situation with my close friends, not completely understanding it on the personal level, but really understanding that it was something that needed to happen politically, even though it hurt in the heart. Federico responded that what mattered was my political perspective. (Karlson)[63]

Karlson became a leading member of El Comité in the years that followed, in the Central Committee and Women's Commission, and was a key advocate for developing the leadership capabilities of women in the organization.

Another long-term member, Kathy Gruber, joined the organization after the Formative Assembly of El Comité-MINP in 1975. At that point the organization decided there was no inherent contradiction in including individuals recruited from grassroots mobilizations who, though not Puerto Rican or Latino, were rooted in Puerto Rican or other Latino communities and shared the goal of contributing to a multiethnic/multiracial working-class movement in the United States.[64] Gruber went on to become the Head of Propaganda, overseeing the production of *Obreros en Marcha*. Between 1975 and 1978, other whites were recruited mainly through community or student protests. There were a few African Americans, too, but other organizations such as Harlem Fight Back tended to draw Black workers and activists. Racial interaction between Blacks and El Comité came mainly through alliances and collective mobilizations. Later in the decade, El Comité recruited more Latin Americans and whites, some of whom had close ties to Puerto Rican communities and others whose political experience was mainly in solidarity movements.

It is not unique or contradictory for an organization with a particular racial or national identity to include members from other social sectors. A founding member of the Young Lords in New York City, Denise Oliver, was African American.[65] The PSP had several white and black members as well. For most of El Comité's existence, racial and ethnic differences did not produce tension in their ranks. In the later years, however, political dilemmas arose that some former members believed stemmed from the difficulty of achieving consensus on political directions among people with different racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds (further discussed in Chapter 7).[66]

By the mid-1970s, core members numbered between fifty and sixty, with about one hundred to one hundred fifty affiliates and active supporters.[67] Members attended weekly meetings to discuss their political work, were active in the campaigns and life of the organization, and studied in political education classes. Not everyone who joined the organization in the early years chose to stay. The many demands of the cadre organization came at the same time people were trying to develop their families or career trajectories, which in combination sometimes presented serious strains in one area or more. Some people took a leave of absence after a few years; others resigned, most often because of family and work obligations or because the demands became too great. Others left to attend law school or medical school. However, many of those who left continued to participate with El Comité in protests or social events. Annual picnics and other social gatherings such as dances, street theater, and concerts were integral parts not only of the organization's cultural life but of its political project. As in other cultures, family, food, music, and dance are central to Puerto Rican life.[68] All of these gatherings provided opportunities to talk politics in informal settings and to strengthen personal relationships. Members sold tickets to meet the cost of buses that carted the entourage to parks in Long Island or Upstate New York or to rallies in Washington, D.C. The politics on these occasions took place in the conversations at picnic tables, distribution of leaflets, political songs, and invitations to future activities.[69]

"Revolutionary Morality"

> Our involvement in housing and education is how we first developed a sense of humanity. Our children were part of the organization. In order for us to go to the meetings, somebody had to take care of them. And we would all do that. Without anybody teaching us about the "socialist man or woman," we started doing it. We did not start out by studying theory and consciously implementing it. On the contrary, our theory developed through the relationships, the human relationships that evolved day-to-day as we dealt with issues that affected the community. That was not contrary to Marxism; it reaffirmed Marxism. We learned that later on.
>
> —Federico Lora[70]

Revolutionary change is personal as well as political. The challenges extend to questioning one's social practices and choices, which are often shaped by dominant cultural and political values. Religious practices, parenting styles, gender relations, and alcohol and drug use were just a few of the topics discussed

and sometimes vigorously debated when El Comité began to project itself as a serious proponent and model of social change. People struggled to recognize sexist attitudes and mistreatment of partners, especially of women, and manifestations of racism. They asked themselves, What rules should guide public and private behavior? Was it acceptable to smoke marijuana? Was cheating on partners a matter for collective discussion? Their growing social and political awareness led both women and men to analyze their relationships, parenting, and domestic responsibilities, issues commonly relegated to the private versus public sphere of life. The debates arose spontaneously, at first. But the women in the organization persisted in holding men accountable for chauvinism. They especially objected to the persistence of sexist attitudes at home.[71] Maria Collado captured some of their concerns:

> The problem was, on the one side, I had to be the wife of Noel and, on the other side, I had to be this revolutionary. We had to play an important role in the community and then come home and take care of the kids and cook. I had to figure out who was going to babysit when we had to go to a meeting.[72]

At meetings, the men listened to the criticisms, which usually came from the women, but sometimes from other men, about domestic expectations and disrespectful and condescending attitudes.

At least on the surface, and deeply engrained in many, the women and men embraced Che Guevara's idea that a "revolutionary morality" was essential to building socialist consciousness and practice.[73]

Women's Commission

The aim of the Women's Commission was to facilitate the participation of women in the organization and in political activism. Women were encouraged to take leadership roles in the community and the organization and to ensure that dialogues on gender oppression were ongoing. Kathe Karlson, who along with others strongly advocated for the Commission, believed that women involved in encouraging and supporting each other was just as important as the dialogue between men and women on gender inequality:

> Part of what we did in the Women's Commission was to try to build ourselves up. We read Engels' *Origins of the Family, State and Private Property,* and tried to relate to it. There was a need to

> encourage ourselves to do what we were doing; to participate and prepare ourselves to be spokespeople when we were assigned to go some place. We were always frightened and nervous. Studying the woman question allowed us to push ourselves and to deal with our fears. (Karlson)[74]

The Commission pushed the organization as a whole to create a nurturing environment for children as well. Child care was offered at all the events the organization sponsored. This was one of the more remarkable accomplishments, not only of El Comité, but of many progressives in the 1970s. Many groups tried to support families in practical ways, so that no one had to miss an event because they lacked money for a babysitter or did not want to leave their children at home. El Comité tried to be sensitive to the needs of families also by lightening the loads of those with children. Some members looked after the children of others when meetings or events had to be attended. But the strains on families were often acute when meetings were held three or four nights a week, or when publishing the newspaper required an all-night shift. There is broad consensus, in retrospect, that if the organization had been more realistic about long-term movement building, that is, over the course of many decades, the assessment of cadre tasks and responsibilities would likely have yielded more practical expectations in order to prevent activist burn-out.

Another difficult subject that was avoided, unconsciously by some accounts, was sexual orientation. As early as November 1971, in response to a reader's letter, *Unidad Latina* published a self-criticism for using the word "effeminate" to describe a male prosecutor at the trial of prisoners.[75] Yet the organization never officially condemned discrimination of gays or advocated for gay and lesbian rights. Though gays and lesbians participated in the organization, and same-sex couples lived together, in the 1970s the undercurrent of homophobia was real.[76] As Luis Aponte-Parés and Jorge Merced point out, radical Puerto Rican politics in the 1970s was immersed in "the issues of colonial status, nationalism, and socialism," and "the center of gravity of [emerging identity] was located in the cultural and community-development arenas."[77]

The central tenet of constructing a counterhegemonic "morality" was that the individual was accountable to the community for his and her treatment of others, and vice versa, in contrast to the dominant view that one should rely first and foremost on individual judgment in "private issues." El Comité developed a cadre policy that represented its interpretation of "revolutionary morality." Members were expected to debate and criticize each other with respect. Drug use was discouraged altogether as the type of behavior that

would discredit them in the larger community. They felt that their behavior would influence how people judged the organization's politics and its ability to mobilize. Their credibility in the community and in all areas of one's life was also understood as vital to the internal security of the organization. The local or national government, especially the government surveillance apparatus, was not to be given any opportunity to discredit, infiltrate, or disrupt the activities of the organization through careless behaviors.[78]

Accountability to the collective was difficult and sometimes contentious. Individuals brought their plans to attend school, change jobs, or move residences to their local chapters for collective discussion. They sought advice on how to reconcile personal goals and political obligations to the organization when these conflicted. If a couple had problems, especially if these affected their political work, the issues were also discussed with comrades. These practices nurtured strong bonds and close relationships but on occasion ended in unresolved tensions and broken trust.

Political Studies

> When we began to study Marxism, we studied Marxism for real. Our study groups were real study groups. We lost a lot of people—by we, I mean "the movement"—who became Republicans and Democrats, or whatever. [But] most of the people who went through El Comité, one way or the other, have continued to struggle wherever they are located. That's important because we are getting to be 60 years old. That means the foundation was key.
>
> —Federico Lora[79]

Implementing a program of political education had its difficulties in that levels of literacy and formal education varied. Former members remembered the painstaking efforts taken to read aloud and discuss passages from Vladimir Lenin's *What Is to Be Done*, Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, and Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais' *Labor's Untold Story*. As the Political Commission wrote in an unpublished document in 1978:

> El Comité did not arise on a university campus nor was it formed by intellectuals, "red diaper" babies or even from the ranks of split-offs from other formations. All of its original members were from working class families, particularly of an oppressed nationality—Puerto Ricans. Some had never read a book from cover to cover, most had

> never seen a college classroom and nearly all had to struggle with the [dilemma] of having spoken Spanish at home, [having been] taught English in . . . school, pronouncing their Puerto Rican heritage, yet being hindered by their lack of skills in Spanish.[80]

In one account by a self-described "non-intellectual," a study group leader once asked a student participant to interpret a passage from Marx's *Capital, Vol. I*. The student provided an elaborate response. When the leader asked the nonstudent in the group if she understood the explanation, she laughed and said "not a word." But she and others persevered.[81]

> One of the things we did was to base political education on the least able person, not based on the students. We studied *What Is to Be Done* by breaking it down on the most basic levels. We did not leave people behind by intellectualizing. I'm not saying we didn't lose people, because we did, and we made a bunch of mistakes. But today the people who did not come from a student background still remain very close to . . . the intellectuals in the organization. The people who were in the workers' movement are still linked to . . . those who were the intellectuals in the organization. (Orlando Colón)[82]

In his Farewell Speech to El Comité's Assembly in 1978, Lora paid tribute to individual perseverance and the power of political education:

> How can I forget the efforts of an individual who was pushed out of school in the ninth grade and today leads discussion groups on the philosophical works of Konstantinov, Lenin, and Harneker? (Lora)[83]

In addition to holding internal classes, El Comité interacted with intellectuals and activists in various New York City forums, including the Cuban-sponsored Casa de las Americas, the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), the Center for Cuban Studies, the Brecht Forum (now Marxist Center), and in local universities and union halls. From these associations developed long-term relationships with Left scholars and activists associated with *Monthly Review* and *The Guardian* newspaper. Two important mentors from the "Old Left" were Irving Kaplan ("Kappy") and Annette Rubinstein.[84] Kappy, according to Federico Lora, was "the greatest critic [of the] organization and . . . its firmest supporter." Rubinstein gave writing lessons to small

groups of five or six at a time in her home in Manhattan, where she served her writers-in-training tea and cookies. She taught them to "know more than what you say" and to "drop the excess baggage." Writers (myself included) were trained for six to eight months, and then a new group began. Today, more than thirty years later, veterans of those groups describe hearing Rubinstein's instruction in their heads when they write.

Education and Resource Mobilization

Producing and distributing a newspaper was daunting for a small organization with few resources, but newspapers were essential tools of analysis and mobilization. *Unidad Latina*, was published biweekly. While some articles focused on the national political economy, colonialism in Puerto Rico, the war in Vietnam, and conditions throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, most dealt with pressing issues of direct concern to Latinos and African Americans in New York City. The affinity with African Americans on a range of issues, including discrimination in hiring, police brutality, urban renewal policies, and the Rockefeller drug laws, was based in the corresponding experiences of race and class and the desire to build alliances. In 1972 and 1973, articles in *Unidad Latina* on workplace exclusion and rising unemployment among minorities in New York City appeared with greater frequency. Over a period of seven months, in fourteen installments, *UL* ran a "political education series" that essentially attempted to popularize Marx's *Capital, Vol. I.*

Before local chapters existed, all of El Comité's propaganda was prepared by a central propaganda team. Eulogio Ortiz, who worked at PBS in New York City for thirty years first as an artistic assistant and later as an assistant director, trained people in layout and for several years served as the Head of Propaganda:

> I went to the High School of Art and Design and then to Pratt Institute to study animation and advertising art. When I was a senior in college, I worked in the Lindsay administration making maps. I also did free lance work for the *New York Times* doing layouts and for a Wall Street newspaper. Ten of us used to put together the lists of stocks and how much money they made. We got paid $10 an hour, very good money then. . . . I became in charge of *Unidad Latina* for two reasons: one was my background and the other was that I had a car. The car was major because every Friday

> after everyone finished their thing on the paper at 3 a.m., I went to New Jersey to get it printed. And then back the next day to pick it up. So what I had to offer El Comité was my graphics background and the car. Well, the car and then the graphics. (Eulogio Ortiz)[85]

While newspaper printing was done in New Jersey, printers and mimeograph machines had to be sought locally for leaflets and bulletins:

> St. Mark's Church [on 2nd Avenue and East 10th Street] had a printing press they allowed groups to use. Once I spent ten hours, overnight, printing five hundred leaflets for a demonstration. Why did it take ten hours to print five hundred leaflets? Well, the . . . machine was broken. It printed, it didn't print, it printed. I finally got two boxes worth. Pedro [Rentas] was sent to pick me up. Here I am walking toward 2nd Avenue at 6 a.m., dragging these two boxes. I sit on the sidewalk like a homeless man with these boxes that I'm going to protect with my life. All I remember next is Pedro waking me up, laughing. (Eulogio Ortiz)[86]

When *Unidad Latina* became *Obreros en Marcha,* members distributed the paper every Saturday, all day, throughout New York City and in neighborhoods in Long Island, Boston, Camden, and Philadelphia. Angel González joked, "We grew up in those projects while distributing the papers."[87]

Both *UL* and *OEM* were distributed free of charge. Recipients were asked for donations, so that by the end of Saturday distribution, everyone's pockets were loaded with nickels, dimes, and quarters.

> I showed up that first Saturday morning at 8 a.m., and Nelson [Gómez] was opening the office. And I waited and waited. Nilsa, who I never met before, came in at 9 a.m. with these fatigues, and I think, "yeah, I'm in the right place; this is the revolution." You know, you had these romanticized notions in those days. She started interrogating me, "who are you, brother?" I say, "I'm supposed to meet Eulogio here to sell some newspapers." "Ok, here you go." So out I went with Eulogio, walking uptown on Amsterdam with fifty papers. I didn't even read it. All I knew was it was about the revolution, about independence for Puerto Rico. I sold 150 papers that day, mine and Eulogio's and more from the office. (Jaime Suárez)[88]

The meager revenue obtained from the newspapers meant that the organization had to raise money from other sources in order to print the paper and meet all other operational expenses. No effective organization can survive without financial resources, but members had little experience raising money. For the most part, participants survived on modest or low incomes. To cover costs for office utilities, propaganda, political events, and travel, full members contributed 10 percent of their net income, every week. As the organization matured, fundraising events were held, often as house parties with a minimal entrance fee. The organization's peripheral supporters helped, too. On one occasion, Rubinstein invited me and other El Comité delegates to the Eleventh International Youth Festival in Havana to talk to her friends and associates at her upstate home about our experiences in Cuba. Those attending opened our checkbooks, and the delegates proudly returned with nearly $2,000, warmed by the good wishes of "old commies." These efforts notwithstanding, the day-to-day expenses of running the cadre organization relied on members' dues.

Democratic Centralism and Government Surveillance

> You never have to worry about a President being shot by Puerto Ricans or Mexicans. They don't shoot very straight. But if they come at you with a knife, beware.
>
> —J. Edgar Hoover, FBI Director, 1964[89]

The Formative Assembly of 1975 implemented an organizational structure based in the principles of democratic centralism, learned not only from the study of Lenin and the Cuban Communist Party model, but also from Latin American revolutionary movements, including the *Movimiento Socialista Puertorriqueño* (MSP, Puerto Rican Socialist Movement) of Puerto Rico, the *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* (MIR, Revolutionary Left Movement) of Chile, and the *Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores* (Workers' Revolutionary Party) of Argentina, among others.[90] The two most important criteria for membership in the cadre organization were adherence to the "political line" of the organization and acceptance of democratic centralism. As Lenin put it:

> The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local party organizations implies universal and full freedom to criticize, so long as this does not disturb the unity of a defined action; it

> rules out all criticism which disrupts or makes difficult unity of action decided upon by the party.[91]

Though El Comité did not consider itself the "vanguard party" and often cautioned other groups not to make such a presumption about their movements, it embraced the idea of "unity of action," meaning once a decision was made by the general membership, individuals were bound by it. Members assembled as a group every few years to formulate and approve a general program, which local chapters were to implement. The Central Committee, elected by the Assembly, met more frequently between Assemblies to evaluate the work of the organization and report back to the membership. The Political Commission, chosen by the Central Committee, was the highest leadership body and responsible for overseeing the implementation of the Assembly's mandates.

When the Central Committee assigned areas of work or specific tasks to the membership as a whole or to individuals, any member could object or disagree through his or her local chapter. However, in practice, members questioned few leadership decisions; communication between base and leadership was sometimes slow; and at times individuals became frustrated by what they felt was a lack of attention given to local political work by the leadership.[92] In one important respect, the more elaborate structure systematized communication within a growing organization; local chapters enabled membership communication in smaller units since the organization as a whole had outgrown its storefront office space. Respecting the lines of communication was considered vital to internal security:

> One of the things that becoming a Marxist-Leninist organization gave us was the sense of security. Organizations were being infiltrated, yes; but people were also killed. There were movements of people in our time that were wiped out. We all assumed that our organizations were infiltrated, and they were. But democratic centralism helped us. (Karlson)[93]

The political power movements of the 1970s faced formidable efforts by the state to discredit or divide them. The U.S. government spied on, infiltrated, and disrupted their organizations, even though the vast majority engaged only in constitutionally protected political activities (discussed further in Chapter 6).[94] El Comité developed a system of internal communication aimed to shield it from government infiltration, illegal surveillance, and harassment. To avoid red-baiting, members were cautious about revealing their affiliation with the

organization publicly (in workplaces, schools, and community organizations). For this reason, El Comité-MINP's presence as an organization was not always publicly announced or recognized in community, workplace, or student movements. Perhaps this explains the more uninformed impressions by scholars that discount the influence of the Puerto Rican Left in many of the protests of the 1970s or mischaracterize it as interested only in the status of Puerto Rico.

El Comité's precautions in recruitment and internal communication were also fueled by government hostility to Puerto Rican independence groups and the infiltration of the Black Panther Party that led to the FBI murder of Fred Hampton in 1969. Government repression of political organizations—besides that of the labor movement in the early 1900s and activists (actual or suspected) during the McCarthy period and Civil Rights Movement—is rarely acknowledged in popular versions of U.S. political history. In fact, it is widely assumed and often repeated by the mainstream media that political dissenters enjoy broad freedoms to criticize public policy, choose political affiliations, protest, and espouse alternatives to the status quo. But this assumption was not credible among the U.S. Left of the 1970s. Thousands of declassified and FOIA-retrieved FBI documents confirm that the concern of the Left about government repression was not merely paranoia. The FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) operated covertly from 1956 to 1976. Originally intended to "increase factionalism, cause disruptions and win defections" in the Communist Party of the United States, COINTELPRO expanded to twelve programs entailing the infiltration and sabotage of political activities of numerous organizations, including the Black Panthers, the New Left, and finally those affiliated with the Puerto Rican pro-independence movement.[95]

COINTELPRO documents reveal the FBI's elaborate efforts to discredit and disrupt the Young Lords (later known as the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization—PRRWO), the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and El Comité-MINP, to name just a few of the program's targets. Initially, the FBI denied the long-term, covert operation of COINTELPRO; and the program did not cease until years after the FBI first faced charges of civil rights violations related to these activities. The FBI perceived the Puerto Rican Left as a grave threat to national security and U.S. interests at home and abroad, even though credible evidence of criminal activity was never produced against any of its members, other than those associated with the *Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional* (FALN).[96]

In a 1976 report of a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, Chairperson James Eastland wrote:

> Acts of terrorism and civil disobedience within the United States, designed to gain attention and support for the Puerto Rican independence movement, have increased in recent years. . . . [This] Subcommittee established that Communist Cuba has taken an active role in support of Puerto Rican independence. During its continuing investigation of Puerto Rican terrorism, the subcommittee has learned that the Democratic People's Republic of China has taken an active interest in the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization, an underground, revolutionary, pro-independence group operating in the United States . . . dedicated to the overthrow of the government of the United States, and to the independence of Puerto Rico.[97]

The report provided no testimony supporting the claim of China's interest in PRRWO or the nature or evidence of Cuba's "active role" in support of Puerto Rican independence. Innuendo, implication, and rhetoric substituted for actual charges and evidence of wrongdoing.

Moreover, if the Young Lords Organization (or PRRWO after 1971) was "underground," as the subcommittee claimed, it did not hide well from public view. As José Sánchez points out, the Lords skillfully and purposely used the media to their advantage by announcing their intentions and then carrying out public protests, such as the takeovers of a church in East Harlem and Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx.[98] The Senate Committee's report identified by name the members of the organization, complete with detailed individual biographies, and dates and places of dozens of meetings attended over a period of several years. The FBI defined "subversive activities" as seizing church property or occupying a hospital or school and demanding breakfast and day care programs, health care, and "human dignity for welfare recipients."[99] The report's coverage of joint activities between the Young Lords and El Comité, and of over one hundred organizations ranging from St. Teresa Welfare Mothers to the Playboy Foundation, elucidates the intensity of surveillance. However, no specific charge or evidence of "terrorism" was brought against any member of these highly visible, not subversive, organizations.

Former members of El Comité often suspected they were followed or otherwise under FBI surveillance. On one occasion, files belonging to a trade union activist visiting from Puerto Rican were stolen from the van of a member while he and the visitor from Puerto Rico ate dinner at a Manhattan restaurant. The member had picked up the visitor from the airport for a scheduled series of

public conferences on government repression of the trade union movement in Puerto Rico. On another occasion, a member of El Comité recognized a detective on special duty at the Office of the Mayor of New York as a person who regularly attended meetings of the Vieques Support Network and claimed to be unemployed.[100] When four members of El Comité participated in a 130-member delegation from the United States to the Eleventh International Youth Festival in Cuba in 1978, myself included, individuals identifying themselves as FBI agents visited acquaintances, families, and building superintendents where the delegates resided to question the travelers' whereabouts. The festival was publicized worldwide, with twenty thousand delegates attending from one hundred forty-five countries. The U.S. delegation provided the State Department with a proposed list of festival participants when it requested permission to travel directly to Cuba (which was denied). The delegates' defiance of the travel ban (going to Cuba through Canada and returning through Jamaica) and their attendance at the festival were covered in major U.S. media.[101] One can only assume that the FBI's intent was to create a cloud of suspicion and damage the delegates' credibility.

Although certain incidents of suspected surveillance cannot yet be verified, activists' concerns that government agents were working to interrupt their lawful activities and divide their ranks were credible. Under the Freedom of Information Act, two former members of El Comité obtained hundreds of pages of files in their names, but the majority of these pages have no legible words.[102] The files indicate continuous surveillance of the Columbus Avenue storefront, including random phone calls made to the office anonymously by agents or informers to obtain information. But the files are so heavily redacted that it is impossible to ascertain whether the surveillance extended beyond El Comité's office to public or internal activities. The cautious paths for internal communications established by the cadre model, activists thought, provided a layer of protection from government infiltration and disruption.

Dual Objectives

One of the beliefs of the Left in the 1970s, certainly of El Comité, was that workers had to overcome "false consciousness" about what was in their objective interests and who their allies were. The Marxist-Leninist Left believed that workers would eventually unite in proletarian revolution and that cadre organizations were the best organizational forms for building toward and safeguarding that revolution. In El Comité's transition to a cadre organization, members

attempted to develop a social practice in which, as James Petras characterizes Che Guevara's thinking, the "personal and political morality" are entwined.[103] Some of the weaknesses of the cadre structure became more apparent in the second half of the 1970s, when its inflexibilities constrained open discussions (discussed in Chapter 7). But to recall the revolutionary aspirations of El Comité and similar groups solely as a failed dogma, or to dismiss the totality of the socialist project because the cadre organizations eventually imploded, is to miss the transformational impact of collective life and commitment and the democratizing elements of the campaigns in which groups united to launch militant challenges to intolerable conditions. Affirmative action legislation, like *dejure* desegregation, did not accomplish inclusion or equality of opportunity in hostile workplaces. To the extent these goals were advanced in the 1970s, it was due to the contentious pushes from below that forced deeper democratic openings and concessions.

Convinced that progressive changes in the quality of life of Puerto Ricans in the United States would come not merely from pressures for reforms but, more fundamentally, from a multinational, working-class movement for socialism, El Comité-MINP placed itself squarely within the Third World and broader U.S. Left. Its political program had dual, but intertwined, objectives: to fight for quality-of-life reforms in Puerto Rican communities and, through these activities, to advocate and recruit for more fundamental social change. This perspective guided the maturing organization in the second half of the 1970s.

5

Resisting Cutbacks and Imagining Revolution, 1975–1980

Despite the harsh conditions in New York's communities of color in the mid-1970s, political activists attempted to push forward with demands for democratic rights and to create new spaces for fighting inequality. But the worst fiscal crisis in New York City history, exacerbated by local and national economic restructuring, the oil crisis and recession of 1973–75, and cuts in federal entitlement funds, changed the political landscape and posed new challenges for Left movements in the second half of the 1970s.[1]

Starting in the early 1970s, the economic growth the United States had experienced in the post–World War II period began to decay. In what Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone termed the "great u-turn," corporate profits began to stagnate when heightened competition from Germany, Japan, Scandinavia, Italy, South Korea, Taiwan, and Brazil glutted the global market with manufactured goods, which lowered prices and increased U.S. imports. OPEC's 1973 oil embargo and price increases exacerbated the profit squeeze. U.S. corporations blamed their declining market position on wage, tax, and regulatory pressures, and began operating their home plants at well below full capacity.[2] Thus, the changing global economy manifested itself in the United States in declines in productivity and massive deindustrialization as companies sought lower costs of production in low-wage markets. Wages began a downward trend, median annual family income stopped growing (even while more family members worked and the hours worked each week increased), and more workers were more likely to earn low wages.[3] Between 1973 and 1979, one of

every five new full-time workers earned less than $11,000 per year, meaning that a declining proportion of workers earned middle-level incomes.[4]

Corporate managers sought to alter their relationship with the workforce by introducing "flexibility" into the workplace, meaning an increased use of temporary, non-union workers leased from outside agencies. Companies put more workers on part-time schedules and froze wages.[5] Workers faced the daily threat of layoffs, plant closings, and company mergers in which "excess" workers were dismissed. For the most part, the big labor unions failed to contest the policies and accepted the retrenchments. Companies also abandoned career ladders that had provided paths of upward mobility for a significant fraction of the workforce.

The federal government intervened to restore corporate profitability by adopting policies that effectively forced workers to accept wage concessions, discredited the trade-union movement, and reduced the cost to business of complying with government regulations. Social programs were either frozen at their current levels or, like publicly assisted housing, cut back. According to Harrison and Bluestone, "the government supported management's demand for a docile work force that would swallow wage concessions without a major fight."[6]

In New York City, labor market conditions worsened even before the peak of the mid-decade fiscal crisis. Between 1970 and 1975, 600,000 jobs were lost, mostly in manufacturing but with few sectors unscathed.[7] In 1975, the city appeared on the verge of defaulting on its mounting debt to the banks, whose short-term loans at high interest rates had been secured by the city's obligation to treat debt servicing as a budgetary priority. When the state government established the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB) as overseer and ultimate authority over the city's budget, including labor negotiations and budget allocations, the budgetary prerogatives of the city became more restricted.

