

# ¡PALANTE, SIEMPRE PALANTE! INTERVIEW WITH RICHIE PEREZ

IRIS MORALES

## RICHIE PEREZ PASSED AWAY IN 2004.

I conducted this interview with him for the documentary, *¡Palante, Siempre Palante! The Young Lords*, broadcast on national public television in 1996. We spoke for about three hours in a makeshift studio at NEON, the New Educational Opportunity Network, an organization I co-founded to do media work with Latino/as and African American youth.

I first met Richie in the Young Lords in 1969. He and I served together on the Young Lords National Staff and, for a time, shared a three-room apartment on Tinton Avenue in the Bronx with our respective significant others. He remained with the organization until 1976; I resigned a year earlier. The interview offered us an opportunity to sum up and reflect on the ideas and organization that had forever shaped our political commitments. We knew that it would be an emotional experience; Martha, his wife and *compañera*, and Danny, his son, were present for the taping.

Richie begins discussing the economic, social, and political landscape that influenced his thinking as a college graduate and high school teacher. One night at a party in the Bronx, two young women told him, “If you believe all that political stuff, you should be down at the church with those crazy Young Lords.” As Richie would, he considered what they said and headed down to the People’s Church on 111th Street, where he remained until arrested with 104 other supporters. It was the beginning of a political journey and association that took him from the Young Lords Organization to the Young Lords Party and finally to the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO). The organization ends when Richie is forced out. When the PRRWO leaders grab and torture him, they killed the revolutionary trajectory of the Young Lords—and the organization could no longer be redeemed, rectified, or revived. Richie describes the twisted, corrupt, and sad decline of a social movement that reveals ideological ossification, police infiltration, failed attempts at working class organizing, and betrayal.



Richie Perez (with bullhorn) at a Young Lords rally protesting Pablo 'Yoruba' Guzman's incarceration for draft evasion (Bronx, NY 28 January 1972). Photographs by Maximo Colon ©. Reprinted by permission.

Richie Perez represents the best of the Young Lords. His brilliant sense of humor enhanced his skills as a community organizer and mobilizer. He remained committed to collective action and believed in the “revolution within the revolution,” the idea that we must be willing to struggle to transform ourselves in order to create a new society. Even after he had been betrayed by comrades and friends, he did not waiver. All who knew him remember his embracing spirit. We can hear him say, “Power to the People, the struggle continues, now let’s throw down.” May he rest in peace.

**Iris Morales:** Richie, I’d like to start with some background and historical context. When did you join the Young Lords Organization, and what were you doing at the time?

**Richie Perez:** I joined the Young Lords in 1969. I was a teacher at James Monroe High School, and I grew up in the Bronx. I was teaching in Maplewood where I lived and knew everybody. I became involved with parents groups that were fighting for community control of the schools in the mid- or late 1960s. That’s where I first met Evelina [López] Antonetty, who was a big inspiration. Like a lot of my generation, I came out of college very naive. I came out with the Kennedy syndrome, believing that individuals could change the system. When I started teaching in the public schools, one of the things that I learned was that individuals don’t make change, that organized groups of people make