City administrations during the crisis years made budgetary choices based not solely on structural constraints but also on the powerful political coalitions and sectors to which they owed allegiance.[8] With Mayor Lindsay's liberal administration replaced by the Brooklyn Democratic Party loyalist Abraham Beame in 1974, severe cuts and layoffs under the auspices of "planned shrinkage" hit minority and poor communities the hardest and intensified neighborhood- and race/ethnicity-based competition for reduced services.[9] Although job recovery began in the late 1970s in the services and finance sectors, the budgetary policies of the Koch administration (starting in 1978) accelerated the drive of the "liberal city" to accommodate economic restructuring with little regard for the needs of the poor, especially minorities. As John Mollenkopf observed,

Figure 5.1. *Obreros en Marcha,* vol. 2, no. 10, October 1977, front cover.

structural economic constraints alone did not explain why, in the period of rapid recovery from recession, with rising revenues, "the Koch administration's development policies had a greater impact on promoting growth and increasing inequality than its social policies had on abating the cleavages generated by the postindustrial transformation."[10]

This chapter focuses on how El Comité-MINP blended its activism for reforms and its revolutionary aspirations in the second half of the 1970s.

As a revolutionary organization it believed that fundamental power shifts in favor of the working class could not be achieved without a class-based, mass movement of resistance. Movements that fought cutbacks and sought reforms were opportunities to recruit new members to the long-term cause of building that movement. El Comité's strategy was to become more deeply rooted in the "types of political [activities that would] facilitate the effective defense of the Puerto Rican national minority and [its] incorporation into the working class struggles in [the U.S.]"[11] In one arena, the Latin Women's Collective, women shared, interpreted, and acted on conditions of gender oppression and exploitation, in both private and public spheres of life. Throughout the city and Long Island, members organized campaigns against cuts in education and health care and to protect access to higher education. Their tactics were similar to those used in earlier campaigns, building coalitions around specific goals and forming alliances that strengthened the challenges to elite policies. One of the differences in its approach in these years compared to earlier years, however, was that members of El Comité did not always reveal their organizational affiliation in the mass organizations in which they were involved, especially in community and workplace struggles, in an attempt to limit their exposure to red-baiting by opponents.

Latin Women's Collective

> The thing that was important about all of this was that we had to believe *ourselves* that we had potential as political leaders, despite our insecurities, despite the messages we received as victims of domestic violence or social oppression. The Latin Women's Collective created leaders. Even when you go home, you're a leader. Understanding and dealing with your family is leadership. We can be leaders in our workplace and community as well. (Carmen Martell)[12]

El Comité placed great importance on combating gender oppression and encouraging political education and activism among women. Along with other activists, women from El Comité formed the Latin Women's Collective. Based on Paolo Freire's idea that empowerment is the central goal of organic education, El Comité viewed political education and empowerment as a collective, interactive process of interpreting and acting upon social conditions.[13]

In the months prior to the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, a delegation from the Vietnamese Women's Union invited activist women from the United

States to a conference in Montreal, Canada. El Comité-MINP planned to attend, as did many of the activist organizations in New York. The contingent from New York included working women and students as well as prominent professionals who served their communities, such as Dr. Helen Rodríguez of Lincoln Hospital, among others.[14] The multiracial delegation of black, white, and Latina women met in advance to organize their travel and discuss their roles at the conference. Sandra Trujillo was part of a small group of Latinas who formed a study group to prepare for the trip:

> We studied together and learned about our history in the general sense but also in regard to the role of women within Latino political movements. The study made us see the importance of our role in social change. We learned about Vietnamese and Cuban women as well. . . . I still have the books from the time about the important roles women played in the struggles in Vietnam and Cuba. (Trujillo)[15]

Trujillo met El Comité in her first year at Columbia University, where she helped mobilize students to support Operation Move-In. She was a student activist, Chicana, who was recruited by Columbia from San Francisco's Mission District at a time when the University was trying to increase enrollment of minorities. In San Francisco where she grew up, Sandra had participated in youth programs from the age of twelve and was inspired by progressive counselors:

> They instilled in us the notion that we needed to be active. If we went to college, we had to come back to serve our communities. It was the time of the anti-war movement. We weren't so much influenced by the Chicano Brown Beret movement but more by a sense of Latin American unity. (Trujillo)[16]

As a representative of a city-wide youth collective, Trujillo had opportunities to speak about poverty and police harassment in San Francisco's communities of color. She attended Columbia University on a scholarship in 1970 at the age of seventeen with what she called "a student-youth-community-control kind of orientation." Feeling alienated in what felt like a "hostile" environment at Columbia, she joined the Latino student organization for support.

In the early 1970s, following in the footsteps of the 1968 Columbia University campus chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the Latin Student Organization joined other student groups in protesting the war in Southeast Asia. Sometimes representatives of local political movements spoke

on campus about the connections they perceived between the war and the oppression of minorities and the poor in the United States. Minority students and leaders criticized the ivy-league institution for ignoring the deteriorated conditions in the surrounding neighborhoods of Harlem and Manhattan Valley. When the squatters of Operation Move-In took over buildings on West 106th Street in the spring of 1971, Sandra and another student led several hundred students on a march to support them. The following year, groups of Latin American, Black, Asian, and White protesters occupied six campus buildings, disrupting classes at Columbia for over a week.[17] Federico Lora of El Comité, along with a delegation of tenants from the West Side, joined the students in the building they were holding to offer reciprocal support.

"The students took over my building, Lewisohn Hall," explained Ana Juarbe, a Columbia University secretary at the time and veteran of Operation Move-In. Juarbe noted that the seeds of the Latin Women's Collective were sown in the relationships that were built during these housing and student movements of the early 1970s:

> We used to have women's groups as squatters on 111th Street . . . and we would talk about how important it was for women to speak up, to provide leadership. I was so timid. I wasn't a student, and I always felt I didn't fit in. So it was very interesting to me to hear women talking.[18]

The 1975 Vietnamese-sponsored conference in Canada, which took place several years after the peak of the housing movement, excited the women who attended from New York. They became even more convinced that women's empowerment was vital to movements for progressive change. Empowerment meant withdrawing the consent they gave, explicitly or implicitly, to institutions, individuals, or ideas that exploited, abused, and constrained them. Following the conference, the women (including Trujillo, who by then was a member of El Comité) continued meeting as a group to study and work together on issues of particular concern to women.

The Latin Women's Collective (LWC) was formed in 1975 by women from various local struggles where bonds had been formed, and by the conscious intentions of El Comité, PSP, MPD (*Movimiento Popular Dominicano*), and unaffiliated activists. Following the examples of women's federations in Cuba, Vietnam, and Nicaragua (prior to the Sandinista victory), the Latin Women's Collective sought to engage working-class Latinas in political discussion that would inspire and motivate political activism.[19]

The initial members of the LWC came from the network of women who attended the Canada conference. They believed that racism, sexism, and economic inequality affected Latinas in ways that were manifest in their lives every day. They wanted to increase their literacy skills and intellectual development, create space for women to study gender oppression, and become a voice against the conditions that oppressed them.[20] They read articles on feminism and Marxism; studied health, education, and labor conditions; and interchanged with women involved in Latin American political movements to discuss mutual obstacles to their development as leaders. The first LWC public event was planned as an educational forum on the effects of war on Vietnamese women. But it turned into a celebration when the war ended just prior to the event in April 1975.

The main objective of the LWC was to nurture the leadership potential and political awareness of working-class women. Ana Juarbe's association with women community and student leaders inspired her to be a leader. During one LWC committee meeting, she volunteered to research the topic of women and welfare:

> I was not a student. It was the first time in my life I tried to write a paper. It was the first time I was going to approach this as a leader, to critically assess this because it was a big issue in our community. I read Frances Fox Piven [and Cloward] and some other books and talked to people. And then I wrote this report. The LWC gave me an opportunity to develop these skills. (Juarbe)[21]

Juarbe described herself as "tongue-tied" the first time she presented her topic before a large gathering. But her support network was in the audience, particularly Elizabeth Figueroa from El Comité, who broke the silence at the end of the presentation to ask a question: "I'll never forget that. Whenever I see Liz, I think of the moment she was so supportive the first time I spoke." (Juarbe)[22]

The leaders of the LWC viewed political participation as more than getting individuals to vote for others to represent and press their claims in governmental institutions. The women believed that mobilizing direct action by large numbers of people required individuals who saw themselves as agents of change. The process of getting to that realization in itself was empowering. Women's liberation was internal and personal as well as social and political.

But the LWC did not think that the feminist movement in the United States adequately articulated or represented the experiences and concerns of working-class women of color. They thought it was important to build relationships with progressive women around the country but wanted to speak to

their own experiences with gender and class oppression, as Latinas, rather than perpetuate the illusion that a white-dominant movement represented them. The first opportunity to do that came in July 1975 at a national conference on Socialist Feminism at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. The conference was organized by a number of groups, including the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, the New American Movement's Women's Caucus, and the Berkeley/Oakland Women's Union. Attended by fifteen hundred women, its purpose was to "share our organizing experience, broaden our perspectives and assert socialist feminism as a strategy for revolution."[23] Merely fifty of the fifteen hundred were women of color.[24] Juarbe and Martell noted significant differences in the feminist outlook of the Latinas in attendance and the white majority:

> I consider myself a feminist to this day, but there were some big differences with the white feminists at the time. Women of color who considered themselves feminists had a different understanding of feminism from white women. We believed in the liberation of women, but we thought about it in the context of family, and we loved our men. And we had a stereotype image of the white feminist who takes off her bra. (Juarbe)[25]

> In Ohio, the biggest problem we had related to the differences we saw between white women who talked about all women being oppressed and our experience as working class women of color. We were and are oppressed differently, and we needed them to hear and understand those differences in order to have unity. (Martell)[26]

The LWC participants thought the conference panels, with so few working-class women of color, could not produce a comprehensive analysis of the conditions faced by women in the United States. They formed a caucus with like-minded attendees to relay their criticism. The caucus position opened the conference to a discussion of their concerns, leading to a consensus that non-panel attendees could sit on the panels in the conference workshops. The dialogue between the "third world women's caucus" and other feminist groups continued for several years thereafter.

After the conference, the LWC turned its attention to political education, recruitment, and activism, and boasted an estimated two hundred members by the spring of 1976.[27] Three committees—Labor, Health, and Education—developed a variety of activities. The Labor Committee researched workplace conditions and unemployment, disseminated information in local factories

where women worked, and built relationships with women in unions. The Health Committee held health fairs in city parks and at cultural events to share information with other women on mental and physical health issues, including sterilization abuse and birth control. The Education Committee spread information on budget cuts that eroded the quality of education, the negative impact of the tracking system, and the lack of adequate, affordable day care facilities in New York City for working mothers.

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COLECTIVA de MUJERES LATINAS CELEBRA CONFERENCIA

El sabado 12 de junio del 1976 mas de 200 personas, en su mayoría mujeres, asistieron a una conferencia auspiciada por la Colectiva de Mujeres Latinas. Entre los objetivos de dicha conferencia estaba el presentar formalmente a la Colectiva como una organización de masa, amplia, con composición mayormente de mujeres Latinas, dirigida hacia bregar con los problemas que afectan a las mujeres de la clase obrera en la sociedad Nortemaericana.

Formada en la primavera del 1975, la Colectiva desde sus principios reconoció el desarrollo desnivelado de su miembresía y los muchos problemas y obstáculos que confrontan las mujeres Latinas en una sociedad capitalista caracterizada por el racismo, sexismo y opresión de clase. Ademas se entendió que la particular condición de opresión a que son sometidas las mujeres Latinas es una situación compleja y se manifiesta en el quehacer diario en diferentes aspectos. Comprometidas a buscar una alternativa concreta a estas condiciones y reconociendo sus propias limitaciones, la Colectiva seleccionó tres areas de investigación y trabajo: Salud, Educación y Trabajo. Como se presentó en la conferencia del 12 de junio, estas areas fueron seleccionadas en base al entendimiento de que es precisamente en estos aspectos de la vida diaria que las mujeres Latinas, y de otras minorías, se enfrentan con las peores condiciones de discriminación y explotación.

En sus comentarios al comenzar la conferencia la Colectiva de Mujeres Latinas señaló que ellas, contrario al movimiento Feminista tradicional, reconocían que la opresión de la mujer debe verse dentro del contexto de la opresión de clase, senalando como el "movimiento feminista al ver a todas las mujeres como una masa uniforme ve al hombre como su enemigo" y "preocupándose esencialmente con las necesidades de las mujeres de clase media, no se preocupan por nuestras necesidades." La Colectiva apuntó hacia la necesidad de ir mas allá de las discusiones teóricas usuales sobre la cuestión de la liberación de la mujer y traducir estas discusiones en practica concreta en una base consistente envolviendose en las luchas diarias de las mujeres trabajadoras. Combatir el feminismo y el chauvinismo machista como actitudes equívocadas que mantienen al hombre y a la mujer separados y que sirven de instrumento para dividir a la clase obrera.

La Conferencia se dividio en tres talleres que giraron alrededor de aquellas areas en las que la Colectiva había realizado investigaciones. Por ejemplo, Trabajo, Salud y Educación.

En el taller del Trabajo la discusion giro en torno a las condiciones de trabajo de la mujer, el desempleo y el rol de la mujer en las uniones. El taller de Salud giró en torno al problema de la esterilización, el control de la natalidad y el control poblacional. El de Educacion brego con como los cortes presupuestarios han causado problemas en la calidad de la educacion - el sistema de "tracking" y la ausencia de facilidades de cuido de ninos (day care) para las madres que trabajan.

Todas estas discusiones se basaron en la labor de investigacion realizada por la Colectiva y en su comprencion de los problemas a los que se enfrentan las mujeres en esas areas. A pesar de que las investigaciones habian abarcado mucho mas de las areas discutidas las presentaciones hechas dentro de cada taller demostraron la cantidad de trabajo y el compromiso que la Colectiva ha realizado y el que se ha comprometido a continuar realizando para lograr un mayor entendimiento de lo que es la opresión de la mujer y como podemos comenzar a

Figure 5.2. *Obreros en Marcha,* vol. 1, no. 18, July 1976, p. 6.

The public events sponsored by the Latin Women's Collective from 1975 to 1978 often included cultural components of music and street theater groups performing their interpretations and celebrations of women's struggles and achievements. One event celebrated International Working Women's Day in 1977 at the Weldon Johnson Community Center, a settlement house on East 110th Street. An activity of this sort, organized by local women for women and their families, addressing issues of education, health, welfare, and labor, was a special event in East Harlem. Afterward, the Education Committee decided to hold English classes in the community as something concrete and tangible it could offer to local women, while encouraging them to join the Collective:

> We found a storefront on 115th Street in Harlem and, since some of us were teachers, we began to offer literacy classes to the community. We had been studying Paulo Freire and believed it was important to incorporate the issues that community women were facing into the substance of what we were teaching. (Trujillo)[28]

Ultimately, this strategy faced practical problems and created tensions within the Collective that partly contributed to its eventual demise. On the practical front, it was extremely difficult for the all-volunteer group to pay storefront rent and maintain a constant physical presence in East Harlem. When an organization confronts the financial realities of its existence, much of its potential organizing energies become redirected to the ongoing task of fundraising in order to pay staff and overhead. The problem speaks to the larger issue of how to build a mass movement for social change comprised of energetic and committed volunteers over a long period of time who cannot afford a "headquarters." The Education Committee volunteers, without financial compensation, spent many hours preparing for their community classes and education agendas. As workers themselves, in some cases with children, their commitment to the LWC was difficult to sustain in light of family obligations. Furthermore, the LWC did not seek governmental or nongovernmental, institutional funding. They never pursued foundation money, since this avenue was unknown to them or undesirable. For core activists, the idea of seeking funding from institutions that did not share the goal of radical social change was a conflict of interest and reprehensible collaboration with those who wanted to co-opt or dilute potential radicalism. Carmen Martell articulated the prevailing view:

> Why would you get funds from that structure? You would be letting people down. In El Comité, we would not allow people to

> work for the city because the city would corrupt you. You would not be representing the people. In the late 1960s and 70s, our organizations were battling government and you did not want to be part of it. When we get to the 1980s, we begin to broaden our view of the alternatives, which you see in the role we played in the Dinkins' Administration.[29]

In her personal account, Esperanza Martell, former member of the LWC and El Comité member until 1972, attributed the dissolution of the LWC to a disagreement between those "who wanted to strengthen our anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist perspective and those who wanted to 'mainstream' the organization . . . and have the members more involved in decision-making."[30] In her view, the LWC was already democratic, and "mainstreaming" reflected a "change [in] the working class politics of the [collective]." Carmen Martell summed up the experiences of the LWC in this way:

> It's like anything in our movement. We created something we thought was a really good thing. And we recruited a lot of women who were not affiliated with any political organization whatsoever and who, otherwise, were never going to be part of a political organization. We were able to elevate their consciousness to a degree. However, most of these women were working or housewives. They had other priorities. Their priorities were not to develop this big organization. They wanted to be part of something for a time, and they were. (Martell)[31]

The experience of the LWC points to some of the practical obstacles to and mixed outcomes of movements from below. Wages were not increased as a result of the efforts of the LWC. Nor did community health care or day care services improve. But countless women learned about sterilization abuse and decreased their vulnerability, eventually stopping the most abusive practices. They developed skills in research, writing, and public speaking; in coalition building; in family and workplace negotiation; and in asserting their rights to fairness in the workplace and to quality education and health care. Today, veterans of the LWC occupy positions of leadership in public service, advocacy organizations, government, and schools, serving as role models for younger generations.

Though difficult to measure, the reach of Left politics in initiating collective interaction, as in the Latin Women's Collective, was profound. In few other settings, certainly in no mainstream political party, would working-class

women read Paolo Freire or Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward. The very concept of democratization as collective deliberation and action to shape private and public conditions contrasts sharply with the idea that political influence is achieved by casting a vote. The main achievement of the LWC was that it engaged countless women, men, and children in political education and collective action, which challenged the idea that political participation meant nothing more than supporting elite contenders for elected office.

Resisting Setbacks in Education and Health Care

The more fiscally constrained local environment in the mid-to-late 1970s forced El Comité and other groups to shift their goals from expanding democratic rights to opposing budget cuts and racial scapegoating, and denouncing what they saw as the collaboration of the city's "labor aristocracy," meaning union leaders who accepted municipal layoffs with little opposition in return for protecting the jobs and previously negotiated compensation packages of those union members who retained their positions.[32]

The political program El Comité established in 1975 and affirmed in 1978 called for deepening the organization's involvement in workplace, community, and school organizations (or forming an organization if none existed) to mobilize against the cuts. Members in the Bronx worked with housing groups that confronted the Koch administration over unfulfilled city and federal promises to address urban decay in the South Bronx.[33] Activists in the Lower East Side who worked at Association Day Care Center united with workers from other day care centers in the neighborhood to promote parent-staff alliances against cuts in daycare funding.[34] But militant grassroots campaigns were more difficult to launch and harder to sustain, and the various groups that opposed New York City's budget cuts never coalesced into a unified, viable opposition. Competition between communities for public funds, often with racial overtones, decreased opportunities for cross-racial/ethnic cooperation or for reducing the gaps between minorities and whites in income and opportunity.[35]

Some success was achieved, however, by a student movement against changes in recruitment policies and funding cuts at SUNY Old Westbury and by a coalition in East Harlem against municipal hospital cuts. At Old Westbury, El Comité's student sector, *Frente Estudiantil Puertorriqueño* (FEP, Puerto Rican Student Front), was a leading force in a student/faculty coalition that fought to keep the college open to a diverse, mainly working-class population, as intended by the school's original mission. In East Harlem, the

Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital kept the hospital open after it had been targeted for closure by the Koch Administration. Similar elements were present in each campaign. The expectations of students at Old Westbury and residents of East Harlem of a certain level and quality of services were deeply entrenched; significant sectors of the affected populations were active in pre-existing organizations and dismissed administration or government attempts to demobilize initial protests; and activists built broad alliances based on clearly defined objectives.

Frente Estudiantil Puertorriqueño: Defending SUNY Old Westbury's Mission

The College at Old Westbury held a unique place in the SUNY system. Its philosophical origins can be traced to the mass movements of the 1960s, when students across the country criticized the limited curricula and exclusivity of higher education and challenged the institutions that perpetuated unequal, inferior education. Among other things, students and progressive faculty pushed colleges to implement open enrollment policies, include Black and Puerto Rican Studies programs, and to expand financial aid programs (such as EOP and TAP in New York State). Old Westbury was conceived as an experimental

Figure 5.3. Student Takeover of Administration Building, SUNY Old Westbury, 1976; from student newspaper, *The Catalyst.*

college whose Mission was "to educate those traditionally by-passed by higher education,"[36] meaning minorities, women, and working people in general. The "experiment" offered admission to students who, because of work and family obligations, financial obstacles, inadequate high school preparation, or discrimination on the basis of race, age, or gender had been denied access to traditional institutions of higher education.[37] Following the pilot programs held from 1969 to 1971, the University Chancellor and Board of Trustees refined the educational direction of the new college. Chancellor Ernest Boyer wrote:

> By committing itself to a student population that has until now not had an opportunity for higher education and by wrestling pedagogically with . . . the problems that these students bring with them, the College at Old Westbury unites its earlier mandate to be an experimental and innovative College with its second commitment to the realization of social justice, and to the recruitment of a diverse, traditionally-bypassed population.[38]

Diversity applied to age and gender and meant "a fairly even balance among blacks, Puerto Ricans, and whites within the student body, faculty, and administration." In 1973, the average student age on campus was 27, slightly more than half were women, and 20 percent were military veterans.[39]

Chancellor Boyer provided the rationale underlying the College's Mission:

> We have an obligation to try to balance and seek to redress a major social error. Until recently we have sought only the gifted who had the financial ability to pay for college. Opportunity can no longer be only for those born in the right star. The University and the schools have an obligation to seek to counter this.[40]

College President John Maguire considered himself a staunch advocate of the Mission. He wrote that "justice" meant to "build a society which would overcome class distinctions, racial antagonisms and prejudices, sexual discrimination and arrogance" and pledged to pursue such an environment on campus.[41]

From the outset, offering generous financial aid and an expansive suburban setting easily accessible by car or train, Old Westbury drew a resident and commuter population largely from New York City and Long Island's working-class towns. The early admissions policy enabled students without a high school diploma or SAT scores to receive a high school equivalency certificate after successfully completing a year of college. Programs were interdisciplinary and

expected to be multicultural. The commitment to multicultural education was based in a pedagogical philosophy that cross-cultural immersion would enrich the educational experience of all students, encourage language literacy in two languages, and foster an environment where diverse cultures could flourish and interact. Old Westbury tried to institutionalize this philosophy in several ways. It required academic departments to incorporate "culture learning" in their curricula, provided all materials in Spanish and English, and brought music and cultural programming to public spaces. Four-credit courses attracted those who worked (as they do now), and allowed faculty the classroom time for in-depth discussion of their material.

The belief in participatory democracy and parity still lingered from the movements of the 1960s, and students participated extensively in college governance. The themes of social justice and diversity obviously appealed to progressives and those with limited access elsewhere; several early students were founding members of the New York chapter of the Young Lords, and other organizations on the Left had members who attended classes at the college.[42] The socially and economically diverse population of Old Westbury, smack in the middle of an exclusive, wealthier-than-average, racially homogenous suburban town, contrasted sharply with the more traditional population at the neighboring C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University and New York Institute of Technology. Especially for students from the city, it was extraordinary to attend classes on a wooded, six-hundred-acre former estate, in what the *New York Times* called "the heart of the patrician horse country on Long island's north shore,"[43] and therefore easy to understand how protective students were of the college and how strong their belief was in the righteousness of the Mission.

The tone set by the Mission encouraged student and faculty solidarity. The rooftop of the Academic Village was a cultural hub where students and faculty played music and danced. The faculty held teach-ins on the Vietnam War and other issues in the lounge known as the Rathskeller. One news report in the early 1970s shared a young Latina's description of the atmosphere:

> She talks glowingly of the beautiful evenings when the students drift into the central plazas, carrying conga drums and flutes and guitars. And she treasures the conversations with the older housewives . . . "[who spend] six hours a day here, then go back to their suburban households."[44]

Students wanted the reality of the college to conform to the promise. But the political and economic ramifications of the Mission developed

quickly. With impending fiscal crisis and budget cuts, SUNY Chancellor Boyer announced in 1972 the need to do more with less.[45] Skills and remediation programs were cut, and plans for a fully bilingual/bicultural program were not implemented. Poor campus transportation limited access of resident students to the few off-campus recreational sites, residence halls were poorly maintained, and food services were inadequate. Additionally, legislators from Long Island insisted that the college provide more seats for students in Long Island's counties and add more traditional programs such as Business Administration that would appeal to transfer students from the area's community colleges. In what students and faculty viewed as a direct assault on Old Westbury's Mission, SUNY's Master Plan of 1972 gave Long Island "top priority" in the creation of space for additional students.[46] President Maguire tried to accommodate the new Master Plan quietly by redefining Old Westbury's geographic areas of recruitment, establishing more traditional academic programs, and luring transfer students from local community colleges. Students believed that these measures would, in effect, reduce the enrollment of "traditionally by-passed" students, especially those from New York City.[47] As a result, faculty and students voted unanimously to censure President Maguire for what seemed like his capitulation to the state.[48]

Tensions on campus escalated in 1975 when the administration issued a new Policy Statement on Admissions, declaring that the school's recruitment priority would be "the three community colleges of Nassau and Suffolk counties," and that 80 percent of seats would be reserved for transfers from those schools. The Statement spoke of the need to reduce the attrition rate, which it linked to skills deficiencies of current students, without identifying the various causes of attrition or proposing appropriate remedies. When the 1975–76 College Catalog appeared, all references to "traditionally by-passed students," to seeking racial, ethnic, and age balance, and to demonstrating "the possibility of universal access" to higher education were gone. The intent seemed transparent: Old Westbury was to be transformed into an upper-division college primarily for local transfer students in traditional programs. The skills issue would be addressed by reducing the lower division course demand and offerings, attrition would slow, financial aid pressures would ease with more cash customers, and local politicians and their constituent communities would be satisfied. The Black and Puerto Rican population that came mainly from New York City would dwindle.[49]

Student leaders Manuel Ortiz and Donald Lorick called on students to mobilize against the threats to the Mission. Lorick was President of the Black Student Union; Ortiz, a former Operation Move-In organizer and member of El Comité, was active in Student Government and Alianza Latina. Both came

to Old Westbury from Upper Manhattan. At campus town meetings, students prepared for a strike against the shifts in the College's direction and called on the faculty to support them.[50] Many of the faculty were scholar activists, such as Gloria Young Sing from Trinidad-Tobago; Waldon Bello, who had opposed the declaration of martial law in the Philippines and now serves in the Philippines House of Representatives; Sam Anderson, former SNCC activist and member of the Black Panthers; Philip Harvey, now a law professor; and feminist/activist Roz Baxandall, to name only a few. Students also asked for support from community groups from across Long island and New York City. Even the Middle States Accreditation Team reported on the shift underway following its visits to the campus:

> The team found the students of Old Westbury to be extraordinary in their enthusiasm and dedication to the institution. They identify with the college to the degree which is rare in contemporary education. . . . The positive attitude of the students . . . cuts across all differences in age and origin, and reflects the unusual quality of human relations and personal interaction between commuter and resident, older and younger students, and among all racial and ethnic groups. The team believes that this is an achievement unequaled on any other campus. . . . The substantial progress made to date, if maintained and further developed, will lead to eventual accomplishments which will make Old Westbury a remarkable institution and, at the same time, will have major implications for higher education generally. . . . To maintain this balance is, in the opinion of the team, both the most important and the most difficult problem which the College faces during the coming year. *In view of outside pressures*, it can solve this problem only through substantial internal coherence and close collaboration between administration, faculty and students.[51]

Students and faculty believed that the "outside pressures" cited by the Middle States team referred to local politicians who viewed the student population at Old Westbury as undesirable and who pressed SUNY's Board of Trustees to alter the Mission.[52]

Student Strikes

Following a year of frustrated grievances, the Strike of March 1976 began when a group of students occupied and barricaded themselves in the building

that housed the administrative offices of the college.[53] The student body closed the school for six days and maintained a twenty-four-hour vigil outside the occupied building. To his credit, President Maguire refused to call the police on to campus to forcibly remove students and agreed to negotiate with a Student–Faculty Team. Faculty compliance with the strike was unanimous, as was its vote to support the strike demands and student amnesty.[54] After five days of negotiations, the administration signed an agreement promising to revise the 1976 Master Plan to reflect the college's original commitment to recruit and provide higher education to traditionally by-passed sectors of society, establish a bilingual/bicultural program to serve native Spanish speakers and non-native speakers, accommodate students and their families in year-round housing, and support the child-care center on campus.[55]

But the second strike occurred a year later, in spring 1977, when it was apparent that the college administration did not have the power to implement the agreement. President Maguire, at that point on sabbatical, had been replaced by a vice president who was less sympathetic toward student activism. Following a three-week student boycott of the food service, during which students took over what they called the "liberated cafeteria zone" and prepared meals funded by donations, Acting President Edward Todd suspended the Codes for Campus Living that had been written by the student–faculty Judiciary Committee and invoked presidential Rules of Public Order.[56] These rules gave Todd the power to overrule decisions made by campus committees. The final blows came when the administration refused to reappoint two popular faculty members and rejected the Admissions Committee's proposals.

For nine days, students barricaded the entrances to the school and disrupted college operations. Once again, they had the support of the faculty, university workers, the Student Association of SUNY (SASU), and many community organizations.[57] At the end, students and faculty believed they had achieved a more powerful and enforceable victory because SUNY Central representatives came to campus to negotiate directly with students.[58] Following a fifteen-hour session that received national and international media attention,[59] the settlement stated, among other things, that the College agreed "to officially adopt as its affirmative-action goals that at least half the students be female, that the median age of the student body be over 25, that priority in admissions be given to students with the greatest economic need, and that in order to fulfill the unique educational mission of the college, the black, white, and Hispanic components of the student body be of equal size."[60] Recruiting efforts would be determined by "the college's commitment to the historically by-passed."

OLD WESTBURY

STUDENTS UNITE & WIN !

In the month of April a student strike at the College of Old Westbury brought about significant victories for the student body at that college. The events received wide national coverage by the media, as well as the international press, Moreover, during the process of the strike acts of provocation by the National Students Association (NSA)—a "student" organization actively supported by the CIA during the Vietnam war—and others reflect the significance of the events at the college.

The college itself is unique within the New York State university system (SUNY) as it was created as a result of the militant movement in the 1960's, in particular the movement of the oppressed nationalities. As a result the college has as its "missions" the education of the "traditionally bypassed"—minorities, working people and women.

In recent years, and integrally related to the economic crisis of imperialism, the dominant class has waged an intense campaign in order to wrest back the reforms and concessions of the previous decade. In this respect, Old Westbury has been targeted as one of the schools that must return to its traditional role or be eliminated from SUNY. The efforts of the State administration has been met by the resolute struggle of the student body at C.O.W. who are intent in maintaining the original mission of the school.

As a result of the most recent strike the students won the guarantee that future recruitment at the school will provide an equal mix of Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites, men and women as well as students over 25 years of age, with first consideration given to those with greater economic needs. This is a victory not only for the students at Old Westbury but for all students. It was not a full victory; two of the most progressive faculty members (there was considerable faculty support for the strike) face dismissal from the school. Both professor Anderson and Barney, the faculty members facing dismissal, will receive the support in their struggle of the students at the college.

Members of El Comite-MINP Long Island Chapter and its student front (FEP) were part of the process which developed at Old Westbury under the correct leadership of the Student Union at C.O.W. and the subsequent Student Coalition. The following article describes the experiences and projections of the students at Old Westbury. **Ed. Note**

The students at the College at Old Westbury have recently held the second strike in a 13-month period against efforts to destroy the "mission" of the school which is to serve the historically bypassed student, i.e., national minorities, women, older and working-class people in general. For nine days (April 18-26), students barricaded the entrances of the school, stopping totally its functioning, in a defiant and well-planned act of resistance that effectively gained the support of faculty, university workers, and community supporters from surrounding working-class communities. This show of unity and support brought on by the level of organization and social awareness of the students played a fundamental role in securing most of the strike demands. The struggle carried on at the College of Old Westbury must be raised for serious study within the student movement and the developing revolutionary process in that lessons to be drawn will aid in overcoming many of the weaknesses of the past and will serve to push forward the consolidation and further development of these processes. The most important lessons lie in understanding well the reasons why the student's victories at the College at Old Westbury arose and grasping the strength given to the continuing struggle by the degree of organization and growth in political consciousness among the students.

Since its inception, the history of C.O.W. has been one of struggle. In 1971 the atrocious conditions in which the college found itself led to a strike moratorium. Better classroom and living facilities, as well as more effective academic support were demanded and won. After the strike moratorium, President Maguire declared: That justice meant "to build a society which would overcome class distinctions, racial antagonisms and prejudices, sexual discrimination, and arrogance."

In 1973, however, the same president and his administration were instrumental in bringing about a fundamental change in the mission that jeopardized the basic interdisciplinary nature of the college by establishing new more traditional programs in the college. Other basic changes included redefining the geographic areas of recruitment with emphasis placed on accommodating transfer students from local community colleges. These measures were intended to reduce the participation of the historically bypassed students.

As early as the fall semester of 1975, student opposition to administration attacks on the mission of the school took shape in the form of the Committee for Self Defense which raised the general call to all students to: DEFEND THE MISSION. The Committee was composed of various campus organizations and concerned students. Basing itself on the study of administrative documents and general college information, the Committee understood that the general direction being given by the administration was serving to take the college away from meeting the educational needs of the historically bypassed students. The work of the Committee, more than anything else, consisted in developing a well-organized campaign of propaganda in order to educate the student body of the general conditions on campus. Throughout this campaign, the needs of the student body and the general problems facing it (food service,

Continued on page 4

Figure 5.4. *Obreros en Marcha,* vol. 2, no. 5, May 1977, p. 3.

The victory was partial and largely symbolic. The language used to support the Mission did not include the quotas students wanted; cuts were not restored, and some improvements were not secured. Faculty member Sam Anderson was not reinstated.[61] But the Mission that affirms Old Westbury's commitment "to social justice and a just, sustainable world" survives to this day, and Old Westbury's student body is the most diverse in the state university

system. Students succeeded because they stayed unified and were willing to use disruptive tactics, typical of protests in the period, and because they understood the importance of coalition building, on and off campus. As El Comité activist Manuel Ortiz commented, “One of our greatest strengths was the fact that the older, suburban white women taking classes on campus were as determined as the rest of us to win. They prepared our meals in the cafeteria and stayed with us the whole time.”[62] As students are a transient population, no doubt the collective will and memory of the faculty and like-minded administrators have safeguarded the idea of the Mission in subsequent decades. But there is also no doubt that, were it not for those early students, who risked jail and their educational futures to fight for social justice, Old Westbury’s future might well have been shaped differently.

El Comité-MINP’s dual goals of fighting for reform and building a broader movement were reflected in the role it played at the college. Its student activists participated, often as leaders, in all aspects of the student mobilizations. They helped form the Student Union, participated in the negotiating teams, served in student government and governance committees, and provided security services to the striking students. They wrote, printed, and distributed informational bulletins and spoke at rallies.[63] Off campus, they urged community organizations and students on other campuses to lend their support and join the picket lines. They also recruited new members to El Comité, which expanded the chapters in Long Island, the Lower East Side, and Upper Manhattan. While participating in the strikes and student negotiating teams, I became a member of the Lower East Side Chapter of El Comité-MINP.

Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital

By late 1978, the severe budget cuts implemented to help New York City service its bank debt had already minimized services and reduced funding for public schools, daycare centers, hospitals, transportation, sanitation, fire services, and city colleges. Yet, in December 1978, the Koch Administration proposed a further reduction of the municipal hospital budget of $1.2 billion by 10 percent. In support of the city’s plan, Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post* published a an editorial targeting the poor in New York City by declaring that the city’s major problem was the burden of providing health care and services to “thousands of welfare recipients and transient illegal aliens.”[64] The article racialized the fiscal crisis by reserving its most vicious remarks for Puerto Ricans:

> [T]he city's hospitals should not be an extension of the welfare system, paying substantially above the welfare rate for thousands of Puerto Ricans who have made this their special preserve.[65]

In response, the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights (CDPRHR) was formed in January 1979 by tenant advocates, students, health care union members, city council members, state and city elected officials representing Latino communities, clergy from the Hispanic Church of God, as well as El Comité and PSP.[66] In its 1979 Strategic Perspective and Proposed Work Plan, the CDPRHR talked about the conditions it wanted to address:

> Rents are unaffordable: entire communities are threatened with extinction as "planned shrinkage" seeks to make room for luxury housing. The policies of the last two city administrations have sought to "balance" the city budget by closing hospitals in our communities or severely reducing their budgets, eliminating after-school programs, laying off thousands of teachers, closing our bilingual programs and drastically reducing the number of interpreters found [in] social services programs. As social unrest climbs with the erosion of our standard of living, the people of our communities also find their legal and constitutional rights . . . violated by the excessive or unwarranted use of force by police authorities.[67]

To coordinate city-wide opposition to those conditions, the CDPRHR formed six chapters. El Comité's representatives participated in each one, with Julio Pabón, Emilio Morante, and Pedro Cordero as coordinators of the Bronx, East Harlem, and Lower East Side chapters, respectively. The work plan identified three courses of action for the Coalition: first, it would voice opposition at public meetings and hearings where city officials were scheduled to appear to defend budget-balancing policies. Second, it would hold educational forums in neighborhoods throughout the city. Third, it would hold street rallies against the budget cuts.[68]

One of the CDPRHR's most significant accomplishments was the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem, formed in response to Koch's announcement that a 10 percent cut in municipal hospital funding, coming on the heels of prior cuts, would be accomplished by laying off more workers and closing four of seventeen municipal hospitals, including Sydenham Hospital in Harlem, Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem, Greenpoint Hospital in the Williamsburg-Greenpoint section of Brooklyn, and Cumberland Hospital in the

Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. Prior layoffs, mainly of maintenance workers and nurses' aides, had hit Black and Latino employees hardest; and supply shortages had compromised the quality of patient care.[69] The city characterized the new proposal as an efficient measure to reduce the excessive number of municipal hospital beds.[70]

The Council of Municipal Hospital Community Advisory Boards accused the city of trying to fill empty beds in private hospitals by closing municipal hospitals, which, in effect, would deny medical care to residents without private or public health insurance. The claim was based on public statements by the Health and Hospitals Corporation, on the reports of investigative journalists on Mayor Koch's Plan for Improving the Effectiveness of Hospital Services in New York City, as well as on public objections to the cuts and closings by doctors and staff at the hospitals. For instance, in July 1979, the *Village Voice* reported that, despite its designation by the federal government as a medically underserved area, the densely populated East Harlem community was to absorb nearly $10 million of a $30.5 million cut by redirecting Metropolitan Hospital's tens of thousands of in- and out-patients to voluntary hospitals in other neighborhoods. The nearest municipal hospital, Sydenham in Harlem, would also be closed.[71] The report also noted that board members of Mt. Sinai and Lenox Hill Hospitals, which were slated to receive most of Metropolitan's Medicare and Medicaid patients, were "among the mayor's heaviest campaign contributors." The same information was reported in the *Westsider*, a local newspaper.[72] The leadership of District Council 37, AFSCME, representing twenty-three thousand municipal hospitals workers, also denounced the cuts. In January 1979, the Committee for Interns and Residents, representing about two thousand doctors in the municipal system, defied a court injunction and staged a one-day walkout at seventeen municipal hospitals to protest the layoffs and hospital closings.[73] Nurses and other employees from D.C. 37 joined the doctors on the picket line at several of the hospitals.

El Comité analyzed the health care cuts in the pages of *Obreros en Marchas* and in the bulletins of its local chapters around the city, while the CDPRHR mobilized East Harlem residents against the closing of Metropolitan Hospital.[74] The Coalition's investigations taught the organizers not to count on union leaders to staunchly oppose the closing of the hospital. Though D.C. 37 publicly opposed the budget cuts, its leadership made no attempt to educate employees or to provide resources for the struggle against the hospital closing. According to one organizer:

> One of the things [we] learned [was] that although some of the union representatives [were] excellent, very committed, and very

> active, . . . the vast majority of the membership was not at all informed of what was happening at the hospital. The union [was] very careful about collecting your dues . . . but aside from that you [heard] very little from them.[75]

For nearly two years, Emilio Morante represented El Comité and the CDPRHR in the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital. The Coalition unified hospital workers, community residents, neighborhood and city-wide organizations, and elected political representatives against the Koch administration. A hospital social worker provided the initial connection between the community activists and hospital staff.[76] Within the first several months, the Coalition had twenty-three member groups and individual activists:

> Once a core group of us got together, the first thing we did was to investigate what was happening not only in the hospital but in the community, too. We found that the more information you have concerning a particular issue and how the different groups in the community are relating to that problem, the better you can educate others. It's then that you can put the issues squarely on the table and begin demanding solutions. It's then that things come out in the open.[77]

The Coalition formed an Employees' Committee to draw hospital workers into the Coalition. The employees then distributed the Coalition's newsletter and leaflets to other workers at the hospital:

> [We] found ourselves doing some basic union work . . . [and] because of the consistency and information provided by our Employees' Committee, more workers [attended] those meetings than sporadic union meetings.[78]

The Coalition had little confidence that local politicians would staunchly oppose the city's plan:

> I was elected by the representatives of the Coalition over a pool of politically connected individuals who threw their hat in the ring. I did not campaign at all. An overwhelming majority of the group simply believed that we had no hidden agenda, could be trusted, and represented the genuine interests of the community in an

> uncompromising manner. We also waited out the internal battle that took place, where the local hacks exposed themselves. At the end of the meeting where the Coalition became a formal entity, the local councilman [Rodríguez] and [Congressman] Rangel were inauspiciously removed as the spokespersons for the community and we [El Comité] were elected. (Morante)[79]

Still, understanding the need to build a strong alliance, the Coalition invited Councilman Rodríguez to Coalition meetings and asked to work with him to save Metropolitan Hospital as a full-service medical center. But, according to Morante, the Councilman and other "*politiqueros*" of East Harlem did not like the Coalition's confrontational tactics or the blame the Coalition placed on the Emergency Financial Control Board for acceding to the demands of large banking and financial institutions while sacrificing health care for the poor in New York City.

The perspective on the role of the Emergency Financial Control Board that El Comité brought to the Coalition was shared with East Harlem's residents through the Coalition's leaflets and newsletters. Despite attempts by local politicians to red-bait and discredit the Coalition, Metropolitan Hospital remained open following an eighteen-month battle and state and federal bailouts that established the hospital as a "health maintenance organization."[80]

Unifying Theory and Practice

El Comité's political program from 1975 to 1980 was shaped by the interaction between its strategic goals and revolutionary ideology and the diminished political opportunities of the period. The results were mixed. On the one hand, activists helped achieve limited successes in grassroots campaigns and built a forum which gave many women across New York City their first experience with political self-organization. On the other hand, given the political and economic shifts in the city, opportunities for multi-ethnic/racial cooperation or even for reducing the gaps between minorities and whites in income and opportunity had diminished.[81]

The most difficult project El Comité set for itself in the late 1970s was to integrate theory and practice in its political activism. The practical component of its agenda was to encourage mobilization around the grievances in neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces by supporting the creation of mass organizations of people in their communities and students on campuses. In

both the episodes of students fighting cuts at Old Westbury and East Harlem residents opposing the closing of Metropolitan Hospital, as in others, El Comité's activists organized stakeholders and built alliances with other sectors that empathized with the objectives of these campaigns. It provided educational materials, such as chapter bulletins or worker or student sector flyers, to inform and rally people around the various causes.

In this respect, El Comité's approach to these campaigns fit neither the traditional mold of class politics in the workplace, which seeks workers' unity against capitalists and the state, nor the approach of ethnic identity-based political incorporation that seeks to expand voter participation. The long-term, revolutionary vision was shared gradually with those whose respect and trust they had gained. The counterhegemonic narrative that the capitalist system was incapable of fairly and equitably distributing social wealth coupled with the idea that a mass movement for a more just system was embedded in the articles of *Obreros en Marcha.* However, given the Cold War politics of the era, the more conservative tenor of the times, and the government surveillance that targeted groups on the Left, El Comité was more careful about exposing activists to red-baiting. Some members were involved in reform struggles where it would have been counterproductive to reveal their organizational affiliation or long-term vision for movement building because opponents would use this information to try to marginalize activists on the Left or discredit the struggles themselves by calling attention to the participation of radicals.

This point is essential in order to fully appreciate the role of El Comité (and other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left) in social justice movements of the 1970s. Often, their affiliation was not known; but they were nonetheless present in leadership roles, addressing the grievances and aims of their communities. The challenge was to introduce their systemic critique to those who were receptive without imposing a revolutionary agenda in broad coalitions focused on concrete, immediate goals. Members of El Comité had themselves witnessed the ineffectiveness and offensiveness of Left organizations that entered a community group with an agenda far removed from the issues at hand and beyond what people were willing to consider. Consequently, the key role El Comité's activists played in these movements was often unknown and unacknowledged.

Long-time activist Jaime Suárez reflected on the dilemma of how to integrate theory and practice:

> [We entered] an organization without the benefit of veteran fighters saying, "this is how to do it." We knew we had to integrate into community organizations, and we did. We would make our

> publications available to the people we got to know. But getting them to see the issue beyond the local community or to push the struggle beyond the immediate issue to a larger critique of capitalism was much more difficult and, for all intents and purposes, was not done.[82]

Despite the difficulties faced in grassroots activism, El Comité grew rapidly in the mid- to late 1970s. With new and larger chapters, it was unrealistic and unreasonable to expect the entire organization, or even entire chapters, to actively support each local campaign as the organization had done during Operation Move-In. Consequently, it was less recognized citywide as an independent political force than it had been on the Upper West Side in the early 1970s. But its involvement in national alliances, party-building dialogues, and solidarity networks (especially with Puerto Rico) increased the organization's visibility within the U.S. Left and strengthened its ties with Left movements in other countries. These areas of El Comité's political program are the subjects of the next chapter.

6

Solidarity Work and Party-Building

In the 1970s, the goals of international solidarity movements were to shine a spotlight on the human rights violations of regimes abroad and to protest U.S. support for those regimes. Activists formed the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) against that country's military regime, pressured academic and government institutions to divest from apartheidist South Africa, and celebrated the Sandinista overthrow of the repressive Somoza regime in 1979.[1] They supported the cause of Palestinians for national sovereignty and exposed the repression of popular movements by military regimes in Argentina and Chile. The unity achieved by progressive and Left organizations on these issues arguably resulted in some of their most notable achievements, both in terms of the many thousands of people they mobilized in common cause and the pressure they brought to bear, especially on authoritarian regimes in Latin America and apartheid in South Africa.

The ideological principle on which El Comité and other groups of the Third World Left joined these movements was, in the language of the period, "international proletarian solidarity"—the belief that working people around the world shared the common oppressor of militaristic global capitalism, or imperialism. The jargon of proletarian solidarity has changed. But contemporary movements that promote transnational organizing against the labor conditions in global factories and that work for international alliances for environmental justice and universal human rights often identify the same culprit—a global economic system that prioritizes the accumulation of wealth and control over labor and natural resources by a very few over the well-being of the vast majority of the world's population.[2]

This chapter examines El Comité's role in movements in solidarity with Puerto Rico, its national alliances with other organizations of the U.S. Left on domestic issues, and the dialogue that was known as the "anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist" party-building trend.

Solidarity with Puerto Rico

Support for Puerto Rico's independence movement took many forms in the 1970s. There were marches that drew thousands of people to the streets of Washington, D.C., calling for liberation from colonial rule; a long campaign to free Puerto Rican nationalist prisoners in U.S. jails; annual delegations to hearings on Puerto Rico's status held by the United Nations Decolonization Committee; educational forums and speaking tours; and the genesis of the movement to oust the U.S. Navy from Vieques, the small island belonging to Puerto Rico that the U.S. military occupied from 1941 to 2003. In New York, the relationship between El Comité and the U.S. Chapter of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) was sometimes strained because of their differences on the "national question"—that is, their divergent views on which political priorities would best serve Puerto Ricans in the United States. Nevertheless, they frequently collaborated with regard to Puerto Rico, along with PRRWO and the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee (PRSC), which was a large network of individuals and organizations that supported independence.

El Comité also established relationships with progressive trade unions in Puerto Rico and facilitated linkages between labor activists in Puerto Rico and the United States, especially at a time when unions on strike in Puerto Rico needed support. During the 1978 strikes of electrical workers and municipal bus drivers on the island, the U.S. Trade Union Committee Against Repression (TUCAR) and Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) sponsored a five-city speaking tour of labor activists from Puerto Rico, including an assembly of striking United Mine Workers in Pittsburgh. That same year, Frank Velgara, from El Comité's Central Committee, and activist Jean Weisman, representing TUCAR, brought union representatives from the American Federation of Teachers in California, the United Mine Workers in Ohio, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in Chicago, the Service Employees in Boston, and D.C. 37 and Local 1199 in New York to meet labor activists in Puerto Rico.[3] El Comité also had a close relationship with the *Movimiento Socialista Puertorriqueño* (MSP, Puerto Rican Socialist Movement) in Puerto Rico and often hosted their representatives to speak in

the United States about the movements in Puerto Rico. One of the solidarity movement's most notable achievements was its campaign to secure the release of four Nationalist prisoners in 1979.[4]

Campaigns to Free Political Prisoners

The movement to free Puerto Ricans imprisoned in the United States for their actions, or suspected actions, as nationalists who opposed U.S. colonial rule was revitalized by the Young Lords (later PRRWO), PSP, and El Comité in 1970. The prisoners included Carlos Feliciano, Eduardo "Pancho" Cruz, Wilfredo "Goody" Meléndez, the five nationalists jailed in the 1950s—Oscar Collazo, Lolita Lebrón, Irving Flores, Rafael Cancel Mirando, and Andrés Figueroa Cordero—and others who refused to testify before grand juries formed specifically to collect information about the independence movement.[5] In the prior two decades, attempts to call attention to the case of the prisoners from the 1950s had been sporadic. Repression of the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico in the 1940s and '50s had severely weakened the movement there, and the climate for protest during the McCarthy era was hardly better in the United States. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the re-emergent independence movement in Puerto Rico brought the case of Puerto Rican prisoners to the fore of activists' agendas in the United States.

In 1970 at Columbia University, El Comité, the Young Lords, and the Puerto Rican Student Union organized the first Conference on Puerto Rican Political Prisoners ever held in the United States. The Committee to Defend and Free Political Prisoners (*El Comité Pro Defensa y Libertad de Presos Políticos*) formed in October 1971 by these groups educated people about the various cases, recruited supporters, and collected money for legal defense expenses and aid for the families of prisoners. As a result of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), dozens of activists were accused of various crimes and jailed for violations such as failing to report to the armed forces for physical examination and induction,[6] or failing to testify before a Grand Jury. Defendants charged with refusing to testify before a Grand Jury were frequently defended by the Center for Constitutional Rights on the grounds that the Grand Jury subpoenas were "fishing expeditions" and violated the constitutional rights of citizens, as witnesses were not permitted to have attorneys present at their testimonies.[7]

To draw attention to what it saw as government harassment and false imprisonment of Puerto Rican nationalists, El Comité Pro Defensa organized rallies in front of the courtrooms where prisoners' hearings were held. Local

artists (or "cultural workers," as they called themselves) who joined the growing movement often performed original songs at the rallies featuring lyrics that spoke of strong bonds with those accused. Artists created drawings depicting the plight of prisoners, and activists reproduced these as posters and sold them to raise money for prisoners' defense and family support. If one missed the poems of empathy and solidarity delivered at the rallies, these could be heard on any given night at the Nuyorican Poets' Café in the Lower East Side.[8]

The security forces, local police, and presiding judges at these hearings tried to discourage the rallies. Often, as a rally or picket occurred outside the courthouse, sympathizers of the defendants lined up on the inside to be admitted to hearings. Spectators were frequently ordered out of the courtrooms. On one occasion in December 1971 at the sentencing hearing of Eduardo (Pancho) Cruz and Wilfredo (Goody) Meléndez, several hundred friends of the defendants waited at the door of the New York State Supreme Court hearing room an hour before the scheduled start. After a half hour wait, the court guard announced that only the immediate families, attorneys, and a few spectators would be permitted to enter—twenty-four individuals in all. The rest were left waiting outside, behind barricades that guarded the court entrance. Inside the courtroom, sixteen policemen were dispersed among the rows of seating, each bench with a detective. The defendants were escorted into court by four police officers. Cruz and Meléndez, convicted of weapons' possession, claimed through their attorneys that the trial was flawed by fraud and frame-up and further that the court had no jurisdiction over Puerto Rican nationalists.[9] There were dozens more courtroom displays of solidarity by Puerto Rican activists in other cities as well, in which police forces and the FBI were accused of fabricating evidence, provoking disturbances, falsifying correspondence, and other acts meant to intimidate activists.[10]

El Comité Pro Defensa counted as one of its successes the case of Carlos Feliciano, a nationalist and cabinetmaker who resided in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn since migrating from Puerto Rico in 1955. Feliciano was arrested in 1970 on thirty-five counts of subversion, bombings, and attempted bombings but indicted on only two charges of attempted bombings of an Army Recruiting Station in the Bronx and the General Electric Building in Manhattan. He spent sixteen months in prison before his attorney, William Kunstler of the Center for Constitutional Rights, secured his release on bail. With no evidence, and no doubt because of the attention the solidarity movement brought to his case, Feliciano was acquitted on the first charge in 1972. In 1973, although acquitted of charges of attempted arson and placement of a bomb at the GE building, he was convicted of possession of explosives.

Figure 6.1. Rally in Support of Carlos Feliciano, 1971. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

When the Young Lords dissolved, mobilizing to free the nationalists convicted of the 1954 shooting incident in the U.S. Congress fell to El Comité, PRRWO, and PSP. For several years, independently and often in close collaboration, many groups across the country (mainly but not exclusively Puerto Rican in composition) held educational conferences in community halls, school auditoriums, and churches to publicize the prisoners' prolonged incarceration. They organized marches, rallies, and fundraisers, called on elected officials to discuss the issue, and called on the United Nations Decolonization Committee at its annual meeting to support the unconditional release of the prisoners by the U.S. government. The march held in Washington, D.C., in 1973 was the largest public demonstration to that date held for that purpose.

> The Nationalists had been in prison for many years and were largely forgotten. Somehow we met with the daughter of Oscar Collazo. She told us about her father and Carlos Feliciano [another prisoner]. Our work began around the case of Feliciano, and then we learned more about the other prisoners. We organized the activity in Washington [on October 30, 1973]. We were the leading force. (Orlando Colón)[11]

Each year at the Puerto Rican Day Parade, contingents carrying banners with the slogan *Libertad Para los Presos Políticos* (Freedom for Political Prisoners) marched up Fifth Avenue, and information tables were set up at cultural festivals in Central Park. Speaking about the years it took to obtain their release, Carmen Martell noted the importance of the work of all of the Puerto Rican Left:

> If you read histories of the movement, it appears as though the Young Lords were the catalysts behind the Nationalists' release. Instead of saying that we worked as a coalition, [some accounts] look at everything in terms of the Young Lords. PRRWO is rarely mentioned also, maybe because it was a negative experience for the Lords. We didn't try to get our name in the media. Our attitude was that we just wanted to move this thing along. (Carmen Martell)[12]

Orlando Colón had a similar view of the diligent efforts made on the prisoners' behalf:

> The Nationalists' release was really El Comité's greatest achievement. . . . We did it for the cause, not to get credit. We got involved and just worked and worked and worked. (Colón)[13]

The first of the five, Andrés Figueroa Cordero, was pardoned and released by President Jimmy Carter on October 6, 1977, because he was terminally ill.[14] Upon his release, El Comité intensified efforts to build a broad-based movement for the release of the remaining four:

> While heartened by and cognizant of the importance of Andrés Figueroa Cordero's release, [there remains] an urgent need to redouble our efforts to obtain the freedom of the remaining Nationalist prisoners. . . . [T]he demand for the unconditional release . . . must be translated . . . into a mass movement in this country . . . with the active involvement of broad sectors of society, including workers, students, intellectuals, and church sectors. . . .[15]

Days later, on October 30, 1977, under the auspices of the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee, a large mobilization took place in Washington, D.C., commemorating the twenty-seventh anniversary of the Jayuya Rebellion, denouncing Grand Jury investigations, and advocating freedom for the Puerto Rican prisoners.

Figure 6.2. Demonstration in Washington, D.C., 1976. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

The event drew widespread attention. The following year, *El Diario–La Prensa*, one of New York's major Spanish-language newspapers, ran a series of sympathetic articles on the imprisoned nationalists. The series was part of a loosely connected campaign to increase pressure on the U.S. government. Core activists reached out to those who would support the movement on humanitarian grounds, even if they did not support the cause of independence. Both Houses of the Puerto Rican legislature passed resolutions demanding freedom for the four remaining prisoners. U.S. Congressman Robert García and ten other legislators sent a letter to President Carter requesting the release.[16] Four former governors of Puerto Rico,[17] all of the island's major political parties, religious groups, labor unions, human rights activists, and student clubs in both the United States and Puerto Rico endorsed the campaign and demanded the prisoners' release based on the consensus that their imprisonment was unfairly prolonged. The next march in Washington, D.C., occurred on March 3, 1979, several days before Andrés Figueroa Cordero died in Puerto Rico.[18]

Puerto Rico may have been a low priority for President Carter, but "human rights" placed high in his public discourse. The United States had only recently withdrawn from Vietnam, and the revelations of wartime atrocities

had not abated. Watergate had not yet dimmed in the national memory, either (especially with President Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon). Civil war was raging in Nicaragua, and the United States faced accusations of support for brutal military regimes in Central and South America. President Carter wanted to be a "peacemaker" (particularly in the Middle East) and champion of human rights. His administration hinted that the Nationalists might be released as a "humanitarian gesture" if they agreed to restrict their political activities. They did not agree to any conditions, but Carter relented anyway, releasing the prisoners on September 11, 1979. At the time of their release in 1979, Oscar Collazo, Irving Flores, Lolita Lebrón, and Rafael Cancel Miranda had served more than twenty-five years of life sentences in U.S. prisons for their actions against U.S. colonial occupation.

Oscar Collazo made this statement the day before the release:

> Our intent, after our release, will be to dedicate ourselves to Puerto Rican national unity, completely confident that this historical moment will serve as a stimulus to the Puerto Rican people to put aside partisan flags and struggles for the only solution—to recover the inalienable political rights of our people, so that the Puerto Rican nation can soon take its place among the free nations of the world.[19]

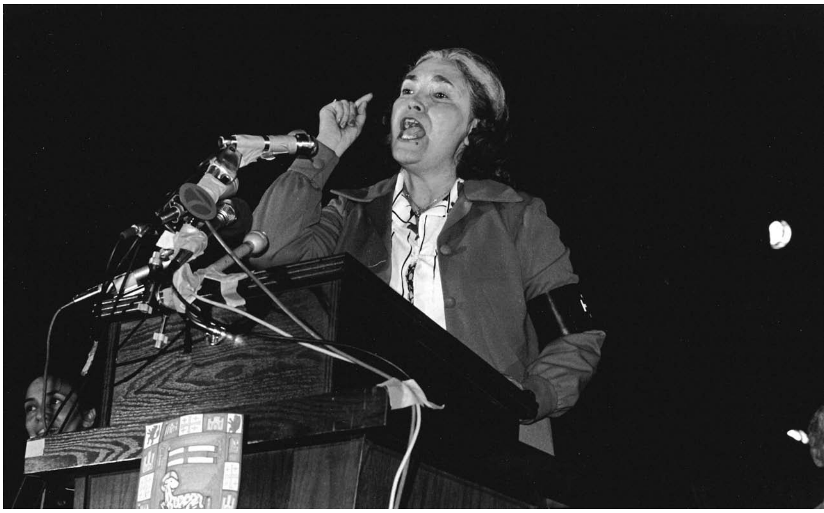
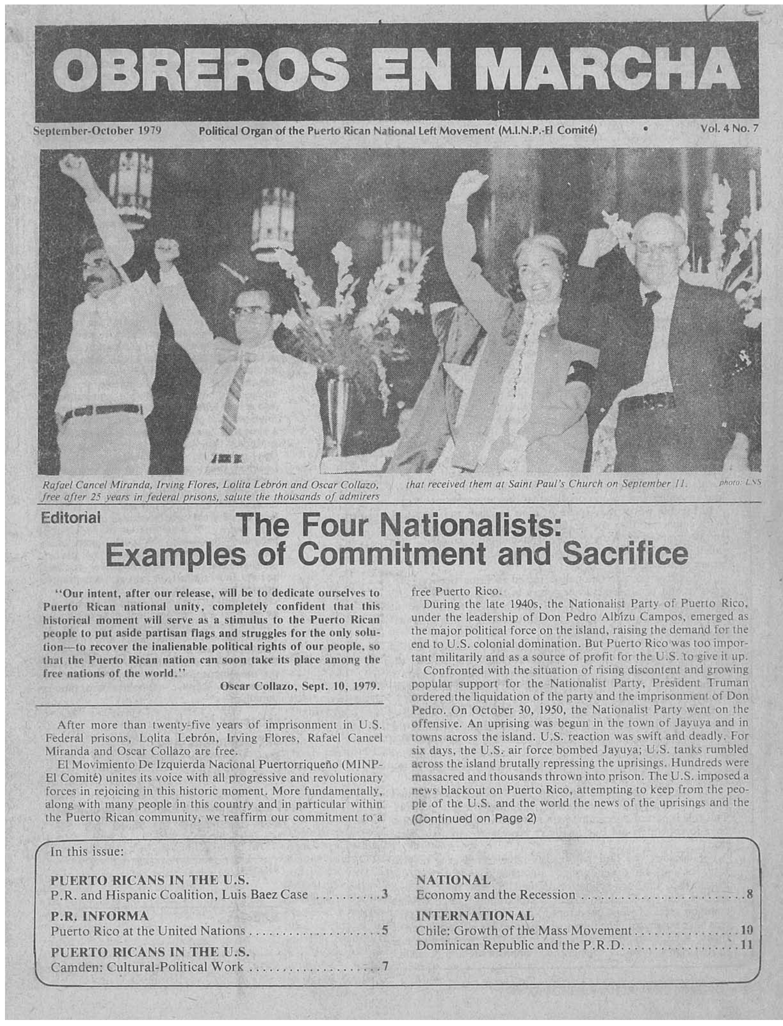


Figure 6.3. Lolita Lebrón at Reception in New York, 1979. (Máximo Colón, photographer)



OBREROS EN MARCHA

September-October 1979 Political Organ of the Puerto Rican National Left Movement (M.I.N.P.-El Comité) • Vol. 4 No. 7

Rafael Cancel Miranda, Irving Flores, Lolita Lebrón and Oscar Collazo, free after 25 years in federal prisons, salute the thousands of admirers that received them at Saint Paul's Church on September 11. photo: LNS

Editorial

The Four Nationalists: Examples of Commitment and Sacrifice

"Our intent, after our release, will be to dedicate ourselves to Puerto Rican national unity, completely confident that this historical moment will serve as a stimulus to the Puerto Rican people to put aside partisan flags and struggles for the only solution—to recover the inalienable political rights of our people, so that the Puerto Rican nation can soon take its place among the free nations of the world."

Oscar Collazo, Sept. 10, 1979.

After more than twenty-five years of imprisonment in U.S. Federal prisons, Lolita Lebrón, Irving Flores, Rafael Cancel Miranda and Oscar Collazo are free.

El Movimiento De Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño (MINP-El Comité) unites its voice with all progressive and revolutionary forces in rejoicing in this historic moment. More fundamentally, along with many people in this country and in particular within the Puerto Rican community, we reaffirm our commitment to a free Puerto Rico.

During the late 1940s, the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico, under the leadership of Don Pedro Albízu Campos, emerged as the major political force on the island, raising the demand for the end to U.S. colonial domination. But Puerto Rico was too important militarily and as a source of profit for the U.S. to give it up.

Confronted with the situation of rising discontent and growing popular support for the Nationalist Party, President Truman ordered the liquidation of the party and the imprisonment of Don Pedro. On October 30, 1950, the Nationalist Party went on the offensive. An uprising was begun in the town of Jayuya and in towns across the island. U.S. reaction was swift and deadly. For six days, the U.S. air force bombed Jayuya; U.S. tanks rumbled across the island brutally repressing the uprisings. Hundreds were massacred and thousands thrown into prison. The U.S. imposed a news blackout on Puerto Rico, attempting to keep from the people of the U.S. and the world the news of the uprisings and the

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Figure 6.4. *Obreros en Marcha,* vol. 4, no. 7, September–October 1979, front cover.

Thousands of people attended celebrations and hosted receptions for the nationalists in New York and Chicago upon their release in 1979. One of the nationalists' stops was to greet the crowd that packed El Comité's office on Columbus Avenue in Manhattan. Yet one commentary on the nationalist prisoners and the receptions that greeted their release was that "reactions to the shootings [in Puerto Rico and the United States] was highly unsym-

pathetic" and "most Puerto Ricans thought the nationalists got what they deserved."[20] In the absence of corroborative evidence, that remains speculative. But it is difficult to imagine that the release would have been secured without the broad support of many Puerto Ricans and others. Carter's action was motivated by the large movement from below that gained momentum and succeeded.

The Puerto Rican Left of the 1970s differed on how to pursue their shared hope for Puerto Rico's independence from the United States. However, their differences did not hinder their cooperation in the prolonged effort to free political prisoners. That cooperation continues today, as thirty-five women rally once a month at different locations in New York City to protest the thirty-five year incarceration of Oscar López Rivera. López is the last of those incarcerated for convictions related to the activities of the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberación Nacional, Armed Forces of National Liberation) in the 1970s. The number of women symbolizes the years Lopez has been imprisoned, despite the release of other prisoners, ostensibly because he refused to accept conditions offered by former President Bill Clinton.

Figure 6.5. Rally of "34 Mujeres por Oscar," New York, 2015. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

United Nations Decolonization Committee Hearings

El Comité-MINP, PSP, and PRRWO also joined solidarity networks to urge the United Nations to pressure the United States to recognize Puerto Rico's sovereignty. In 1960, the United Nations' General Assembly passed Resolution 1514(XV), which declared, in part, that "All peoples have the right to self-determination; . . . [and] Immediate steps shall be taken, in . . . all . . . territories which have not yet gained independence, to transfer all powers to the peoples of those territories, without any conditions or reservations. . . ." A twenty-four-nation member committee, commonly known as the Special U.N. Committee on Decolonization, was established to monitor the implementation of the Resolution.[21] Though they were original members of the Decolonization Committee, the United States, Australia, and Britain resigned in 1971 in protest of Resolution 2649 (XXV), proposed by the Decolonization Committee and passed by the General Assembly in 1970. In Resolution 2649, the United Nations General Assembly

> [a]ffirm[ed] the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples under colonial and alien domination recognized as being entitled to the right of self-determination *to restore to themselves that right by any means at their disposal;* [r]ecognize[d] the right of peoples under colonial and alien domination in the legitimate exercise of their right to self-determination *to seek and receive all kinds of moral and material assistance*, in accordance with the resolutions of the United Nations and the spirit of the Charter of the United Nations; [c]all[ed] upon all Governments that deny the right to self-determination of peoples under colonial and alien domination to recognize and observe that right in accordance with the relevant international instruments and the principles and spirit of the Charter; [c]onsider[ed] that the acquisition and retention of territory in contravention of the right of the people of that territory to self-determination is inadmissible and a gross violation of the Charter; [and] [c]ondemn[ed] those Governments that deny the right to self-determination of peoples recognized as being entitled to it, especially of the peoples of southern Africa and Palestine . . .[22]

Although it joined its allies in walking off the Decolonization Committee, the United States was not deeply concerned about how the United

Nations would treat the U.S.–Puerto Rico relationship. In 1953, soon after Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status was established, the United States successfully petitioned the United Nations to remove Puerto Rico from its list of colonies and territories, thereby establishing the basis in later years for the United States to assert that affairs relating to Puerto Rico were domestic, not international, concerns.

On August 18, 1972, approximately two thousand (according to participants) demonstrators rallied outside the United Nations while Cuba's Permanent Representative to the U.N., Ricardo Alarcón Quesada, proposed a resolution to the Decolonization Committee recognizing Puerto Rico as a colony and affirming its right to self-determination.[23] When the resolution passed unanimously several days later, the coalition of activists, including El Comité, PSP, PRRWO, the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), I Wor Kuen, and the Black Workers Congress, characterized the victory as a new opening to gain international attention and support for the cause of independence and an opportunity for the United States to resolve the issue peacefully. In his presentation at the rally, James Forman of the Black Workers Congress announced that "People's Solidarity Day" was being celebrated in places around the world on that day and called for "third world unity" in the United States."[24]

The Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee (PRSC) that formed in 1975 saw the campaign to persuade the U.N. Decolonization Committee to take a position on Puerto Rico as one strategy to build a solidarity movement on an international scale. While the anticolonial perspective of PRSC may not have drawn vast crowds of participants to public rallies, the multinational campaign succeeded each year in expanding the size of the delegation appearing at the United Nations to urge the passage of strongly worded resolutions. With a national Board of Directors comprised of representatives from the major organizations of the Puerto Rican Left (including El Comité and PSP), and the National Lawyers Guild, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizations (IFCO), among others, PRSC was granted permission by the U.N. Decolonization Committee to present its own statement at the hearings, which it did from 1975 to 1982.

The PRSC eventually disbanded. But the annual hearings of the U.N. Decolonization Committee continue to draw representatives from Puerto Rico, the United States, and elsewhere to present the colonial case of Puerto Rico. Since 1972, the Decolonization Committee has passed resolutions recognizing Puerto Rico's right to self-determination and calling on the United States

Figure 6.6. Rally for Puerto Rico at the United Nations, 1973. (Máximo Colón, photographer)

to take immediate steps to recognize the country's sovereignty. At times, the resolutions have called on the United States to release nationalist prisoners, to cease military activities in and around Puerto Rico, to remove the U.S. Navy from Vieques, and (since the Navy's departure from Vieques in 2003) to clean up the toxic waste and remedy the environmental hazards caused by the naval occupation. In 2007, more than forty individuals and organizations spoke at the Committee hearing, which was double the number in 2006 and included representatives from every major political party in Puerto Rico, including the pro-statehood New Progressive Party (PNP).

The U.N. Decolonization Committee continues to recognize Puerto Rico's right to sovereignty. In June 2014, "[t]he Special Committee on Decolonization . . . called on the United States to again expedite a process that would allow the people of Puerto Rico to fully exercise their inalienable right to self-determination and independence."[25] Despite the Committee's position, the U.N. General Assembly up to now has declined to address the case of Puerto Rico.

Vieques Support Network

On February 6, 1978, a flotilla of forty fishing boats with signs reading *Vieques nos pertenece; rescatémosla* (Vieques belongs to us; let's recover it) entered restricted waters where warships from the United States and allies were about to begin naval and aerial exercises. Stunned naval commanders were forced to cancel the scheduled activities.[26] The civil disobedience, organized by the Fishermen's Association of Vieques and Crusade to Save Vieques, was the first of many "fish-ins" in which fishermen risked their lives to call the world's attention to the Navy's use of their waters and land for missile practice and as a weapons' storage facility; the bombing that daily threatened residents' lives; and the dangers posed to the health and well-being of residents by high noise levels. The protests spread across the mainland of Puerto Rico. The main political parties, including the pro-U.S. statehood party (PNP), expressed support for the fishermen. The following year, forty activists were arrested while attending a religious ceremony on the island, including Angel Rodríguez Cristóbal, who was imprisoned in the United States. That same year, Rodríguez was found hanging dead in his Florida prison cell.[27]

These events and a visit to New York City by one of the fishermen prompted the formation of the Vieques Support Network in the United States. The largest committees developed in New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. Sandra Trujillo of El Comité and Zoilo Torres of PSP were co-coordinators of the New York Committee.

> The Support Network was formed with the intent of fomenting and coordinating action in the United States in support of the Vieques struggle, to bring about the withdrawal of the U.S. Navy and termination of military activity in Vieques and to acquire restitution for the people of Vieques for all damages and losses resulting from military presence on the island. (Trujillo)[28]

The Network disseminated information about Vieques at cultural activities in the South Bronx and East Harlem, festivals in Central Park, and the Puerto Rican Day Parade; collected signatures for petitions; and spoke to students and community groups. They visited churches and met with environmentalists, human rights activists, elected officials, and labor unions. Committees in other cities carried out similar activities. In Washington, D.C., they lobbied Congress and testified at Congressional hearings. On May 17 (Armed Forces Day), 1980, twenty-five hundred supporters of the Network marched in Washington, D.C.,

shouting "ni con bombas, ni con balas, esta lucha no se para" (Neither with bombs nor bullets will this struggle be stopped).[29] The march coincided with the arrest of two local fishermen from the Crusade to Save Vieques.

Respecting the example of the residents of Vieques, whose political affiliations varied, the Support Network put aside the question of Puerto Rico's status and focused on the violations of economic, civil, and human rights in Vieques. Consensus on this approach was not easy to achieve in the mix of socialists and nationalists, some of whom believed that a demand for independence for Puerto Rico should be linked to the demand for an end to U.S. militarism. But the movement gained its greatest momentum when its objectives aligned with those of the fishermen in Vieques—to oust the Navy from their land and waters. Zoilo Torres reflected on the fact that the Puerto Rican Left overcame their differences to launch its most effective campaign: "We infused the Puerto Rican movement with a spirit [of] coalition-building. We were able to do this by addressing the immediate needs of the fishermen and by focusing on winnable goals."[30]

Long after the Puerto Rican Left organizations dissipated and the movement of the people of Vieques ebbed in the mid-1980s, the Vieques Support Network regrouped in 1999 when a civilian guard, David Sanes-Rodríguez, was killed in Vieques by two stray five-hundred-pound bombs that exploded during Navy target practice. Several other civilians were wounded. The reactions in Puerto Rico and the United States were swift. Student-led strikes at the University of Puerto Rico and protests all over Puerto Rico drew thousands of people, including representatives from all the political parties and many elected officials. For 387 days, two hundred protesters occupied naval land until a predawn raid removed them in May 2000.[31] Former activists of the Puerto Rican Left reacted to the incident by convening a meeting at Local 1199's union hall in New York, and in the months that followed revived their movement to bring national and international attention to Vieques. For the next three years, acts of public protest and civil disobedience spread throughout Puerto Rico and the United States. On December 7, 1999, eleven activists calling themselves *La Brigada David Sanes-Rodriguez,* which included former members of the Young Lords, walked from the New York Public Library to the United Nations. Before the police could intervene, the group chained themselves to the gate in front of the employee entrance of the U.N. building on First Avenue and East 42nd Street. By pre-arrangement, two New York journalists, former Young Lords Juan González and Pablo Guzmán, and a third photographer, José Rosario, recorded the events. Ruben Blades, the Panamanian-born singer, actor, and former presidential candidate, read a statement to the press.[32] As expected, the group was arrested.

Joining the revitalized Vieques Network were grassroots activists, prominent political figures, religious leaders, and celebrities of the arts. Two U.S. Congressional Representatives (Nydia Velázquez from New York and Luis Gutierrez from Illinois) were among those removed from the protesters' camp on naval land in Vieques at the same time Congressman José Serrano (NY) was detained at the White House for his protest in May 2000. When a federal judge refused to issue a temporary restraining order to stop naval exercises in April 2001, attorney and environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., actor James Edward Olmos, Local 1199 President Dennis Rivera, and Reverend Al Sharpton were among one hundred forty people arrested for occupying a restricted area that caused the Navy to delay bombing exercises.[33] The "Vieques Four," referring to Sharpton, New York City Councilman Adolfo Carrión, Jr., State Assemblyman José Rivera, and former state legislator Roberto Ramirez, were sentenced to four-month prison terms along with forty others, including former nationalist prisoner Lolita Lebrón, who by then was in her eighties. Vieques Mayor Dámaso Serrano also spent four months in prison for his part in the protests.[34]

Following the high-profile arrests, volunteers signed up in the United States and Puerto Rico to serve as human shields in Vieques; many served prison terms. The solidarity movement in the United States organized educational forums to give visibility to the events as they occurred. Activists obtained support resolutions from trade unions, faculty associations, and local town and city councils. The U.N. Committee on Decolonization weighed in with a Resolution on June 21, 2001, that

> urged the United States to immediately halt its military drills and manoeuvres on Vieques; return the occupied land to the people of Puerto Rico; halt the persecution, incarcerations, arrests and harassment of peaceful demonstrators; immediately release all persons incarcerated in that connection; respect fundamental rights; and decontaminate the impact areas.[35]

The exposure of the Navy's activities in Vieques through massive demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, hunger strikes, and court cases brought a barrage of national and international criticism that eventually forced the U.S. government to relent and give up the occupied territory in Vieques on May 1, 2003, with a promise to clean the toxic waste and thousands of unexploded bombs it left behind.

The tide of support given to the Vieques movement from many sectors of the United States was a product of the drastic measures taken by the

fishermen and their allies and by the consistent campaign of the solidarity movement.[36] Co-coordinator Sandra Trujillo noted that the ability of activists to work together on the issue of Vieques provided valuable experience that led to future cooperation, especially in New York City:

> There had always been tensions on the Left. This was one of the first successful efforts to put aside differences and develop an independent group. . . . Vieques gave us the opportunity to work together collaboratively. From the onset we presented it as an issue in which you didn't have to have a position on status. However, the case was a blatant way of exposing the colonial relations between the United States and Puerto Rico. But we followed the cue of the fishermen and built a solid movement that we tailored to be broad-based. Our education project reflected this. We focused on the disregard for human life. (Trujillo)[37]

The initial Vieques Solidarity Network formed the basis for the National Congress on Puerto Rican Rights. Many of the Vieques supporters in New York joined the coalition of Latinos, blacks, and whites that aided David Dinkins' mayoral election. In one scholar's assessment, the factors explaining the departure of the Navy in 2003 include the participation of experienced, committed cadres of the Left and the broad reach of the campaign, as well as the post–Cold War "new focus on peace" that provided an opportunity for protest to develop and prevail.[38] More than a decade after the Navy's departure, the people of Vieques continue to suffer the consequences of a half-century of military occupation, with the highest rates of cancer, infant mortality, and overall mortality in Puerto Rico.[39]

Colonialism in the New Millennium

The deplorable conditions that persisted in Vieques long after the Navy's departure in 2003 was only one manifestation of the persistent colonial constraints in Puerto Rico. In 2006, the United Nations paraphrased the testimony of fisherman Ismael Guadalupe Ortiz on the lack of recourse available to the residents:

> [A]lthough the United States Navy had left Vieques on 1 May 2003, no Court in Puerto Rico was able to attend to the thousands of abuses against Puerto Ricans, claiming it was beyond their

> jurisdiction . . . No agency, government branch or department could force the United States Navy to comply. Moreover, the Navy's presence was still felt in the thousands of bomb craters, in the toxic materials dumped on land and in the sea and in the skin diseases, cancer and respiratory problems. The Navy also controlled the clean-up process. . . . The Navy was detonating bombs . . . but refused to use alternative, less toxic methods. From August 2005 to June 2006, a total of 66 detonations had taken place, totaling twenty tons of explosives that had increased the level of pollutants in the atmosphere. . . .[40]

As recently as 2007, the FBI used the Grand Jury to solicit information about the independence movement. The Justice Department issued subpoenas to several individuals in New York to testify in Federal Court, Eastern District, in Brooklyn, before a Grand Jury convened by the FBI/NYPD Anti-Terrorism Task Force.[41] The question of whether or not to testify posed a serious dilemma for those individuals. The precedent of noncooperation by activists of the 1970s suggested that these individuals should refuse as well, despite their lack of organizational affiliation, the difficulty of paying for hefty legal costs for private attorneys, and the unlikelihood that a campaign to quash the subpoenas would have drawn broad support in the post-9/11 political environment. Jail sentences for noncompliance damage careers and reputations, and it is debatable whether the personal sacrifices would have served the goal of increasing mass support for Puerto Rico's independence. The decisions these individuals made were mixed, and personal.

Still, the mobilizations against colonialism are likely to persist as long as Puerto Rico remains a colony of the United States. As recently as 2000, a legal adviser for Treaty Affairs of the U.S. Department of State testified against altering this status before a House of Representatives committee hearing on a resolution that proposed allowing Puerto Rico some degree of sovereignty in international relations:

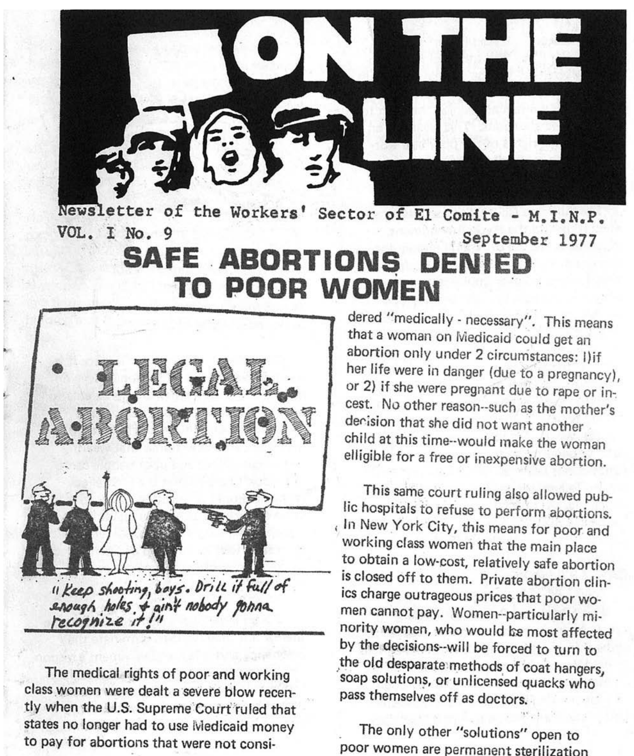
> Under our system of government, the conduct of foreign affairs is constitutionally vested solely in the federal government. The exercise of a parallel and co-existing foreign affairs authority by a sub-federal unit of the United States would not only be unconstitutional, but retrogressive and impractical as well. The existing U.S. territories and commonwealths have different relationships with the Federal Government in terms of the degree of autonomy they exercise

> in the conduct of [their] domestic affairs. . . . At the same time, however, the Federal Government is responsible internationally for the affairs of the territories and commonwealths *in precisely the same manner as for the States of the Union*. . . . The efficacy of U.S. international relations accordingly depends upon the foreign activities of territories and commonwealths, as well as of the States, fitting within the framework of an overall United States foreign policy. . . .[42] (emphasis added)

The unspoken difference between the relationship between the states and the federal government and that of the territories, in both domestic and international affairs, is that the federalist structure of government in the United States allots every state, but not the colonies, voting representation in Congress and the Electoral College. Under the colonial structure, the options for addressing the debt crisis in Puerto Rico in 2015 were severely constrained. Though it is beyond the scope of this book to delve into the current crisis, the concluding chapter touches on the responses to the crisis by contemporary activists.

National Alliances

In the 1970s and early 1980s, alliances between Left and progressive groups and individuals, unions and religious figures, and civil rights organizations brought people together around a host of domestic issues. These alliances provided powerful counternarratives to the mainstream explanations for union-busting, attacks on affirmative action and reproductive rights, and the economic hardships workers faced in the United States. As part of these alliances, El Comité helped to organize mass mobilizations in Washington, D.C., New York, and other cities to call attention to rising unemployment, setbacks to reproductive rights for poor women, escalating militarism, President Reagan's firing of the workers of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), and the need for global disarmament.[43] *Obreros en Marcha* published articles on the similarities between the struggles of Latinos in New York and other working people around the nation and the world, urged support for striking mine workers and rank-and-file movements of auto and steel workers, and criticized reactionary union practices such as the role of the AFL-CIO in the USAID-sponsored American Institute for Free Labor Development in Central America (AIFLD), which was widely believed to be a CIA project to help identify and eliminate Leftist worker-activists in Central America.



ON THE LINE

Newsletter of the Workers' Sector of El Comite - M.I.N.P.

VOL. I No. 9 September 1977

SAFE ABORTIONS DENIED TO POOR WOMEN

LEGAL ABORTION

"Keep shooting, boys. Drill it full of enough holes + ain't nobody gonna recognize it!"

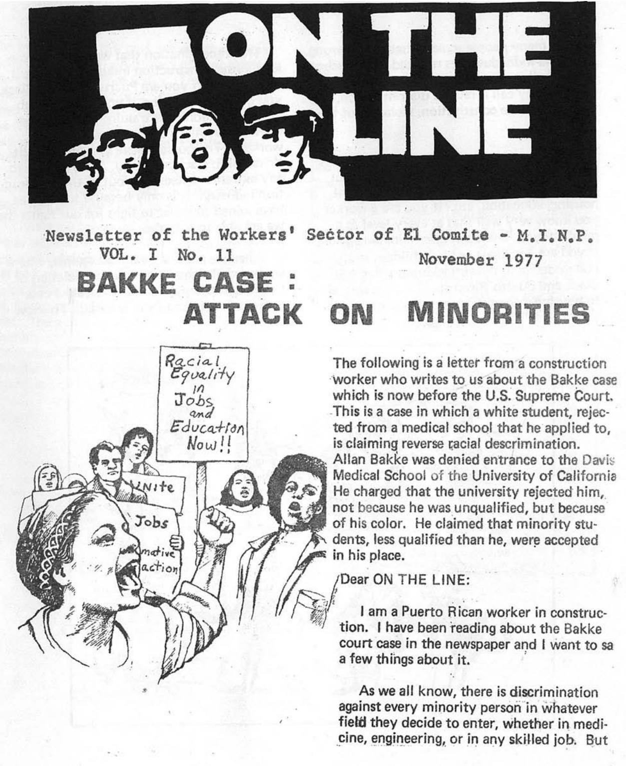
The medical rights of poor and working class women were dealt a severe blow recently when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states no longer had to use Medicaid money to pay for abortions that were not considered "medically - necessary". This means that a woman on Medicaid could get an abortion only under 2 circumstances: 1)if her life were in danger (due to a pregnancy), or 2) if she were pregnant due to rape or incest. No other reason--such as the mother's decision that she did not want another child at this time--would make the woman elligible for a free or inexpensive abortion.

This same court ruling also allowed public hospitals to refuse to perform abortions. In New York City, this means for poor and working class women that the main place to obtain a low-cost, relatively safe abortion is closed off to them. Private abortion clinics charge outrageous prices that poor women cannot pay. Women--particularly minority women, who would be most affected by the decisions--will be forced to turn to the old desparate methods of coat hangers, soap solutions, or unlicensed quacks who pass themselves off as doctors.

The only other "solutions" open to poor women are permanent sterilization

Figure 6.7. *On the Line*, vol. 1, no. 9, September 1977, front cover.

One of the most significant mobilizations occurred in 1978 when the Supreme Court ruling in *University of California v. Bakke* brought together groups on the Left, civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, unions, and students in a protest that drew thousands of people to Washington, D.C., and thousands more to rallies in other cities.[44] In *Bakke*, the Supreme Court decided that establishing racial quotas in admissions criteria at higher education institutions was unconstitutional. The decision represented a major victory for the conservative narrative that blamed affirmative action and an expanded welfare state for economic stagnation. In fact, to those who believed that racial quotas were one mechanism to redress historical exclusion of minorities from higher education, the case was a major setback to affirmative action and the start of a slippery slope leading to further retrenchments in affirmative action policies and programs.



ON THE LINE

Newsletter of the Workers' Sector of El Comite - M.I.N.P.
VOL. I No. 11 November 1977

BAKKE CASE :
ATTACK ON MINORITIES

The following is a letter from a construction worker who writes to us about the Bakke case which is now before the U.S. Supreme Court. This is a case in which a white student, rejected from a medical school that he applied to, is claiming reverse racial descrimination. Allan Bakke was denied entrance to the Davis Medical School of the University of California He charged that the university rejected him, not because he was unqualified, but because of his color. He claimed that minority students, less qualified than he, were accepted in his place.

Dear ON THE LINE:

I am a Puerto Rican worker in construction. I have been reading about the Bakke court case in the newspaper and I want to sa a few things about it.

As we all know, there is discrimination against every minority person in whatever field they decide to enter, whether in medicine, engineering, or in any skilled job. But

Figure 6.8. *On the Line,* vol. 1, no. 11, November 1977, front cover.

Many of the groups that identified themselves as Marxist-Leninists knew each other from their international solidarity work and national alliances and from the exchange of their newspapers. One of the main questions they grappled with was how to unite their small organizations around the country and grow a national movement for deeper social change from the multitude of localized struggles across the country. El Comité was concerned with the same question.

In the mid-1970s, several founding members of El Comité left the organization to live in Puerto Rico. They believed, like some of the Left in Puerto Rico, that national liberation was imminently achievable and that they could make a greater contribution to a workers' and socialist movement there than in the United States.[45] Soon after their departure, First Secretary Federico Lora announced that he, too, would leave permanently for Puerto Rico following a year of preparation by the members for an organizational

Assembly and leadership transition. These losses were difficult for El Comité, and were compounded by the subsequent move to Puerto Rico of another leading member, Orlando Colón. Pedro Rentas and Noel Colón (the first to leave) were worker activists considered by many to be the heart and soul of the organization. Lora was a central figure in the political and ideological growth of the organization, played key roles in local struggles, and represented El Comité in dialogues with other Left organizations. Both Lora and Orlando Colón had recruited many participants and designed the political education program. Once in Puerto Rico, Rentas and Noel Colón became activists and leaders in the Teamsters' Union, with Colón rising to the position of union president.[46] Lora and a former member of the PSP became co-editors of the journal *Pensamiento Crítico* (Critical Thinking), which carried articles analyzing the political and socioeconomic conditions in Puerto Rico, the collaboration of the local government in the colonial structure, and the challenges of the independence movement.[47]

In the year leading to the Assembly, El Comité reorganized its leading bodies, established a somewhat more elaborate internal structure, and evaluated its political work and direction. One of the main questions the participants addressed was how to link their local political struggles to the more radical agenda of building a revolutionary movement. To that end, the Assembly of 1978 decided that the organization would participate in a dialogue with other groups of the U.S. Left aimed toward eventually building a national, revolutionary political party.[48]

Party-Building Dialogue

The party-building discussions in the late 1970s were based on a mutual interest among organizations on the Left to share their experiences, explore paths for unifying their groups, and eventually build a new revolutionary party. The central point on which all of these groups agreed was that the U.S. Communist Party had been seriously weakened by internal divisions and government repression in prior decades, had little legitimacy in communities of color, and therefore could not provide leadership to a multiethnic and multiracial mass movement. In the first of its two-part position paper on party-building, entitled *Party Building and its Relationship to the Masses*, El Comité criticized those organizations of the Marxist-Leninist Left that identified themselves as "vanguard" (or leadership) parties, pointing out that most of these relatively small groups had few connections to working-class communities and were active mainly in anti-imperialist solidarity networks:[49]

> Originating essentially in a morally-outraged petty bourgeoisie consisting largely of students and young professionals, this movement assumed an anti-imperialist character and developed in . . . opposition to reformism and class conciliation. Nevertheless, [it retains strong elements of the] characteristics which it opposed. Its class nature . . . [is a] formidable obstacle to its development. . . . [One] consequence . . . has been that the appeal of anti-imperialism . . . serves mainly to direct individual and joint efforts to the support of struggles outside the country . . . as an easy escape from the frustration of finding no organized means of coping with domestic problems which require leadership and perseverance . . .[50]

Based on this perspective, El Comité joined with approximately twenty-five groups nationwide to discuss strategies for building a movement that might eventually lead to the formation of a more viable revolutionary political party. Meeting over a period of several years, the collective called itself the "anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist trend."[51] When the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee proposed that the "trend" designate itself as an Organizing Committee for an Ideological Center (OCIC), or what they called a "pre-party formation," El Comité and some of the groups declined to join, believing that declaring "ideological" leadership was presumptuous and premature and that much more grassroots organizing and consensus-building were needed before a viable national party organization could be created. The second of its party-building papers explained:

> [W]e came to the conclusion that our strengths and weaknesses as a movement, as well as the state of class-consciousness and self-organization of the working class, sets objective limits to the organizational forms our movement and . . . our [anti-dogmatist, anti-revisionist] trend can assume. . . . One cannot take root in the masses or learn to advance our struggles . . . by debates on party-building at the national level or in preparations for such debates or conferences. This can be achieved through engaging in social practice at the grass roots, i.e., locally, in the neighborhoods, the trade unions, or other forms of mass organizations. . . .
>
> [We must] face the reality that after more than three years of the worst attacks on [workers] since the depression of the 1930s—attacks in which the bosses and the federal and local governments joined forces with such success that corporate profits have risen to

> annual records—class consciousness among workers is still at a relatively low level. But the forces of our "trend," . . . are yet unable to claim any significant experience in struggles which have . . . raised the class consciousness of any sector of the working class. Until we are able to do so, we cannot objectively call ourselves the ideological leaders of the working class or usefully consider changing our level of organization to a more advanced centralized form. If we do so, we will only be deceiving ourselves and guaranteeing our isolation . . .[52]

El Comité proposed as an alternative establishing "centers of communication, cooperation, and coordination," which essentially would be forums in which Left organizations could learn from the experience of others, share resources, and coordinate local and regional work, where possible. Working relationships would be deepened also at the national level through joint activities such as the anti-Bakke mobilization and international solidarity campaigns. Joint political education could provide an additional opportunity for cooperation. The perspective El Comité brought to the party-building groups was based in its origins and grassroots' mobilizing experiences. It also reflected the understanding that effective movements develop organically and require mass participation. These ideas were well received by groups in the "trend," and discussions continued for a few years. By early 1981, however, a split in the membership of El Comité severely weakened and limited the scope of its activities until its official demise in 1984, and the party-building trend itself dissipated.[53]

El Comité's experience in the party-building dialogue points to one of the dilemmas of the revolutionary project of the Left in the 1970s. On one hand, the urge to build a movement by strengthening networks of communication among like-minded organizations was based in the understanding that pockets of protest would not spontaneously produce a larger movement. The attempt to come together was essential. On the other hand, the sectarian debates over ideological nuances drained participants' energy and resources and yielded no tangible results. El Comité wanted to avoid the in-fighting on ideological principles within the Left; therefore, its participation in the "party-building" trend was limited. But the party-building project became a point of political tension within the organization as some leading members thought more focus should be placed on it.[54]

By 1980, El Comité's members had multiple commitments, including local activism, national alliances and solidarity networks, and party-building dialogue, which both socialist scholar Ralph Miliband and historian-activist

Max Elbaum have characterized as the frenetic voluntarism of the Left.[55] Although unacknowledged at the time, the multitude of tasks left little room for reflection on how the organization could remain relevant in a political climate that had changed dramatically over the course of the decade since it formed.[56] Several former members reflected that the leadership became more isolated from the membership and the organization as a whole more distanced from the communities where it originated. These dynamics were among the factors that contributed to the split and disintegration of El Comité, discussed in the next chapter.

7

Cadre Dilemmas

> One great error we committed was to be young. . . . We got caught up in political work, which did not permit us a single moment for reflection.
>
> —Fernández Huidobro[1]

By 1980, the economic, political, and ideological environment in which El Comité became politicized ten years earlier had changed dramatically. Fundamental shifts in U.S. capitalism were accompanied by the resurgence of a conservative political narrative and state policies that reduced the opportunities for successful protest outcomes and underscored the unlikelihood that revolutionary politics would flourish in the United States in the foreseeable future.

Across the nation, deindustrialization and the transition to a service-based economy meant the loss of decent-paying, often unionized jobs, which heightened the insecurity felt by all workers. Conservative politicians blamed affirmative action, entitlement programs, and cultural pluralism at the same time that their policies accelerated the material and ideological assault on workers' rights.[2] The neoliberal championing of the virtues of the free market promoted an image of the corporate sector as freedom riders for universal prosperity. In the 1980 presidential race, Ronald Reagan mocked President Carter's call for people to "tighten our belts" and blamed the federal government's intrusions into the marketplace and bloated social spending for economic stagnation. He resolved to deregulate corporations, cut federal social programs drastically, and "return power to the states" by dismantling rules on entitlement programs. By

the start of the Reagan era in 1981, anti-communist rhetoric justified increased military spending and overt support for military regimes and their paramilitary forces throughout Latin America, as well as covert aid to right-wing insurgencies (as in Nicaragua and Afghanistan).

In New York, the city's business development policies accommodated and encouraged the ascendancy of the finance, insurance, and real estate sectors and escalated the gentrification of Manhattan.[3] Although these sectors led economic growth, the opportunities for good-paying union jobs shrank while low-wage service sectors grew and income inequality intensified. For example, the median family income of Puerto Ricans fell from 53 percent of the median family income of whites in 1970 to 40 percent in 1980; the median family income of African Americans dropped from 69 percent that of whites in 1970 to 57 percent in 1980.[4] The gentrification of Manhattan dispersed many low- and middle-income families living in Manhattan to the outer boroughs and elsewhere. In key neighborhoods of the Lower East Side, Upper West Side, and East Harlem, the community and cultural environment that had provided the physical space for local activists to gain visibility was already shrinking. The Koch administration (inaugurated in 1978) allocated a smaller share of budgetary resources to redistributive services and reduced city hall's interest in quality-of-life concerns of lower income and minority sectors.[5] Even scholars who have characterized Koch's handling of the city's fiscal crisis as "successful" acknowledge that his "rhetoric before the media was seen by some as pandering to white biases or as unnecessarily unsympathetic to minority concerns."[6]

Many of the organizations of the radical Left had already disappeared by 1980. Those remaining saw their political influence diminished, partly through government disruption and sectarian in-fighting and partly due to the scapegoating and derision of "liberals" and the welfare state in the national political discourse. To a lesser or greater degree, the organizations of the radical Left turned inward and became immersed in nuanced ideological debate with each other rather than focused on organizing at the grassroots level.

Despite these conditions, which El Comité-MINP reflected on in the pages of *Obreros en Marcha,* the organization remained committed to its ideals of racial and gender equality, class solidarity, and proletarian revolution.[7] The speech delivered by First Secretary Victor Quintana at the Tenth Anniversary Celebration in 1980 highlighted what he regarded as the organization's greatest strength, "a morality and determination rooted in a commitment to revolutionary change and serving people."[8] Recalling its history, Quintana emphasized El Comité's ongoing commitment to grassroots activism:

> Our experience has shown us the need to have a close relationship with the people, to be a part of their struggles, and to learn from them. In fact it was their struggles that gave rise to MINP. . . . We have consistently tried to impress upon other Marxist-Leninists in this country the importance of rooting our movement [in] the working class and the oppressed—not as an end in itself, but rather as the only concrete basis upon which to build a revolutionary process in this country.[9]

But an abrupt and unexpected split among the members in El Comité-MINP in January 1981 tore the organization apart, leaving members on both sides stunned, emotionally traumatized, and in the moment, angry. In the days and months that followed, the organization disintegrated, within only a few years of the demise of similar organizations of the Third World Left. This chapter reflects on the intertwining of political dilemmas and organizational dynamics in El Comité's last years.

Elevating Form over Substance

The episode that shattered the bonds of one of the most tight-knit, respected, and enduring organizations of the Puerto Rican and Third World Left appears, on its face, trivial. A group of members signed a petition calling on the Central Committee to convene a full assembly of the membership to discuss concerns they had about the political practice of several leading members and to evaluate the leadership. According to El Comité's statement following the split, the petition "alluded to political differences [but] did not state what the cadres considered these to be."[10] In response, those in the Central Committee who were not signatories to the petition expelled the petitioners from the organization because they had violated the established lines of communication. In a view from the other side, a former member of the Central Committee acknowledged that the petition represented a "technical" violation of the structure but said that the petition was made only after frustrated attempts to persuade the leadership to address the conflicts at hand. The petitioners did not anticipate that their action would summon a collective purge.

The rupture was swift and shocking in the moment, especially for long-term members who had been with the organization during times of heated debate when political differences were resolved and members managed to chart

a unified path forward. Long-term friendships among comrades were deeply bruised, though in the years that followed many relationships, both personal and political, were repaired. Following the split, the leading body conceded that it had acted "precipitously and incorrectly" in expelling members without identifying and addressing the underlying issues and that it had not recognized the gravity of growing tensions and dissatisfaction with the direction of the organization.[11]

Although the nature of those tensions remains unclear, the breakup was, in the immediate sense, a consequence of elevating organizational form above the looming political questions. The technical, established lines of communication discouraged open discussion of grievances. Years earlier, Irving Kaplan, the former Communist Party activist and close advisor to the less-experienced activists of El Comité MINP, criticized the organization's structure as "related to the conditions in Russia in 1905 and not New York City in the 1970s." The multiple layers and separate units inhibited the political conversations that were needed to evaluate the shifts in the political landscape and to chart a unified path forward. Following the ousting of nearly half the members, the remaining members floundered. They continued to meet sporadically, but published only two issues of *OEM* after January 1981 and formally disbanded in 1984.

Notwithstanding the limitations of the organization's structure, the democratic centralist model should be viewed in its historical context. It may seem to today's readers that the radical Left exaggerated the need for caution and secrecy that shaped their organizational structures; after all, they were engaged in constitutionally protected political activities. But the political reality at the time told another story. Activists' concerns about government infiltration and harassment, as well as red-baiting, were firmly grounded in the experience of the Left in the United States. Government infiltration and harassment of the Communist Party, labor movements, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther Party, and the Puerto Rican independence groups persisted long after the McCarthy era.[12] By the late 1970s and early 1980s, anti-communist ideology peaked as the United States reinvigorated its Cold War policies and rhetoric, especially in relation to Central America.[13] It was one thing to carry a banner at a rally of thousands in Washington, D.C., against the economic blockade of Cuba or apartheid in South Africa. It was quite another to participate in a local daycare association and risk being red-baited by FBI exposure of one's affiliation with a Left organization.

The Grand Jury was used specifically to try to intimidate Puerto Rican activists (and nonactivists). On several occasions in the mid- to late 1970s, armed clandestine organizations claimed responsibility for violent acts, includ-

OBREROS EN MARCHA

Vol 6, No. 2 Puerto Rican National Left Movement (MINP-El Comite) August/September 1982

Editorial: Disarmament and the Latin Community, p. 2

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On Urban Enterprise Zones . . . . p. 4
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U.S. War Games in Caribbean . . . . p. 7

Figure 7.1. *Obreros en Marcha*, vol. 6, no. 2, August/September 1982, front cover.

ing random bombings in New York and Chicago and an attack on a group of U.S. Navy personnel in the town of Sábana Seca, Puerto Rico. In *Obreros en Marcha,* El Comité-MINP criticized these as "acts of terrorism which neither deal with nor meet the needs of present conditions [and which] tend to isolate the revolutionary forces further . . . from the masses."[14] It lamented

that these actions provided "the state with an excuse to continue harassing the revolutionary movement."[15]

The harassment took the form of a series of Grand Jury investigations, in which affiliates of all of the pro-independence organizations as well as never-affiliated individuals were subpoenaed or threatened with appearance subpoenas. El Comité suspected that FBI agents followed members and ransacked several homes, and FBI files later obtained confirmed the surveillance of El Comité's headquarters. FBI agents sought information about members' personal lives from neighbors, building superintendents, and employers, all of which El Comité described as "a campaign of character assassination . . . intended to create an atmosphere of fear among our fellow workers and the community [to discourage] any type of activity which is critical of government policies."[16] The publicly staged government investigations created the illusion that all those with pro-independence sentiments supported random acts of violence and implied that engaging in any form of protest was cause for government scrutiny.

When a person testifies before a Grand Jury, no legal representation is permitted in the room, and there are few parameters to the range of investigators' questions. In 1978, the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee formed the Community Grand Jury Campaign to mobilize activists and provide legal counsel in the face of Grand Jury "fishing expeditions." The position taken by pro-independence organizations in the 1970s not to cooperate with grand juries was based on the view that most individuals were subpoenaed not because they were suspected of having information relevant to the stated purpose of the investigation but because the FBI used the Grand Jury as a means to harass and discourage association with the independence movement. In the cadre organizations, rules that discouraged discussion of internal grievances among members of different chapters were intended to shield members from unwarranted scrutiny.

Government harassment of the Left reached into other solidarity movements as well. In an undated informational document, the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) reported FBI harassment of individuals who traveled to Nicaragua after the Sandinista victory to exchange ideas with economic development organizations. The FBI questioned co-workers about the travelers' activities, implying they might be involved in illegal actions. Also, according to the CCR,

> [t]he FBI's massive investigation of [the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, CISPES] was carried out under [Executive Order] 12333 . . . as a window to spy on other Cen-

> tral American groups including the Network in Solidarity with Guatemala, the Nicaraguan Network, the Thomas Merton Center, and the Central America Mobilization Network. While the FBI produced not a shred of evidence of wrongdoing on the part of CISPES during its five-year investigation, it managed to amass 17 volumes of files on CISPES. . . . [H]eavily deleted portions of these files . . . show that the FBI . . . regularly attended and photographed demonstrations and meetings, recorded license plate numbers of participants, in addition to conducting surreptitious interviews and placing informants. . . . Agents . . . invaded college campuses and visited employers and family members explaining that they were investigating terrorist threats.[17]

The cadre organizations were designed to protect the membership against random intrusions by government authorities. Although the repression in the United States did not approximate the daily threat of abduction, torture, and death faced by activists in authoritarian Latin American regimes, radicals in the United States risked their jobs, their reputations in communities and schools, and in some cases their freedom and their lives, for the ideals they espoused.[18] The democratic centralist organization tried to shield its members from unwarranted threats by limiting discussions between members outside of established channels so that informants would have greater difficulty gathering information that could be distorted to discredit members and even compromise their safety. The question for activists, which remained unresolved in the period, was how to foster a democratic culture of open and honest discussion while ensuring a safe space for participants. The ostracism of the Left in the national political discourse has been a persistent quandary for socialists in the United States.

Political Dilemmas

Several other aspects of El Comité's political practice and internal dynamics weakened its cohesiveness in the years leading up to the 1981 split. The frenetic pace of multiple endeavors that exhausted members kept the organization as a whole from seriously assessing the changing political environment that the organization wrote about in *Obreros en Marcha* or from confronting emerging political differences. Members disagreed on what the priorities of the organization should be, which some later attributed to cultural, class, or racial differences. Moreover, the longstanding opposition to electoral politics excluded El Comité

from a popular arena in which it could have presented alternative perspectives and contributed to a broader discussion of diverse paths to democratization.

Multiple Endeavors; Minimal Reflection

El Comité was formed based on the premise that protest movements grow from the bottom up. Carmen Martell, a member from 1970 through 1984 who served on the Central Committee and Political Commission and as Secretary of Organization, recalled that, "at the beginning, we were involved in discussions about how you integrate and what you [learn] from the masses."[19] However, as a revolutionary organization, El Comité inevitably became involved in the dynamic wherein even small groups on the Left felt compelled to educate themselves about and take positions on political conditions and events around the country and the world. Because of their overarching worldview and commitment to solidarity, they felt morally obligated to launch political campaigns for change that reached beyond their immediate communities and workplaces. The dynamic was not inherently flawed—practice and theory building created the knowledge that grew new practice. The challenge was to simultaneously stay close to the lives and struggles of people and build bridges and connections that would grow a national movement for fundamental, progressive change.

By 1980, a few of the leading members traveled more frequently to meet with affiliated members outside of New York—in Camden, Washington, D.C., and Boston—and to dialogue with other organizations or attend national conferences. Others were involved in important solidarity work related to Puerto Rico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Cuba, and South Africa, and more. Those who remained immersed in local struggles had to share the attention of the leadership and the organization overall with all of these endeavors. One former member who represented El Comité in a campaign for health care recalled feeling frustrated about inadequate feedback. Others thought El Comité was too involved in supporting Puerto Rico's independence movement at the expense of community and U.S.-based struggles.[20] In any case, in the later years there was little organization-wide discussion of the conditions and needs in the various neighborhoods, or of tactical questions of how to link and escalate localized protests. The situation mirrored precisely one of the flaws El Comité had observed about other organizations in its earlier critique of the party-building trend:

> The more Marxist and rhetorical we got, the more we complicated the task. We neglected to look at our experiences in the Bronx,

> Long Island, the Lower East Side, and to say "let's see how the organization can learn from our role there." (Quintana)[21]

In retrospect, former First Secretary Quintana thought the organization did not pay enough attention to what was happening in the Puerto Rican community or to developing a practical and useful strategic response:

> We were being helpful at the margins but not in a strategic sense. We tried to respond to the exploitation and oppression, whether in the South Bronx or Lower East Side, but we did not discuss how we could play an effective role in helping those communities gain political consciousness or build non-traditional leadership. Those were challenges that, at best, we were trying to grapple with, but not enough as a group. Our political studies were disconnected from that conversation. (Quintana)[22]

A similar observation can be made of the student sector. Throughout the 1970s, FEP was active on campuses throughout New York City and Long Island, in student movements that demanded more inclusive academic programs and better services and in support of progressive faculty. However, according to former Central Committee member Jaime Suárez, although the leadership of El Comité followed FEP's work on the different campuses, a deeper discussion about developing a strategic vision for youth activism in New York and the United States did not take place.[23]

The scattering of cadres among a plethora of political activities did not help. The frenetic pace exhausted members and sometimes strained relationships. Suárez, who also served for a time as Secretary of Organization, recalled that in the later years too many members were no longer involved in local issues and instead participated in solidarity networks comprised primarily of the Left or performed mainly internal functions, such as publishing *Obreros en Marcha*. The newspaper had become a sophisticated political organ, widely distributed within the Left and its periphery as well as door-to-door in neighborhoods in New York City and suburban towns of Long Island. But it took a lot of resources, both human and financial, to publish it consistently. Fewer resources and time were spent on educational materials like chapter bulletins that focused on local issues; consequently, these were published only sporadically.

Given the changed political climate, it is doubtful the organization would have survived even had it reflected more and made better strategic choices. Like similar radical organizations of the period, El Comité-MINP was not

organizationally or ideologically inclined in the early 1980s to attempt to coordinate with other groups (such as PSP) the type of large-scale, unified response in New York City that might have offered, at the very least, greater vocal opposition to budget cuts and retrenchment policies. Many individual activists tried to do just that by rallying residents, co-workers, and students to fight cuts in day care, health, and education. By this point, however, with some of the leaders from the formative years having left for Puerto Rico, and with members scattered among numerous local endeavors and international solidarity campaigns, El Comité became increasingly ineffective locally with no consensus on how to move forward. In fact, in the months prior to the split, debates were occurring in the Central Committee over what types of political activities were "reformist" (with a pejorative connotation) versus "revolutionary." Some thought members of certain chapters were too entrenched in local politics, behaving like "reformists" reminiscent of the old CPUSA and diluting the revolutionary program of El Comité. They thought that greater effort should be given to the party-building dialogue within the Left.[24] Whatever the meaning of the jargon in the specific contexts, these debates reflected the level of abstraction and the shift from bottom-up to top-down dialogue that had affected similar organizations.

Paradoxes of Diversity

One of the most complex questions about El Comité's later years is how growing ethnic and racial diversity and, to some extent, different class origins affected its internal dynamics and politics. The answers of former members ranged from "little effect" to "a transformative effect," with both positive and negative assessments. El Comité's initial political identity was shaped by its roots in Puerto Rican communities. Like other organizations of the Third World left, political identity came from shared experiences of racial and class oppression, which produced a counternarrative that called for political self-organization rather than integration into white-dominated organizations.

Why white activists joined El Comité has several answers. From the organization's perspective, El Comité saw no contradiction in including among its ranks individuals who were committed to its political perspective and program, including its support for Puerto Rico's independence, and who wanted to apply their skills and experience to grow the organization and contribute to a multinational movement in the United States. From the individuals' perspectives, some were involved in grassroots struggles where El Comité was also present, admired the organization, and grew close to its members. In other instances,

personal relationships or life experience brought them to the organization. But more whites joined as El Comité expanded its presence in solidarity movements, reflecting the pool of potential recruits in those arenas. Some of the recruits from solidarity networks had socioeconomic backgrounds that differed from the majority in El Comité. They were mainly (but not entirely) intellectuals, considered to be "theoretically sophisticated," very supportive of the pro-independence movement, and enthusiastic about party-building. Their path to becoming full members of the organization was atypically swift because of their political experience within the Left and history of commitment to the revolutionary movement.

All of the newer recruits to El Comité from the Left signed the petition calling for a full membership meeting, but so did longstanding members from the early 1970s. Those who did not join the petition were also somewhat diverse, racially and in terms of the length of time spent in the organization. Thus, there was not a clear demarcation on the political tensions and procedural questions along lines directly traceable to class, race, or ethnicity. But all of the newer recruits developed their theoretical orientation, political priorities, and values prior to joining El Comité. While this may not have posed a problem for some members, in an interview that appeared elsewhere, Elizabeth Figueroa, formerly with the Bronx Chapter and member of the Central Committee and *FEP*, commented that

> [g]enerally, the white members had a completely different outlook from us. When we talked about Puerto Rico, Chile, Nicaragua, etc., it came from an understanding of their realities because of the cultural similarities. If a woman could not come to a meeting because of problems with her husband, we all understood. We said, "That's her husband, we've got to work with him," whereas white members said, "You know, he's this, he's that . . ." [I]f I had to do it all over again, I would not allow any white members in the organization.[25]

On another occasion, Figueroa said she believed there were exceptions to her view that there should not have been racial/ethnic diversity in El Comité.[26] Other former members of El Comité disagreed that ethnic or class differences were factors in the organization's split or that the political cohesiveness of the organization suffered from diversity. However, Figueroa's position that the organization should not have included whites reflects the fundamental ideology of the Black and Brown power movements of the late 1960s that self-organization

was essential in communities of color in order to resist racial, class, and ethnic subordination in the United States.

There were no apparent racial schisms throughout El Comité's history or at the time of the split. The political relationships and friendships that endured in the subsequent decades crossed racial and ethnic lines and were rooted in a shared political perspective on race and class and hopes for a deeper democracy in the United States. But the experience of racialized oppression was not shared. It is important to acknowledge, at the very least as an ongoing dilemma of social movements in the United States, the difficulties encountered in trying to build diverse, multiethnic, mass movements in the context of an extremely segregated society, where racial oppression and white-skin privilege are not fully understood by many of the activists themselves and are often ignored or denied in society at large.

Rejection of Electoral Politics

El Comité did not participate in electoral politics, meaning its members did not run for political office or endorse or campaign for political candidates at any level of government. This opposition was rooted in the lesson El Comité drew from the housing movement of 1970 that local politicians, often supported in their electoral bids by working-class constituents, abandoned (or never represented) the needs and concerns of those constituents once they were elected to office and became part of the city's public and private sector elites:

> We came out of an experience, in the late 60s and early 70s, where, for the most part, political machineries were corrupt; our own community distrusted politicians. We did not want to associate in any way, shape, or form with the political parties or the formal political process because we were imbued with that sense of being pure; we wanted to be honest. (Suárez)[27]

Like many organizations of the Third World Left, El Comité viewed elections as both corrupt and an institution that legitimized the democratic façade through which elites perpetuated anti-worker and racist policies and that reinforced the misconception that well-intentioned individuals could effect structural change if elected to office. The Democratic and Republican Parties were seen as two sides of the same coin, legitimizing capitalism and imperialism. Although demanding specific reforms of elites was a necessary part of building a broader political movement, expecting the state to function independently, as a neutral

arbiter of conflicting and irreconcilable differences, was contrary to the Marxist view that the state reproduced the dominance of the bourgeoisie. *OEM* often criticized the two-party lock on the winner-take-all electoral system as blocking an electoral path to socialist representation in government. The CIA-assisted coup that overthrew Chilean President Allende in 1973 lent credence to the belief that the repressive arm of the state would take extreme measures against even those who adhered to electoral procedures of liberal democracies but tried to use political institutions to pursue working class ideals.

But by 1980, especially at the local level where there was growing disgust (even though fragmented) with the Koch Administration, some activists began to consider electoral challenges as a potential path for asserting progressive influence in government. In its 1981 *Statement on the Division in El Comité-MINP,* the organization wrote that the issue of electoral participation was one of the key questions that needed to be considered in the ensuing period. Though the organization did not last long enough to address the question as a group, many individuals came to embrace the view that elections provided an important forum for pressing a progressive agenda for several reasons. First, the revolutionary party-building movement (or any party-building movement of a social democratic or socialist nature) in the United States in the 1980s was not practical. Second, conservatives were using electoral and legislative processes quite successfully to promote regressive candidates and policies that attacked even the minor gains made during the prior two decades in labor rights, affirmative action, housing, and social programs, and, internationally, especially in relation to Central America. Following twelve years of Republican control of the White House and the rise of the Reagan Democrats in Congress, more liberal and even moderate Democratic Party candidates for national office became more attractive to Left activists; the concept of "the lesser of two evils" took on greater significance. Third, participants in various campaigns were facing the question whether to participate in electoral politics at the local level. For example, the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights debated whether to participate in school board elections and other campaigns and whether to endorse policies of local legislatures and council members.

When El Comité split in 1981, some members turned their attention to their prospects for steady employment and careers. Through networks established over the years, former members knew individuals working in government institutions and agencies and nonprofit organizations. Several joined Manhattan City Council Member Ruth Messinger's staff, while others worked for Manhattan Borough President David Dinkins in the mid- to late 1980s.[28]

Demise of the Third World Left

By the end of the 1970s, organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords that had inspired the Left of the 1970s had dissolved or splintered into smaller groups.[29] Many of the groups they influenced were themselves weakened or destroyed by in-fighting, government repression, and the burnout of intense activism. In her study of the Third World Left in Los Angeles, Laura Pulido describes the nearly identical experience of CASA, a Chicano Marxist organization in Los Angeles, whose internal tensions stemmed from differences on revolutionary rhetoric and political practices. The undemocratic practices fostered by an elaborate structure and sectarianism, as well as police surveillance, inhibited CASA from resolving internal conflicts, and it dissolved in 1978.[30] Similarly, the Asian American group East Wind, also a cadre organization involved in community activism and party-building, faced internal conflict arising from the shift in emphasis from community action to "study, theory, and political development."[31] One of the major conflicts in the Black Panther Party occurred around the question of how involved its chapters in California should be in electoral politics. According to Pulido, the extensive hierarchy of democratic centralism made it unable to resolve this and other conflicts productively.

In all of the Left organizations of the 1970s, including the PSP, El Comité-MINP, CASA, East Wind, and the organizations Max Elbaum discusses in his study of the "new communist movement," the concern with theoretical development and party-building at the expense of practical reflection on grassroots mobilization distanced them from the population they sought to reach. [32]

José "Che" Velázquez makes two relevant observations about the demise of the U.S. Branch of the PSP. First, he attributes PSP's rapid decline in the late 1970s to "its failure to develop a clear and consistent political theory and practice for organizing the Puerto Rican community in the United States."[33] Zoilo Torres, another former member of PSP, made a similar observation.[34] Although, unlike PSP, El Comité was not accountable to any organization in Puerto Rico, and in principle it remained committed to organizing Puerto Ricans in the United States, by the end of the 1970s it was distracted from developing a strategic and longer term presence in local communities. The second parallel with the PSP concerns the "intensive involvement of the U.S. branch" of PSP in the ideological debates over differences among the leadership in Puerto Rico.[35] El Comité's theoretical and ideological debates occurred mainly in the party-building trend in its later years, but throughout the 1970s ideological differences within the Puerto Rican Left itself sometimes turned

into intransigence, which weakened their prospects for building a unified movement, whether concerning the status of Puerto Rico or the conditions of Puerto Ricans in the United States.

El Comité's final years reveal the complexities faced by the revolutionary Left, especially in organizations where abstract principles sometimes hindered their ability to develop effective strategies for mounting political challenges in the more conservative and competitive national environment of the late 1970s and 1980s. In the next chapter, the book's conclusion, I turn to some final reflections on El Comité's history and the path taken by some of its former activists.

8

Conclusion

Radical Imagination, Radical Humanity

In the 1970s, El Comité-MINP and similar community-based groups of the Third World Left represented a wave of "democratization from below," in protests across the country for fundamental rights to decent housing, quality education, health care, and jobs—a radical agenda in the United States. In New York, activists opposed gentrification in their neighborhoods and racism in public schools. Workers challenged discriminatory hiring practices, and students demanded college access and curriculum reform. Cutbacks in community health care services were fiercely resisted. These campaigns resonated widely in communities throughout New York and in some instances elicited reforms that improved people's lives. El Comité played a key role in these struggles, articulating the grievances and aspirations of the communities where they were rooted and building alliances with other minorities and progressive whites. The activists of El Comité found their greatest momentum and successes when they stayed close to the people they wanted to influence. In all of their struggles, the humanity, humility, and message of El Comité's members resonated widely, contributing to its growth and longevity.

Later in the decade, when fiscal budget crisis hurt minorities most, when electoral coalitions shifted and competition for resources intensified, the Coalition in Defense of Puerto Rican and Hispanic Rights built bridges across various sectors to prevent the closing of a community hospital. The SUNY Old Westbury strikes and, more significantly, the repeated episodes of civil

disobedience in the Vieques movement were classic movement strategies that worked. At the same time, economic contraction, urban decay, fiscal crisis, and the upsurge in conservative political narratives exacerbated racial antagonisms and competition throughout New York City and the nation, making militant movements harder to mobilize and sustain.

The cadre organizational form of El Comité and similar organizations in the 1970s was strenuous in the nonrevolutionary environment of the United States. The demands on members were so stringent, they could not last more than five or six years without consequences to families and career paths. As El Comité undertook the multiple tasks for which a larger political organization might have been better equipped, the members found little time to assess their work and develop a strategic vision for a new era. The bureaucratic structure eventually inhibited efforts to evaluate the political experience they had accumulated and to engage in dynamic discussions about how to adapt to changing conditions and remain relevant to the people they wanted to mobilize. By the end of the 1970s, political tensions simmered and, in the absence of an open debate, the organization could not survive.

However, to extract from the experience of El Comité-MINP and the organizations of the Third World Left solely that their organizational forms had weaknesses or that proletarian revolution was idealistic would be to miss the democratizing influence of the movements they mobilized. The achievements in housing and bilingual education, the battles against racism in the media, and the struggles for community control in schools and fairness in hiring practices showed that people were motivated to join and support protesters, that disruptive tactics worked, and that these movements indeed made gains in fighting racism and inequality. While democratic centralism may have inhibited communication among members, it is important to recall that government repression, both confirmed and suspected, reinforced the need to protect members from random harassment and persecution.

In its final days, some individuals in El Comité-MINP questioned whether electoral politics in New York City should be reconsidered as an arena for pursuing greater political influence. At all levels of government, conservatives were shredding domestic social policy. In foreign policy, neoconservatives were stepping up military support for repressive regimes and tightening the economic blockade against Cuba. El Comité did not endure long enough to address the question, but some former members came to embrace electoral politics as one forum for pressing a progressive agenda. Although many continued to doubt that the electoral arena alone provided a viable path for

fundamental change, most acquired an appreciation for the multitude of useful strategies for building social justice movements. All those I interviewed affirmed their conviction that challenges to existing power relations are most effective when large numbers of people come together in direct, contentious actions to transform those relations.

After El Comité dissolved, officially in 1984 but in practical terms in 1981, its former members and friends remained politically active and went on to participate in a variety of social movements, often identifying as "progressives" but still committed to their beliefs in racial justice, gender equality, liberation for Puerto Rico, and an economic system based on fairness, cooperation, and egalitarianism. Individuals on both sides of "the split" reconnected, as friends and activists, bound by the values that were critical to them in their youth. Through the years, they found each other in campaigns that addressed many of the same issues that concerned El Comité in the 1970s, and new ones. As Lourdes García said, "the commitments we made when we were young shaped our values," and neither the values nor the commitments dissolved into thin air with the demise of one organization.[1] For García's years of dedication to the Puerto Rican community, the *Comité Noviembre*, a well-known nonprofit organization in New York, presented her with its *Lo Mejor de Nuestra Comunidad* Award in 2014. Besides advocating for Puerto Ricans in the United States, she remains engaged in campaigns for women's rights, supports delegations from Vietnam who come to talk about the devastating impact of agent orange and napalm dropped during the Vietnam War, and continues to fight for the freedom of Oscar López Rivera, the longest-held Puerto Rican political prisoner in the United States. Half of the "Thirty-five Women for Oscar," who hold a rally on the last Sunday of every month in different communities in New York, are veterans of the 1970s Puerto Rican Left.

In Puerto Rico, Federico Lora became a well-known attorney and independence activist, and Pedro Rentas was a respected organizer in the Teamsters' Union for several decades. There remains a gaping hole in the lives of former El Comité members from the tragedy of Noel Colón's murder in 2001 while he was President of Teamsters Local 901 in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico is still a colony of the United States, and the current debt crisis is another manifestation of the colonial relationship that constrains the country's options and exacerbates the crippling economic conditions that underlie the most recent migration of nearly 800,000 Puerto Ricans to the United States. With the newly formed "Call to Action," many individuals from the Puerto Rican Left of the 1970s are among the organizers and

participants in a burgeoning movement to denounce the crisis and expose the colonial, structural impediments to resolutions. Frank Velgara, who heads the organization *Pro-Libertad,* Lourdes García, Esperanza Martell, and Kathe Karlson, to name a few, continue to work with former members of the PSP and Young Lords to educate younger people about the colonial constraints that obstruct Puerto Rico's path to economic and political recovery. They are joined by many of their children, grandchildren, and friends. Máximo Colón, whose photographs of movements of which he was a part appear throughout this book, continues his work of providing the images of contemporary social justice movements.

As for their career paths, the former activists of El Comité moved on to work in city government, public schools, and nonprofit organizations; acquired law, medical, and academic degrees; and attained leadership positions in their fields. Esperanza Martell teaches community organizing at Hunter College and has been recognized by many social justice movements for her lifelong human rights activism. Lillian Jimenez is an independent filmmaker, producer, educator, and media activist. Her film about Puerto Rican educator and founder of ASPIRA, *Antonia Pantoja ¡Presente!,* has achieved wide acclaim. Carmen Martell worked in the Borough President's Office under Ruth Messinger and thereafter became the Human Resources Director for UniteHere. Ana Juarbe recently retired from her position as the HealthStart Program Manager for the City of New York. Kathy Gruber was the Executive Director of the NENA Health Care Clinic on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and Kathe Karlson served New York City children as a bilingual social worker with the Department of Education for over thirty years. Nancy Sutherland is a respected social worker in an alternative high school in Freeport. There are many others with similar histories of service.

In the late 1980s, several former members joined Latinos for Dinkins in a progressive coalition with African Americans to elect David Dinkins as Mayor. The citywide alliance between African Americans and Puerto Ricans that campaigned for Mayor Dinkins included many individuals from the revolutionary organizations of the 1970s. It was an opportunity to work toward racial unity, which had long been a goal of El Comité, and to influence government policy in New York City. After the election, veterans of El Comité held prominent positions in the Dinkins Administration of 1990 to 1993 and afterward moved to other areas of service and activism. Victor Quintana became the Director of the Office of Constituent Services under Dinkins and then the Senior Program Officer and Assistant Director of the

Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program. Debra Pucci was the Director of European American Affairs in the Dinkins administration, worked with SEIU Local 1199 and the Department of Environmental Protection, and in 2015 was appointed Chief of Staff to George Gresham, President of Local 1199. Sandra Trujillo served as Deputy Director of the Mayor's Office for Children and Families and later became the Deputy Director of the Children's Defense Fund of New York. In 2004, the New York City Council presented Trujillo with a Proclamation for Outstanding Contributions to the Lives of Children, which was a first-time award to honor Mexican Americans "whose contributions have made a lasting difference . . . within the Hispanic community, and the community at large."

At the risk of exhausting readers, my aim in this selective biography of activists is to say that El Comité's most significant legacy lies in the sense of empowerment and liberation that transformed the lives of its members and those they touched with an alternative vision of a more just world. It was a movement of radical political imagination and radical humanity. In the words of a founder and former leader of El Comité, "It really was like Che said, 'The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.' "[2]

New Counternarratives

Some years ago, Daniel Colón listened while his mother, Maria Collado, talked with me about her involvement in the housing and bilingual education movements and the workplace activism of his father, Noel Colón. I asked Daniel what he thought was important for his generation to draw from those experiences. In his reply, he used language that, in the 1980s and 1990s, mainstream political actors in both Republican and Democratic Parties attempted to expunge from the national lexicon:

> It's not about "them" keeping us down. It's about us standing up. There's a need to fight for what you're *entitled* to. You're *entitled* to have a good job, a good life; your kids are *entitled* to a good education, whether or not you come from humble beginnings and public housing like my mom. From the stories of my parents and my own observations, I get the message. It's kind of like, you know how the saying goes, "the more things change, the more they stay the same." There's always a need to stand up.[3]

In 2016, as gentrifying New York City rapidly proceeds toward the "gating" of Manhattan and parts of the outer boroughs for the wealthy, and as the battles against excessive police force and for decent wages, health care, and quality education rage on, studies of community-based resistance movements in the 1970s strike at historical amnesia by recalling that social conditions are neither stagnant nor the product of inevitable, unchangeable forces of evolution. People can and do take an active role in trying to shape or change them. Contemporary movements for social justice may not speak in terms of class struggle or proletarian revolution, but they can draw lessons from the Marxist-Leninists of the 1970s who believed that fighting "materialism, militarism, and racism," as Martin Luther King, Jr., phrased it a year before his murder, was a practical and necessary basis for multiracial unity. The potential for powerful movements for democratization "from below" lies in a similar unity—between Latinos who fight for human and civil rights, African Americans and others who continue to suffer and resist police brutality, and all who share a vision of social, political, and economic equality at home and abroad.

Despite the victory in 2008 of the first African American president and the massive support for "democratic socialist" Bernie Sanders for the Democratic Party nomination in the 2016 presidential race, mainstream political space in the United States has become more constricted in light of the Supreme Court's wholesale surrender of the political system to the wealthiest individuals and corporations. It is true, as Frances Fox Piven argues, that with relatively little sustained exercise of disruptive power by subordinate groups, deep transformations in power relations have been rare.[4] In an environment where transnational corporations continue to dominate the main ideological institutions that tend to justify and to reinforce subordination, how do people develop alternative explanations, the will, and the strategies to challenge elite policies? The answers lie in specific historical circumstances, in the complex processes and interactions that include conscious actors in collective interchange, who develop their capacities organically, and in interaction with other organizations, intellectuals, and theoretical and ideological doctrines.

The experiences related in this book show that when popular movements stood up to challenge dominant elites and their ideologies, they were effective. El Comité's members were organizers who resisted racism, sexism, and the harsh and oppressive material conditions of working people and their families. At the same time, they struggled to link local struggles to the inequality inherent in U.S. capitalism and the racism that obstructed (and continues to obstruct) class unity. The history of Puerto Rican protests against racialization and economic

marginalization is especially important as today's political discourse sharpens in what are, at times, racially antagonistic and fractious tones over the conditions and rights of new immigrants. The classic slogan adopted by El Comité-MINP and progressive movements worldwide captures the continuity of the quest for social justice: *la lucha continua* / the struggle continues.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. Chapter 3 discusses the differences between El Comité and other organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in the 1970s.

2. *Unidad Latina* vol. 3, no. 6 (December 22, 1973).

3. "A Call to the Puerto Rican Community, *Siembra*, Bulletin of MINP-El Comité, September 1981, 2.

4. See, for example, Haslip-Viera, "Evolution of Latino Community"; Rodríguez and Sánchez Korrol, eds., *Historical Perspectives*; Sánchez Korrol, *Colónia to Community*; and Vega (ed. Iglesias), *Memorias*.

5. Beginning in 1960, Puerto Ricans were counted in the U.S. Census Bureau decennial census as a category of "race," separate from whites and blacks.

6. Cruz, "Pluralism and Ethnicity," 57.

7. Cruz, *Identity and Power*, xi.

8. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Socio-Economic Profile*.

9. In the *Atlas of Stateside Puerto Ricans*, Falcón contrasts the relatively low voter registration and turnout among Puerto Ricans in the United States with the high rate of electoral participation in Puerto Rico. See, also, *Voter Registration and Turnout in Federal Elections by Race/Ethnicity* 1972–1996 in "Current Population Reports, Series P20, U.S. Bureau of Census," indicating that "Hispanic" voter registration ranges between 30 and 40 percent and turnout between 20 and 30 percent of the voting age population.

10. On the reluctance of the Left to participate in electoral politics, see Epstein, "Marginality of American Left."

11. Edgardo Meléndez, "Vito Marcantonio, Puerto Rican Migration," 204.

12. Denis-Rosario, "Asserting Their Rights," 60.

13. The recent study by Song-Ha Lee, *Building a Latino Civil Rights Movement,* recognizes the intensity of Black–Puerto Rican political association not only in civil rights struggles but in the alignment of Black and Puerto Rican nationalist groups in the 1960s and early 1970s.

14. The impact of the Nationalist Party on activists is discussed in Chapter 3.

15. Zoilo Torres, interview with author, August 12, 2015, New York.

16. Chapter 5 contains a full account of SUNY Old Westbury's "mission" to recruit a diverse student body; the story of Melendez's trip to Chicago appears in Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets*, 83–85.

17. The first Young Lords Organization originated in Chicago in 1966. The New York Young Lords Party formed in 1969 and, after a split in 1971, part of the group formed the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO).

18. Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets*; Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 230–34.

19. Rodríguez-Morazzani, "Political Cultures," 25.

20. Aronowitz, *Death and Rebirth*, 102–04; Cruz, *Identity and Power.*

21. Cruz, "Pluralism and Ethnicity," 58 (emphasis added).

22. Buhle, *Marxism in the United States*. For a contrasting account, see Berger, *Hidden 1970s*.

23. Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 234.

24. Wanzer-Serrano, *New York Young Lords*.

25. Gandy, "Between Borinquen and Barrio."

26. Sánchez, *Boricua Power*, 207–08.

27. For an accounting of the literature up to 1980 on radical activism of Puerto Ricans, see Angelo Falcón, "Bibliographic Essay." More recent studies include Gandy, "Between Borinquen and Barrio"; Lee, *Latino Civil Rights Movement*; Sánchez, *Boricua Power*; Schneider, "Framing Puerto Rican Identity"; and Torres and Velázquez, eds., *Puerto Rican Movement*.

28. See, for example, Aparicio, *Dominican Americans*; Marquez, *Mexican American Social Movement Organizations*; Muñoz, *Youth, Identity, Power*; Newton, *War Against Panthers.*

29. Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, Left,* explores radical politics based on differential experiences with racism as well as the similarities and interethnic relations of the Black Panther Party, *El Centro de Acción Social y Autónomo* (CASA), and East Wind in Los Angeles; Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero!*, examines nationalism and class in the identity of the Brown Berets, the Chicano Moratorium Committee, *La Raza Unida*, and *El Centro de Acción Social y Autónomo* (CASA) in Los Angeles; for accounts of Black activism in the period other than the Black Panther Party, see the Detroit Revolutionary Movements Collection, 1968–1976 at the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

30. Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*; Whalen and Flacks, *Beyond the Barricades*, 258.

31. The Communist Party of the United States of America Records: Chile Solidarity Collection 1963–1979, at the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, contains documentation on the National Coordinating Center in Solidarity with Chile. Other solidarity networks included Non-Intervention in Chile (NICH), the Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee, the Nicaragua Solidarity Network, and the Committee in Support of the People of El Salvador (CISPES).

32. In *Revolution in the Air,* Elbaum uses the term "new communist movement" to refer collectively to the radical political organizations of the 1970s. A glossary of eighteen of these organizations appears in the Appendix to his book.

33. Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*, 240–42.

34. Therborn, *Ideology of Power*.

35. Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*; Collins, "Black Feminist Thought"; Parenti, *Democracy for the Few*.

36. Gramsci, "Intellectuals," in *Prison Notebooks*, 12–13; Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

37. Gramsci, "Study of Philosophy," in *Prison Notebooks*, 334.

38. McSherry, *Chilean New Song,* 8.

39. Carroll and Ratner, *Social Movements and Counter-Hegemony*, 7 (italics in original).

40. Ibid., 8.

41. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*.

42. Ibid., 165.

43. Pulido, "Race, Class, Political Activism," 764–65.

Chapter 2

1. Pedro Rentas, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan.

2. Lyford, *Airtight Cage*.

3. Wilson, "Urban Revitalization," 37.

4. Luis Ithier, interview with author, March 18, 2006, New York.

5. *Unidad Latina* vol. 1, no. 2 (March 25–April 8, 1971) and vol. 2, no. 3 (April 9–23, 1971).

6. Figures are compiled based on median family incomes reported in Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*, 63.

7. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Uncertain Future*, 47.

8. Ibid.

9. NYC Census 2000.

10. Population data from NYC Census Data 2000; Ross and Trachte, "Global Cities," 108.

11. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Uncertain Future*, 52.

12. See discussion of the local construction industry's response to affirmative action in New York in Chapter 4.

13. Rodríguez, "Puerto Ricans in New York," 209.

14. Torres, "Human Capital" (PhD diss., New School for Social Research, 1988) cited in Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*, 62.

15. Lyford, *Airtight Cage*.

16. Gittell and Hevesi, eds., *Politics of Urban Education*; Orfield et al., "Deepening Segregation."

17. Monserrat, *"Hispanics-U.S.A."*

18. New York City Board of Education Profiles reported dropout rates of students with "Spanish surnames." The U.S. Census Bureau used a similar category, "Americans with Spanish surnames." With these categories, immigrants from Spain, Puerto Ricans, as well as other Latin Americans of varied ancestry were racially constructed as non-white and non-black.

19. Opie, *Upsetting the Apple Cart.*

20. Lader, *Power on the Left*, 158–59.

21. All local newspapers covered the demonstrations of the 1960s in New York City and local police and mayoral reactions.

22. Opie, *Upsetting the Apple Cart*, 67.

23. Chapter 4 details the campaigns for bilingual education and parent empowerment in the Upper West Side and Lower East Side of Manhattan.

24. Op. cit., 13.

25. Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets*, 75–76. See, also, *New York Times* articles on Columbia University building takeovers by students on May 1, 5, 7, 22, and 23, 1968.

26. This information was obtained from the Monserrat Archives, Box 10, at CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College.

27. Ibid.

28. Mayor Lindsay was quoted as saying, "The aspirations of the Puerto Rican community are just, and their fulfillment is imperative," in Peter Kihss, "Puerto Ricans Lay Inaction to Mayor," *New York Times,* July 28, 1967.

29. See Joseph P. Fried, "East Harlem Youths Explain Garbage-Dumping Demonstration," *New York Times,* August 9, 1969.

30. Miguel Melendez, 102–05. Former Young Lords also speak about their origin in Chicago and activities in East Harlem in two documentaries: *Yo Soy Boricua, P'a que tu lo sepa (I'm Puerto Rican, Just So You Know);* and *Pa'lante Siempre Pa'lante (Forward Always Forward).*

31. Sánchez, *Boricua Power*, 204–07.

32. Lang and Sohmer, "Editors' Introduction," 291–98.

33. Ibid.; Davies, *Neighborhood Groups*.

34. Davies, *Neighborhood Groups,* 112.

35. Schwartz, "Tenant Power." For further discussion of the causes and effects of landlord abandonment, particularly in the South Bronx, see Jonnes, *South Bronx Rising*.

36. See David K. Shipler, "Squatters Cast Doubt on Housing Plans," *New York Times,* October 11, 1970.

37. Lyford, *Airtight Cage*, 8–9. See, also, Davies, *Neighborhood Groups*, for a history of Title I of the 1949 Housing Act and urban renewal projects in Manhattan's West Side and West Village. Also see accounts of my interviewees on lost records, cited in endnote 63, indicating the prophetic nature of Lyford's claim.

38. The Lincoln Center redevelopment was spearheaded in 1955 by Robert Moses, then chair of the Mayor's Committee on Slum Clearance. Prior to redevelopment, the Lincoln Square area of the Upper West Side was the site used for filming "West Side Story."

39. See David K. Shipler, "Lindsay Assails Nixon on Housing," *New York Times,* June 10, 1970.

40. Velez was head of the antipoverty agency, Hunts Point Multi-Service Center; Betances managed the urban renewal office on the Upper West Side. In 1970, Badillo became the first Puerto Rican elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, from the 21st District in the Bronx. He ran three times in Democratic Party primaries for mayor, served as Deputy Mayor during Mayor Koch's first term; joined Republican Party tickets in 1993; and ran against Mayor Bloomberg in the Republican Party primary in 2001.

41. *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 20 (September 1976): 8–9.

42. The film "Break and Enter," also known as "Rompiendo Puertas," can be viewed at CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College, or purchased from Third World Newsreel.

43. See David K. Shipler, "Poor Families Taking Over Condemned Buildings," *New York Times,* April 24, 1970.

44. Tom Gogan, interview with author, March 24, 2007, New York. Gogan, who was a tenant advocate, organizer, and supporter of the squatters in the Upper West Side from 1968 to 1973, helped me understand the various organizations and key players in the Squatters Movement, and shared his assessment of the period.

45. Stunning visuals of city mechanics wrecking good facilities in apartments, as well as police removing handcuffed squatters, including middle-aged women, are captured in the documentary "Break and Enter" ("Rompiendo Puertas").

46. Federico Lora, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan.

47. Luis Ithier, interview with author, March 18, 2006, New York.

48. U.S. Congressman William Fitts Ryan represented what was then the 20th Congressional District in New York from 1960 to 1972. He was a civil rights activist and advocate for workers' rights, civil liberties, and the expansion of health care access for the poor. The Ryan Community Health Center, a not-for-profit, community-based facility established in 1967, bears his name as a tribute to his work for health care access as a right, not a privilege.

49. *Unidad Latina* vol. 3, no. 12 (December 22, 1973).

50. Carmen Martell, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan.

51. Op. cit.

52. Rentas interview (June 18, 2004).

53. Ana Juarbe, interview with author, April 8, 2006, New York.

54. Martell interview (June 18, 2004).

55. Schwartz, "Tenant Power," 23. Since West 15th Street lies just beyond the boundaries of Greenwich Village in Chelsea; the author might have been referring to West 13th, where takeovers also occurred, or he inadvertently referred to the occupied building at 233 West 15th Street as the Village.

56. See Edith Evans Asbury, "Squatter Movement Grows as Housing Protest Tactic"; "Squatters Occupy Flats on West Side"; and "Squatters Score Nearby Wrecking," *New York Times*, July 22, July 26, and August 1, 1970, respectively.

57. According to a *New York Times* report, "Squatters Occupy Flats on West Side," July 26, 1970, the Episcopal Diocese owned eight buildings on the block, including the six to be demolished to make way for Morningside House (eventually built on one of the Diocese's sites in the Bronx). The pastor of the Cathedral sat on the Board of Directors of Morningside, Inc.

58. Tom Gogan, who was present for these events, noted that Episcopalians for the Poor included Marie Runyon, who in 2016 at age 102 was still active in the well-known anti-Iraq war group, "Grannies for Peace."

59. See Will Lissner, "Squatters Score Nearby Wrecking," *New York Times,* August 1, 1970.

60. Gogan interview (March 24, 2007).

61. See Jill Jonnes, "For Squatters, Rent-Free Life Is Solution to High Costs." *New York Times,* March 25, 1980. It appears that the other Morningside buildings were acquired by Amsterdam House, which completed a major expansion in 1998.

62. Manuel Ortiz, interview with author, August 1, 2006, Glen Cove.

63. This claim was repeated in five separate interviews with El Comité's founding members, including Luis Ithier and Carmen Martell; Manuel Ortiz; Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado; and by Tom Gogan.

64. Barbra Minch, interview with author, February 19, 2007, New York.

65. See Steven R. Weisman, "Squatters Asked to Pay City Rents," *New York Times,* June 14, 1971.

66. Martell interview (June 18, 2004).

67. Eulogio Ortiz and Maria Collado, interviews with author, April 13, 2006, New York.

68. See Joseph P. Fried, "Police Arrest 32 at Squatter Site," *New York Times,* November 18, 1970.

69. See David K. Shipler, "Shortage of Housing Here Expected to Grow Worse," *New York Times,* August 10, 1970.

70. See Murray Schumach, "Segregated Slum 'Threat' Fought on West Side," *New York Times,* July 21, 1970.

71. See Lisa W. Foderaro, "2 Luxury Rentals Extend Columbus Ave. Renewal," *New York Times,* October 3, 1986.

72. See footage in documentary film "Break and Enter" ("Rompiendo Puertas").

73. Collado interview (April 13, 2006).

74. Nancy Colón, interview with author, April 15, 2006, Philadelphia.

75. The media coverage of President Carter's visit to the South Bronx on October 6, 1977, spotlighted urban housing decay and poverty with a tone of Hurricane Katrina–like shock for at least several weeks following the visit. The *New York Times* called the area around Charlotte St. "a national symbol of what is wrong with urban

America." See Lee Dembart, "Carter Takes 'Sobering' Trip to South Bronx; Finds Hope," *New York Times,* October 6, 1977.

76. Manuel Ortiz interview (August 1, 2006).

Chapter 3

1. Esperanza Martell, "Belly of the Beast," 179–80.

2. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Uncertain Future*, 28.

3. Avilés-Santiago, *Puerto Rican Soldiers*.

4. See Gray, *Harvesting Expectations*; and Monserrat, "Puerto Rican Migrant Farmworker."

5. Hernández-Alvarez, "Movement and Settlement of Puerto Rican Migrants," 372–73.

6. Thomas, *Puerto Rican Citizen,* 141, points out that Puerto Rican migrants were surely lured to the States in large numbers in the late 1940s and 1950s by the expanding postwar economy. At the same time, as I discuss in this chapter, a structural determinant of the Great Migration was the colonial context in which Puerto Rico's economy transitioned from agriculture to rapid industrialization.

7. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Uncertain Future*, 16. Scholars note similar results in Mexico under NAFTA and in Caribbean and Central American "free trade zones" where the number of jobs created and wages paid in the *maquiladoras* do not nearly approximate the need of displaced peasants for employment at livable wages. See, for example, Booth, Wade, and Walker, *Understanding Central America*; Faux, "NAFTA at 10"; Andrew Ross, *No Sweat*.

8. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico*, 275; Ronald Fernández, *Disenchanged Island*, 188; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Uncertain Future*, 16.

9. Haslip-Viera, "Evolution of Latino Community," 3–29; Findlay, *Left Without a Father Here*, 9.

10. Edgardo Meléndez, "Vito Marcantonio, Puerto Rican Migration," 203.

11. Dietz, *Economic History of Puerto Rico*, 183–85; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Uncertain Future*, 25. Many people in Puerto Rico did not fare better in the decades following Operation Bootstrap. Income inequality, high unemployment, and the consequent dependency of two-thirds of the population on federal welfare programs worsened as labor-intensive manufacturing began to move offshore to avoid the federal minimum wage laws that applied to increasing numbers of workers by 1983. On the other hand, capital-intensive pharmaceutical and chemical industries utilized federal tax exemptions in Puerto Rico to shield their revenues from federal taxes. Baver, *Political Economy of Colonialism*; Carr, *Puerto Rico: Colonial Experiment*.

12. The practice has been widely documented. See, for example, Gibson-Rosado, *Sterilization of Women in Puerto Rico*; Mass, "Puerto Rico: Case Study in Population Control"; and Presser, "Sterilization in Controlling Puerto Rican Fertility."

13. *Carta Autonómica of 1897.*

14. Noteworthy among the strikes was that of sugar cane workers against U.S. sugar and utilities monopolies in 1934. See Denis, *War Against All Puerto Ricans*.

15. Ibid., 14.

16. Quoted in Ronald Fernández, *Disenchanted Island*, 177.

17. President Truman lived in Blair House, the official state guest house, from 1948 to 1952 while the White House was under renovation.

18. Grosfoguel, "Migration and Geopolitics."

19. Among the many scholars who have documented U.S opposition to both reform and revolutionary movements in the region, see Johnson, *Blowback*; Kinzer, *Overthrow*; Schlesinger and Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit*; Peter Smith, *Talons of the Eagle*.

20. Extensive coverage of the shooting and subsequent round-ups of Nationalists on the island was reported in the *New York Times,* March 2 through May 17, 1954. The terms used by the media to characterize the Nationalist Party and its actions, such as "fanatics," "terrorists," and "seditious conspiracy," changed from the 1950 description of Nationalists as "rebels" or "extremists" engaged in "uprisings." See, for example, "Revolt Flares in Puerto Rico: Soon Quelled with 23 Dead"; "Puerto Rico Blasts Remaining Rebels; Planes and Tanks Recapture Two Strongholds"; Eisenhower Target for Fanatics Also"; and "Terrorists' Chief Held in San Juan After Gun Battle." *New York Times,* October 31, 1950; November 1, 1950; March 2, 1954; and March 7, 1954, respectively.

21. The United States does not acknowledge that it holds "political prisoners." Though there is no internationally recognized definition, the Puerto Rican independence movement interpreted the actions of the Nationalists as part of the rebellion against U.S. occupation, similar to that of American revolutionaries, patriots in Northern Ireland against British occupation, and Algerians who fought French Colonialism. Ronald Fernández notes that the U.S. media's labeling of the Nationalists as "ruthless terrorists" and "fanatics" fails to note the similarity between Lebrón's written note, "My life I give for the freedom of my country" and the American revolutionary pledge, "Give me liberty or give me death." Fernández, *Disenchanted Island*, 182, 186.

22. Albizu Campos suffered a stroke in prison in 1956 and was pardoned again in 1964 when he was near death. He died in Puerto Rico in 1965.

23. See files held by CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies, at www.centropr.org.

24. Ronald Fernández, *Disenchanted Island*, 177; Bosque-Pérez, "Political Persecution"; and Bosque-Pérez, "FBI and Puerto Rico."

25. Rubinstein, ed., *I Vote My Conscience*.

26. Nelson Gómez, interview with author, April 20, 2006, Miami.

27. Frank Velgara, interview with author, September 4, 2004, New York.

28. Pedro Rentas, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan.

29. Elizabeth Figueroa, interview with author, October 11, 2013, Bronx.

30. Julio Pabón, interview with author, October 11, 2013, Bronx.

31. Jaime Suárez, interview with author, March 18, 2006, New York.

32. Luis Ithier, interview with author, March 18, 2006, New York.

33. González, *Harvest of Empire*, 93–94; Guzmán, "Puerto Rican Barrio Politics"; and Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets.*

34. Maria Collado, interview with author, August 2, 2004, New York.

35. Federico Lora, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan.

36. Ibid.

37. González, *Harvest of Empire*, 125.

38. Ibid.

39. Collado interview (March 18, 2006).

40. Carmen Martell, interview with author, August 20, 2004, New York.

41. Velgara interview (September 3, 2004).

42. Lora interview (June 18, 2004).

43. See Blaut and Stea, "Are Puerto Ricans a 'National Minority'?" For the various positions on the national question, see Puerto Rican Socialist Party, *Political Thesis*; El Comité-MINP, *Process of Puerto Rican Migration*; and El Comité-MINP, *Puerto Ricans and Proletarian Internationalism*.

44. El Comité-MINP, *Process of Puerto Rican Migration*, 11.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, Left*, 764.

48. Puerto Rican Socialist Party, *Political Thesis*. For accounts that speak to the tensions within the U.S. Branch of the PSP on this issue, see Velázquez, "Coming Full Circle."

49. El Comité-MINP, *Puerto Ricans and Proletarian Internationalism*, 9–12.

50. *Unidad Latina* vol. 1, no. 7 (June 10–24, 1971).

51. Lacey Fosburgh, "19 Police Injured at Parade Here: 20 Arrested as Puerto Rican Groups Interrupt March in Protest Over Status," *New York Times,* June 14, 1971.

Chapter 4

1. Maria Collado, interview with author, March 18, 2006, New York.

2. For contrasting views on the impact of Black protest movements on civil rights legislation, see Santoro, "Struggle for Fair Employment" and McAdam, *Political Process*. McAdam views civil rights legislation through the lens of insurgency; Santoro concludes that contentious episodes explain the passage of legislation up to 1964 but that subsequent legislation was rooted more in conventional politics and public opinion.

3. Point Number 4 stated, "We Want Decent Housing Fit for the Shelter of Human Beings. We believe that if the White Landlords will not give decent housing to our Black community, then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people." https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/1966/10/15.htm.

4. Aparicio, *Dominican Americans*; Pulido, "Race, Class and Political Activism"; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*.

5. Torres, "Introduction," 8–9.

6. DeJesús and Pérez, "Community Control to Consent Decree."

7. "The Myth of Decentralization," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 17 (May–June 1976): 11.

8. Lourdes García, interview with author, October 19, 2014, New York.

9. Lourdes García and Frank Velgara, interview with author, October 19, 2014, New York.

10. Quoted in Jennings and Chapman, "Puerto Ricans and Community Control Movement," 286.

11. DeJesús and Pérez, "Community Control to Consent Decree," 20.

12. Op. cit., 285.

13. ASPIRA, "Bilingual Education Report" and Monserrat, "Statement."

14. Monserrat, "Statement."

15. Federico Lora, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan.

16. "Local School Board Elections—Role of 'Por Los Niños,' " *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 6 (May 1975): 8.

17. "The Myth of Decentralization," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 17 (May–June 1976): 8, 11.

18. It was distinctive in the general sense that bilingual education was supported by whites in the District but not particularly unusual in District 3 given the history of progressive politics on the Upper West Side (excluding the role of CONTINUE in the battles against urban renewal).

19. Orlando Colón, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan; and Jaime Suárez, interview with author, March 18, 2006, Brentwood.

20. Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*.

21. See McGray, "Lost in America."

22. *Unidad Latina* vol. 2, no. 6 (June 12–June 30, 1972): 3, 14.

23. Eulogio Ortiz, interview with author, April 13, 2006, New York.

24. Frank J. Prial, "Gypsy Cab Group Will Help Lazar Draft Regulations," *New York Times*, September 4, 1971.

25. Nelson Gómez, interview with author, April 20, 2006, Miami; García and Velgara interview (October 19, 2014).

26. Harrison and Bluestone, *Great U-Turn*.

27. Noel Colón was President of the Teamsters Union in Puerto Rico when he was killed on November 15, 2001 by a co-worker. My account of his organizing activities was obtained from interviews with other former members of El Comité and from *Unidad Latina* and *Obreros en Marcha*. Other workplace activists interviewed by the author either asked not to be identified or could not be reached for an interview.

28. *Unidad Latina* vol. 2, no. 2 (February 24–March 10, 1973): 3.

29. *Unidad Latina* vol. 3, no. 4 (July 14–30, 1973): 1–2.

30. "Denuncia Obrera Contra U.S. Metal," *Unidad Latina* vol. 2, no. 17 (December 16–31, 1972): 1–2; and vol. 3, no. 1 (April 14–28, 1973): 4, 11.

31. "Worker's Front (F.O.U.) Founding Assembly," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 4 (Sept. 23, 1974).

32. Ibid., p. 2.

33. Ronald Smothers, "Polarization Over Hiring Minorities in Building Trades," *New York Times,* March 17, 1975.

34. Gómez interview (April 20, 2006).

35. "City College: Workers Demand Jobs, Call for Unity in Action." *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 6 (May 1975): 7, 11.

36. Ibid.

37. "Minority Construction Workers: Against Exclusion, Racism and Corruption." *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 7 (June 1975): 3, 9; Emanuel Perlmutter, "Construction Jobs Spark Racial Fight," *New York Times,* May 15, 1975.

38. "Minority Construction Workers," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 7 (June 1975): 3, 9.

39. Gómez interview (April 20, 2006).

40. Frank Velgara, interview with author, September 3, 2004, New York; and Jaime Suárez interview (March 18, 2006).

41. For comparative studies that explore institutionalized racism as impediments to multiethnic unity in Europe and in the Americas see, Jefferys and Ouali, "Trade Unions and Racism in London, Brussels and Paris"; Downing, "Hemispheric Cultural Unity." and the Denial of White Racism." Paper delivered at the Pan American Colloquium: Cultural Industries and Dialogue Between Civilizations in the Americas, University of Quebec, Montreal, April 22–24, 2002. In particular, Jefferys and Ouali argue there is a gap between national-level antiracist policies and local-level union workplace practices.

42. Mills, *Sociological Imagination*. See, also, History Task Force, *Labor Migration under Capitalism*.

43. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*

44. One important influence on this and other "full cadre" policies was *Notes on Cadre Formation,* written by Chile's *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario* (MIR), published by Resistance Publications in 1974.

45. In its *"Guidelines on the Organizational Structure of Communist Parties, on the Methods and Context of Their Work,"* the Third Congress of the Comintern 1921 asserted that there was "no absolutely correct organized form for communist parties." However, it stressed democratic centralism, the "synthesis" of centralism and democracy, as the essential guiding principle, with authority concentrated in central leadership that must be seen by the membership as "objectively justified strengthening and development of their work and fighting power." In this view, democracy is realized through "reciprocity" between leading bodies and membership.

46. Klatch, "Of Meanings and Masters," 187.

47. Many studies have noted the use of flags, popular art, and music as expressions of defiance. See, for example, Figes and Kolonitskii. *Interpreting the Russian Revolution*; Goldman, "Iconography of Chicano Self-Determination"; and Klatch, "Of Meanings and Masters." In the Puerto Rican case, it is important to recall that displaying the flag was forbidden in Puerto Rico after the passage of La Ley de la Mordaza (the Gag Law) in 1948.

48. Eulogio Ortiz interview (April 13, 2006).

49. Maria Collado, interview with author, August 2, 2004, New York.

50. The composition of the Young Lords is discussed in Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets,* and in the documentary, *"Pa'lante."*

51. Carmen Martell, interview with author, July 31, 2004; Velgara interview (September 3, 2004); and Collado interview (August 2, 2004).

52. Manuel Ortiz, interview with author, August 1, 2006, Glen Cove. Ortiz related an interesting complexity in his extended family's politics in the 1930s. While some family members were pro-independence, others who were socialists favored statehood because they believed mainland and island workers should unite in "proletarian solidarity" against capitalism.

53. Manuel Ortiz interview (August 1, 2006).

54. Ibid. Ortiz said "Hijos de Boricua" had about twenty members.

55. Orlando Colón interview (June 18, 2004).

56. Badillo could not be interviewed for this project because he currently resides in the Dominican Republic. I rely here on recollections of interviewees and on my observations as a participant in his class on the History of Puerto Rico at the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) in New York in 1976.

57. Orlando Colón and Lora interviews (June 18, 2004); Martell interview (July 31, 2004).

58. For a small local sample, see the following in the *New York Times*: Lacey Fosburgh, "100 Puerto Ricans Disrupt College; Protesters Barricade Doors at School in the Bronx," February 18, 1970; Arnold H. Lubasch, "City University Students Boycott Classes; Thousands Attending Night Courses Protest Fees"; Murray Schumach, "Columbia Rebels Fail in Protest," March 12, 1970; Bayard Webster, "60 Students Seize Fieldston School," March 24, 1970; Frank J. Prial, "Protesters Disrupt Class at Hunter," April 9, 1970; Murray Schumach, "College Turmoil Continues Here; Baruch Classes Off," April 18, 1970; Arnold H. Lubasch, "Aides Try to End Fordham Strike," April 19, 1970; "75 NYU Students Protest at Club," April 25, 1970; McClandish Phillips, "City High Schools Join in Protests; Thousands Here React to Cambodia and Kent State," May 7, 1970.

59. Edgardo López Ferrer and Orlando Colón, interviews with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan; and Sandra Trujillo, interview with author, April 8, 2006, New York.

60. In the 1940s and 1950s, Dr. Janet Karlson was involved in the movement of women who entered the workforce during and after World War II trying to get public daycare services for their children. In subsequent years, she worked in youth services in Harlem.

61. In her personal account, Esperanza Martell also credits Karlson's mother with exposing her to the anti-War movement. Martell, "Belly of the Beast."

62. Kathe Karlson, interview with author, May 12, 2006, New York.

63. Ibid.

64. Kathy Gruber, interview with author, November 9, 2006, New York.

65. See documentary, *"Pa'lante."*

66. Besides my discussion in Chapter 7, for views of former members on how ethnic and racial integration impacted El Comité in its last years, see Velázquez, "Another West Side Story."

67. I received similar approximations from most of my interviewees and estimate the same from my attendance at El Comité-MINP's First Assembly in 1978.

68. For studies that address the importance of these cultural components among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Latin Americans, see Torres-Saillant and Hernández, *Dominican Americans*, and Delgado and Muñoz, eds. *Everynight Life*.

69. Social gatherings among political activists associated with Latin American movements were frequently held in the 1970s at Casa de las Americas on West 14th Street in Manhattan. The issues of *Obreros en Marcha* were filled with announcements of cultural celebrations of well-known socialist commemorations, such as International Working Women's Day and May Day, and of historical events associated with Puerto Rico's independence movement. Especially following the Chilean coup in 1973, solidarity networks such as NICH sponsored monthly Chilean *peñas* to support resistance movements in Chile.

70. Lora interview (June 18, 2004).

71. On the struggles against gender oppression and leadership roles of women in Latin American revolutionary movements, see Luciak, *After the Revolution*; and Randall and Yanz, *Sandino's Daughters*. On the shortcomings of revolutionary movements in addressing gender oppression, see Randall, *Gathering Rage*.

72. Collado interview (April 13, 2006).

73. Studies of Che Guevara's views on education and "revolutionary humanism" and his influence on Latin American revolutionary movements include McLaren, *Che Guevara, Paulo Freire and Pedagogy of Revolution*; Petras, "Che Guevara and Contemporary Revolutionary Movements"; and Lowi, "Che's Revolutionary Humanism."

74. Karlson interview (May 12, 2006).

75. *Unidad Latina* vol. 1, no. 18 (Nov. 19–Dec. 3 1971): 10.

76. Homophobia, to the extent it may have existed, was not exclusive to El Comité, according to Aponte-Parés and Merced. Nor was it as extreme as these scholars indicate existed in Left organizations in Puerto Rico, where "any hint at being [gay] was grounds for discipline or even dismissal." "*Páginas Omitídas*," 359. For an historical account of the treatment of gays by the Cuban state and society, see Lumsden, *Machos, Maricones, and Gays*.

77. Aponte-Parés and Merced, "*Páginas Omitídas*," 297–98.

78. FBI surveillance of the Puerto Rican radical organizations and activists is discussed more fully later in the chapter.

79. Lora interview (June 18, 2004).

80. Author's archive.

81. Confidential interview.

82. Orlando Colón interview (June 18, 2004).

83. Federico Lora, "Farewell Speech," delivered at the First Assembly in 1978.

84. Irving Kaplan served in the Works Progress Administration's National Research Project, investigating labor markets in the 1930s, and worked in various other capacities in the Roosevelt Administration. After World War II, he was an economic advisor to West Germany, and for decades thereafter a socialist activist and close advisor to El Comité. Annette Rubinstein, who died on June 20, 2007, at age 97, was an educator, author, and Left activist since the 1930s. A frequent contributor to *Monthly Review* and a former librarian and high school principal, she was known also for her bid for a seat on the New York State Assembly as an as American Labor Party candidate in 1949. For many years, she collaborated with U.S. Congressman Vito Marcantonio, later documenting his record in *I Vote My Conscience: Debates, Speeches and Writings of Vito Marcantonio* (New York: Vito Marcantonio Memorial, 1956). *Monthly Review's* obituary for Dr. Rubinstein can be read at http://www.monthlyreview.org/0607rubinstein.htm.

85. Eulogio Ortiz interview (April 13, 2006).

86. Ibid.

87. Angel González, interview with author, January 10, 2008, New York.

88. Jaime Suárez, interview with author, September 25, 2004, Brentwood. Suárez was an accomplished track athlete in high school.

89. J. Edgar Hoover, Director of FBI, 1964, quoted in Michael Smith, *Greatest Story Never Told,* 151.

90. This information is from El Comité's document, "International Solidarity," which discusses its history of developing relationships with Latin American movements, written in preparation for the First Assembly in 1978 (Author's archive). In *Black, Brown, Yellow, Left,* Pulido observes similar influences on the cadre organizations in Los Angeles, as does Elbuam, *Revolution in the Air*.

91. Vladimir Lenin, cited in LeBlanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*. LeBlanc, a scholar, self-proclaimed Trotskyist, and former member of the Socialist Workers' Party, provides an elaborate and sympathetic explanation of Lenin's conception of the vanguard party as a democratic representative of the working class, formed from within the working class, in his essay, "*Revolutionary Principles and Working-Class Democracy.*" Global Document Index, Trotskyist Encyclopedia, 7, www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/fit/leninismus.htm. Also see, LeBlanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party*.

92. Victor Quintana, interview with author, September 25, 2004, New York; Emilio Morante, interview with author, May 3, 2007, New York; and Suárez interview (March 18, 2006). These dilemmas are further discussed in Chapter 7.

93. Kathe Karlson interview (May 12, 2006).

94. On FBI surveillance, see Bosque-Pérez, "Political Persecution." For media coverage of recent revelations about the extent of FBI surveillance of activists in Puerto Rico and the United States, see Matthew Hay Brown, "Puerto Rico Files Show FBI's

Zeal; For Decades, Secret U.S. Dossiers Targeted Suspected," *The Orlando Sentinel,* November 6, 2004. FBI files were obtained at Congressman José Serrano's request of former FBI Director Louis Freeh, who confirmed to the Congressman that the FBI had engaged in "egregious illegal action, maybe criminal action." To date, 120,000 of 1.8 million pages of FBI files compiled during twentieth-century surveillance have been released to Congressman Serrano and are currently being catalogued by CUNY's Center for Puerto Rican Studies. Researcher Bosque-Pérez found one hundred FBI pages on himself alone covering his participation in anti-Vietnam War and pro-independence protests when he was a high school student.

95. In November 1977, a lawsuit brought by several news reporters forced the FBI to release thousands of documents revealing the existence of the counterintelligence program directed against the Puerto Rican pro-independence movement and sectors of the North American Left. The findings are summarized in an unpublished (to my knowledge) document written by José Antonio Lugo, former (and now deceased) staff attorney of the Center for Constitutional Rights, entitled "Is Cointelpro Dead?: *Consejo Puertorriqueño Por La Paz* v. Federal Bureau of Investigation." Center for Constitutional Rights staff attorneys represented the plaintiffs in the case.

96. The FBI Reading Room at its Washington, D.C., headquarters contains 52,680 pages on COINTELPRO, of which 1,190 are devoted to groups seeking Puerto Rican independence; 1,450 to what it calls "nationalities intelligence"; 6,244 to the New Left; and 482 to its Espionage Program. Bosque-Pérez, "FBI and Puerto Rico." U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on the Judiciary, 94th Congress, Second Session; Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws: The Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976.

97. U.S. Congress. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 94th Congress, Second Session. Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws: The Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976.

98. Sánchez, *Boricua Power*.

99. U.S. Congress Subcommittee Report, 21–23.

100. Confidential interviews, July 2006.

101. See Alan Riding, "Politics Aside, Cuba is Festive for Visiting Young Leftists," *New York Times*, August 7, 1978, A2.

102. The files were shared with me by former members of El Comité.

103. Petras, "Che Guevara."

Chapter 5

1. Mollenkopf, Phoenix in the Ashes; Shefter, *Political Crisis/Fiscal Crisis*; Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*.

2. Harrison and Bluestone. *Great U-Turn*, 9–10

3. Mishel, Bivens, Gould, and Shierholz, *State of Working America*.

4. Harrison and Bluestone. *Great U-Turn,* 5.

5. Ibid., 39, 43.

6. Ibid., 14.

7. Ehrenhalt, "Economic and Demographic Change," 40.

8. Mollenkopf, *Phoenix in the Ashes*, 9.

9. See *New York Times* articles: John Darnton, "The Cuts Have Already Been Felt in New York: As Usual, the Poor Will Be Most Affected," October 19, 1975; Fred Ferretti, "New York Will Be Forced to Be a Much Smaller Apple," February 15, 1976; Roger Starr, "Making New York Smaller," November 14, 1976; Fred Ferretti, "City U. and City Hall Are Steering Collision Course on Further Cuts," December 9, 1976; Sanford Solender, "Meeting Greater Needs With Fewer Dollars," December 12, 1976; and Msgr. James J. Murray, "Human Toll Is Exacted By City Budget Slashes," December 19, 1976. On the impact of cuts on education in New York City, see Dean, "Impact of Cutback Planning."

10. Mollenkopf, *Phoenix in the Ashes*, 21.

11. *Obreros en Marcha: Special Edition on First Assembly* vol. 3, No. 10 (Nov/Dec 1978): 2–3.

12. Carmen Martell, interview with author, April 8, 2006, New York.

13. Freire, *Pedagogy of Oppressed*; Horton, *Long Haul*; Horton and Freire, *We Make the Road*.

14. In her post at Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, Dr. Helen Rodríguez was widely known for her public exposure of lead poisoning of children and other urban health care issues. As a practitioner first in Puerto Rico, she learned of the widespread sterilization abuse of women by the local government and was later instrumental in getting federal sterilization guidelines passed. In 2001, President Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Honor for her distinguished public service. She was well-known in Latino communities and remembered as a champion of health care and human rights.

15. Sandra Trujillo, interview with author, April 8, 2006, New York.

16. Ibid.

17. See *New York Times* articles: Martin Arnold, "Columbia Classes Held Under Makeshift Conditions," April 25, 1972; Robert D. McFadden, "Columbia and Protesters Meet and Trade Demands," April 27, 1972; Martin Arnold, "Policeman Hurt, Three Seized in Protests at Columbia," May 1, 1972; and John Darnton, "Antiwar Protests Erupt Across U.S.: Columbia Rally Ends Again in Clash with Police," May 10, 1972.

18. Ana Juarbe, interview with author, April 8, 2006, New York.

19. For perspectives of Nicaraguan women, see Randall and Yanz, *Sandino's Daughters*; on Vietnamese women, Taylor, *Vietnamese Women at War*; on the Federation of Cuban Women, see Madre, *Federation of Cuban Women*, and King, "Cuba's Attack on Women's Second Shift." Although subsequent studies of women in revolutionary movements question the progress of socialist-inspired, twentieth-century revolutions in overcoming gender inequality, in the mid-1970s the Nicaraguan and Vietnamese

revolutionary movements and the Cuban revolution were regarded by activists around the world as leaders in addressing the "woman question." See "Marxism and Women's Liberation," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 9 (August 23, 1975): 4–5, 10–11.

20. These objectives were drawn from several issues of the Latin Women's Collective bulletin, *La Semilla.* (Author's archive)

21. Juarbe interview (April 8, 2006).

22. Ibid.

23. The flyer announcing the 1975 Socialist-Feminist Conference is in author's archive and the Latin Women's Collective files held by Sandra Trujillo.

24. "Socialist-Feminism or Class Struggle?" *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 8 (July 24, 1975): 6.

25. Juarbe interview (April 8, 2006).

26. Martell interview (April 8, 2006).

27. Juarbe, Martell, and Trujillo interviews (April 8, 2006); and Lourdes García, interview with author, October 14, 2014, New York.

28. Trujillo interview (April 8, 2006).

29. Martell interview (April 8, 2006). Martell's reference to El Comité-MINP's position against city employment referred to governing institutions, not public sector employment in general.

30. Esperanza Martell, 185.

31. Martell interview (April 8, 2006).

32. "N.Y. Labor Leaders and Economic Crisis." *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 1, no. 8 (July 24, 1975): 7, 10–11.

33. Lee Dembart, "Carter Takes 'Sobering' Trip to South Bronx; Finds Hope." *New York Times,* October 6, 1977; "South Bronx Housing Plan Crumbles," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 4, no. 1 (March 1979): 7–8.

34. "Daycare Parents Win Victory at Center" and "Association Daycare Threatened Once Again," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 5, no. 8 (October 1980) and vol. 5, no. 9 (November–December 1980), respectively.

35. Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*, 28–29.

36. SUNY Old Westbury, *From the Ground Up*, 2.

37. Hostos College, Medgar Evers of CUNY, Livingston and Essex Colleges in New Jersey were similarly formed.

38. SUNY Old Westbury, *From the Ground Up.*

39. Ibid., 4.

40. Chancellor Ernest L. Boyer, quoted in SUNY Old Westbury, *From the Ground Up,* 4. Chancellor Boyer made a similar statement in the *Statesman,* Stony Brook University, 1970.

41. SUNY Old Westbury, *From the Ground Up.*

42. Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets*.

43. Fred M. Hechinger, "Where Should You Put a University?" *New York Times,* December 31, 1967.

44. George Vecsey, "Students at Old Westbury College Concerned Over State Plan to Enroll More Long Island Commuters." *New York Times,* May 27, 1974.

45. Gene L. Maeroff, "End of Building Program and Change in Enrollments Planned by State U." *New York Times,* August 9, 1972.

46. Ibid.

47. For reactions to the changes by students and faculty, see Alice Murray, "'College for Poor' Shifting Policies," *New York Times,* October 14, 1973.

48. Alice Murray, " 'College for Poor' Shifting Policies," *New York Times,* December 14, 1973.

49. Whereas Blacks and Latinos now comprise about one-quarter of the population in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, in 1970 Long island's population was over 90% white. See nassaucounty.gov.

50. *Catalyst,* vol. 3, no. 5, November 1975.

51. "Report to the Faculty, Administration, Students, and College Council of the State University of New York College, Old Westbury," by An Evaluation Team representing the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association, Prepared after Study of the Institution's Self-Evaluation Report and a Visit to the Campus on December 7 through December 10, 1975: 37–38 (emphasis added).

52. Colleen Sullivan, "Blacks Assail State U. Policies," *New York Times*, September 7, 1975.

53. "Students Hold Protest Sit-Ins," *New York Times*, March 19, 1976.

54. Faculty Resolutions, March 1976. (Author's archive)

55. Strike Agreement, 1976. (Author's archive)

56. Harvey, Philip. "Justice at Old Westbury." Unpublished pamphlet. (Author's archive)

57. The records of SASU (1970–1985) are held at the Archives of Public Affairs and Policy, M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University Libraries, University at Albany, State University of New York. Resolutions in support of Old Westbury student strikes are contained in Series 6: Subject Files, 1970–1981, Box 8.

58. It is important to note that, by this time, Hugh Carey had succeeded Nelson Rockefeller as New York State Governor.

59. Marjorie Kaplan, "Tass Dispatch Misses the Point," *Newsday*, May 4, 1977.

60. Ari L. Goldman, "Students in State U. End Nine-Day Strike," *New York Times,* April 27, 1977.

61. Ibid.

62. Manuel Ortiz, interview with author, August 1, 2006, Glen Cove.

63. For example, FEP pamphlets, "Getting it Together," "The Spring 'Offensive,' " "Present Situation: February 1977." (Author's archive)

64. "Major Operation," *New York Post,* December 27, 1978.

65. Ibid.

66. "Coalition Forms to Defend Hispanic Rights," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 4, no. 1 (March 1979): 8.

67. Document included in files of CDPRHR. (Author's archive)

68. Ibid.

69. Letter from Camille Mallouh, M.D., President of the Medical Board of Metropolitan Hospital Center to Joseph C. Hoffman, President, New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation.

70. The data reported in this section were extracted from the voluminous files of the Coalition to Save Metropolitan Hospital, containing copies of original correspondence between Metropolitan Hospital's Medical Board New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, the Newsletters of the Coalition, the Newsletters of the Community Action for Legal Services, numerous articles from the *Daily News, Village Voice, New York Times, El Diario-La Prensa,* and *City Limits.* The Coalition files were given to me by Emilio Morante.

71. *Village Voice,* July 30, 1979.

72. *Westsider,* June 1979. The photocopy of this article in the Coalition files does not contain the title or date of the article. Author's archive.

73. For four days in March 1975, the militant Committee of Interns and Residents staged "the first major strike ever" by U.S. doctors to protest working conditions and substandard patient care at New York City voluntary and municipal hospitals. See "Doctors on Strike." *Time Magazine*, March 31, 1975.

74. Author's archive of El Comité and Coalition reports, articles, and informational pamphlets.

75. Interview with "R.E.," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 5, no. 3 (April/May 1980): 3–4.

76. Emilio Morante, interview with author, May 4, 2006, New York.

77. Interview with "G.L." Op. cit.

78. Interview with "R.E." Ibid.

79. Morante interview (May 4, 2006).

80. "A Sensible Path for Harlem's Hospitals," *New York Times,* June 21, 1980, 22.

81. Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*, 28–29.

82. Suárez interview (March 18, 2006).

Chapter 6

1. For an account of anti-apartheid solidarity, see Culverson, *Contesting Apartheid*; on Central American solidarity extending into the 1980s, see Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan,* and Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul.* In the 1970s, the bimonthly *Report on the Americas* of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) frequently chronicled the activities of U.S. solidarity movements, as did the independent Marxist newspaper, the *Guardian*.

2. Armbruster-Sandoval, *Globalization*; Brecher and Costello, *Global Village*; Della Porta, ed., *Global Justice Movement*; Tabb, *Amoral Elephant*.

3. See, "Puerto Rican Trade Unionists Tour U.S.," and "U.S. TUCAR Meets with Puerto Rican Trade Unions," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 3, no. 2 (February 1978): 6–7; and vol. 3, no. 5 (June 1978): 6, respectively.

4. The other occurred in 2003 at the U.S. Navy withdrawal from Puerto Rico's island of Vieques, after more than sixty years of occupation.

5. The actions of the five Nationalists imprisoned in the 1950s are discussed in Chapter 3.

6. The case of Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán of the Young Lords is one example.

7. See *Obreros en Marcha,* multiple issues.

8. The artists included mainly Puerto Ricans and other Latin Americans, but also African American and white performers. Veterans of the movement may recall Noel Hernández's poem *Cinco Hermanos*; Richie Havens's appearance on more than one occasion, along with those of Mike Glick, José Valdés, and Bernardo Palombo, to name a few.

9. *Unidad Latina* (Dec. 20, 1971–Jan. 3, 1972): 7.

10. Bosque-Pérez. "Political Persecution."

11. Federico Lora, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan. See, Leslie Oelsner, "Bombing Suspect is Acquitted Here" and "Bomb Case Figure Found Guilty Here," *New York Times,* June 24, 1972, and September 19, 1973, respectively.

12. Carmen Martell, interview with author, June 18, 2004, San Juan.

13. Orlando Colón, interview with author, June 18, 2004.

14. First Lady Rosalyn Carter was scheduled to address the 18th Annual United Press International Conference in Puerto Rico on October 18, 1977. Though Cordero's release may have been timed to deter criticism of U.S. treatment of the Nationalists, a protest demonstration was held at the site of the Conference in Puerto Rico, featuring Figueroa Cordero as a main speaker. See, "On the Nationalist Prisoners." *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 2, no. 10 (October 1977): 2. Figueroa Cordero died on March 7, 1979, at the age of 54.

15. "On the Nationalist Prisoners," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 2, no. 10 (October 1977): 2.

16. "Editorial," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 4, no. 7 (September–October 1979): 1–2.

17. These governors were Hernández Colón, Sánchez-Villela, Ferre, and Muñoz-Marín.

18. Op. cit. and "Editorial," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 4, no. 1 (March 1979): 2.

19. Collazo, as quoted in *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 4, no. 7 (September–October 1979): 2.

20. Cruz, *Identity and Power*, 44.

21. The exact title of the Special U.N. Committee on Decolonization at the time was "Special Committee on the Situation with Regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples."

22. U.N. General Assembly 1915th Plenary Meeting, 30 November 1970.

23. For crowd estimate, see "Puerto Rico Ante Foro Internacional," *Unidad Latina* vol. 2, no. 10 (Aug. 27–Sept. 10, 1972): 2–3; on the presentation and passage of the resolution, see Kathleen Teltsch, "Puerto Rican Sovereignty Backed in U.N." and "Independence Groups Pleased," *New York Times,* August 29, 1973.

24. "Puerto Rico Ante Foro Internacional," *Unidad Latina* vol. 2, no. 10 (Aug. 27–Sept. 10, 1972): 11.

25. United Nations, *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases,* 23 June 2014, http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/gacol3269.doc.htm.

26. "Vieques: An Island in Struggle," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 3, no. 12 (February 1979): 6–7.

27. "Bishop and Ministers Are Arrested by Navy in Puerto Rico"; "Puerto Ricans Vow to Avenge Death in U.S. Prison," *New York Times,* May 20, 1979, and November 18, 1979, respectively.

28. Quoted in McCaffrey, "Forging Solidarity," 330–31.

29. Estimate appeared in *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 5, no. 4 (June 1980), 11–12. Another estimate, provided by former members of the Vieques Support Network, was four thousand attendees.

30. Op. cit., 338.

31. John Nordheimer with David Johnston, "Federal Agents Clear Puerto Rico Bombing Range of Protesters," *New York Times,* May 5, 2000.

32. This account of the protest at the U.N. comes from one of the participants, Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets.*

33. Ivan Roman, "Navy Steels for Vieques Protests; Bombing Resumes Today After Navy Tear-Gassed Crowds and Made Arrests, *Orlando Sentinel,* April 30, 2001.

34. Eric Lipton, "Sharpton and 3 From Bronx Are Jailed in Vieques"; "National Briefing: South: Puerto Rico: Protester Freed," *New York Times,* May 24, 2001, and December 12, 2001, respectively.

35. United Nations' Press Release GA/COL/3053.

36. McCaffrey, "Social Struggle against the U.S. Navy."

37. Sandra Trujillo, formerly of El Comité-MINP, quoted in McCaffrey, "Forging Solidarity," 334; also discussed by Sandra Trujillo, interview with author, April 8, 2006, New York.

38. Op. cit.

39. See Backiel, "People of Vieques"; also Laura Rivera Meléndez, "Cancer Rate Continues to be High in Vieques," *Puerto Rico Herald,* April 29, 2004.

40. United Nations GA/COL/3138/Rev. 1.June 2006

41. Jesús Dávila, "Puerto Rico: Denuncian que se Producirán Arrestos de Independentistas," *El Diario La Prensa,* December 27, 2007.

42. Statement of Robert E. Dalton, Assistant legal Adviser for Treaty Affairs, U.S. Department of State, Before the House Resources Committee Regarding the Foreign Relations and Citizenship Issues Presented by H.R. 4751 on the Status of Puerto Rico, October 4, 2000, pp. 2–3.

43. "Disarmament and the Latin Community," *Obreros en Marcha* (Aug/Sept. 1982).

44. Estimates of the number attending the rally range from ten thousand to fifty thousand. Lawrence Feinberg, "Demonstration on Bakke Suit," *Washington Post*, April 16, 1978.

45. This impression was attained both from interviews with those individuals and from statements of organizations in Puerto Rico that were published in *Obreros en Marcha*.

46. Noel Colón was murdered by a co-worker in Puerto Rico in 2001.

47. Though it is beyond the scope of this book to trace the paths of the workers' and pro-independence movements in Puerto Rico, there can be no doubt that *independentistas* in Puerto Rico were under constant surveillance by the FBI and local police long after the infamous activities of the FBI's COINTELPRO had supposedly ceased. FBI and local files obtained by the author in Puerto Rico, May 2015.

48. "First Assembly: Program for the Coming Period," *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 3, no. 10 (Nov/Dec 1978).

49. For example, the Communist League became the Communist Labor Party in 1974; the Revolutionary Union changed to the Revolutionary Communist Party in 1975; and the October League called itself the Communist Party (M-L) beginning in 1977.

50. El Comité-MINP, *"Party Building and Its Relationship to the Masses,"* 1978: 5.

51. In *Revolution in the Air,* Elbaum discusses the national "party-building" efforts, noting that the "trend" El Comité-MINP affiliated with was comprised of four other groups: the Detroit Marxist-Leninist Organization, the Philadelphia Workers Organizing Committee, the Potomac Socialist Organization based in Washington, D.C., and the Socialist Union of Baltimore. Twenty groups subsequently joined, including the Socialist Organizing Committee of Orange County, California, the Buffalo Workers Movement, and the Bay Area Socialist Organizing Committee of San Francisco.

52. El Comité-MINP, *"Where to Begin? Centers of Communication, Cooperation and Coordination*." 1979: 1–3.n (Author's archive)

53. The split is discussed in Chapter 7.

54. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 7.

55. Miliband, *Socialism in Question*, and Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*.

56. Jaime Suárez, interview with author, March 18, 2006, Brentwood.

Chapter 7

1. Quote of Fernández Huidobro, leading member of Uruguay's *Tupamaros*, 1986, cited in Heinz and Frühling, *Determinants of Gross Human Rights Violations*, 247.

2. Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*; Ehrenberg, *Servants of Wealth*; Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*; Zweig, "Challenge of Working Class Studies."

3. Sassen, *Global City*.

4. Figures compiled from median family income figures in Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic*, 63.

5. Mele, *Selling the Lower East Side*; Mollenkopf, *Phoenix in the Ashes*.

6. Brecher and Horton, *Power Failure*, 99.

7. For examples of El Comité's coverage of the issues discussed in the preceding paragraphs, see "Steel Workers: Growing Unemployment"; "Stagflation: New Twist in U.S. Economy"; "1980 Presidential Elections: Candidates Agree on Increased U.S. Militarism"; "The New Right: Old Ideas in a New Context"; "Reaganomics"; "Free Enterprise Zones: No Solution"; in *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 2, no. 11 (November 1977); vol. 3, no. 9 (October 1978); vol. 5, no. 2 (March 1980); vol. 5, no. 10 (November/December 1980); vol. 6, no. 1 (April/May 1982); and vol. 6, no. 2 (August/September 1982), respectively.

8. Victor Quintana, "*Presentation of the First Secretary of MINP-El Comité*," July 19, 1980. Reprinted in *Obreros en Marcha* vol. 5, no. 6 (August 1980): 4–5.

9. Ibid.

10. Statement on the Division in MINP-El Comité, 3. (Author's archive)

11. Ibid., 4.

12. Cunningham, *There's Something Happening Here*; McAdam, "Biographical Impact of Activism."

13. Jonas, "Central America as Theatre" and *Battle for Guatemala*.

14. "Editorial: The Struggle Against Repression," *OEM* vol. 2, no. 9 (September 1977): 2.

15. Ibid., 2.

16. "Editorial: El Comité-MINP and Grand Jury Repression," *OEM* vol. 2, no. 5 (May 1977): 2; "Repression and the Grand Jury," *OEM* vol. 1, no. 15 (March 1976); "Editorial: The Struggle Against Repression," *OEM* vol. 2, no. 9 (September 1977); and "Grand Jury Attacks *Independentistas*," *OEM* vol. 5, no. 9 (November/December 1980).

17. Center for Constitutional Rights, "COINTELPRO," n.d.

18. For accounts of government repression in Latin America and U.S. complicity, see McSherry, *Predatory States*.

19. Carmen Martell, interview with author, September 25, 2004, New York.

20. Confidential interview.

21. Victor Quintana, interview with author, September 25, 2004, New York.

22. Ibid. Although there was no single "syllabus" for political study used throughout the organization's history, the early members read Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth;* Richard Boyer and Herbert Morais, *Labor's Untold Story;* and sections of Marx's *Capital, Vol. I*. Lenin's *What is to be Done* was a staple of study groups as were segments from Mao Tse-Tung's writings on liberalism and contradiction. The pamphlets produced by revolutionary organizations from Latin America, such as Chile's *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario,* Uruguay's *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros,* and Argentina's *Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Revolucionario de Trabajadores*, were also read by members. For one year in the late 1970s, political studies in MINP included readings

from *Fundamental Principles of Marxist-Leninist Philosophy,* translated from Russian to English by Robert Daglish (Russian author printed in Russian on text) (USSR: Progress Publishers, 1974). Members read sections of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* on intellectuals and Che Guevara's "Notes on Man and Socialism." Cadres were also expected to read J. Peters, *The Communist Party: A Manual on Organization*; compilations of essays by Lenin entitled, *Party Work in the Masses* and *Critical Remarks on the National Question*; Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto;* V. Adoratsky, *Dialectical Materialism* (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1934); and Georges Politzer, *Elementary Principles of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1976). The editorial page of *Obreros en Marcha*, often written by the Political Commission, was the subject of discussion each month.

23. Jaime Suárez, interview with author, September 25, 2004, New York.

24. Confidential interviews.

25. Elizabeth Figueroa, quoted in Velázquez, "Another West Side Story," 99. In pointing to different approaches of white and Latino members to personal relationships, Figueroa alludes to the cultural and political differences members of the Latin Women's Collective identified with white feminists at a socialist-feminist conference in 1975. The implication is that the white members were less tolerant of male attitudes they viewed as sexist, whereas Latinas understood that rigid denunciation of deeply embedded male attitudes would be counterproductive and that the struggle against sexism was long term.

26. Elizabeth Figueroa, interview with author, March 18, 2006, New York.

27. Suárez interview (September 25, 2004).

28. Doug McAdam notes a similar trajectory among civil rights activists, as does Laura Pulido in her study of former members of Third World Left groups in Los Angeles. McAdam, *Freedom Summer* and "Biographical Impact of Activism"; Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, Left*..

29. Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets*; Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, Left*, 104.

30. Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, Left*, 119–20.

31. Ibid., 111.

32. Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*.

33. Velázquez, "Another West Side Story," 48.

34. Zoilo Torres, interview with author, August 12, 2015, New York.

35. Velázquez, "Another West Side Story," 49.

Chapter 8

1. Lourdes García, interview with author, November 22, 2015, New York.
2. Federico Lora, interview with author, May 31, 2015, San Juan.
3. Daniel Colón, interview with author, August 2, 2004, New York.
4. Piven, *Challenging Authority*.

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HISPANIC STUDIES / HISTORY / LATINO/A STUDIES

In this book Rose Muzio analyzes how structural and historical factors—including colonialism, economic marginalization, racial discrimination, and the Black and Brown Power movements of the 1960s—influenced young Puerto Ricans to reject mainstream ideas about political incorporation and join others in struggles against perceived injustices. This analysis provides the first in-depth account of the origins, evolution, achievements, and failures of *El Comité-Movimiento de Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño*, one of the main organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in the 1970s in New York City. *El Comité* fought for bilingual education programs in public schools, for access to quality jobs and higher education, and against health care budget cuts. The organization mobilized support nationally and internationally to end the US Navy's occupation of Vieques, denounced colonial rule in Puerto Rico, and opposed US aid to authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Africa. Muzio bases her project on dozens of interviews with participants as well as archival documents and news coverage, and shows how a radical, counterhegemonic political perspective evolved organically, rather than as a product of *a priori* ideology.

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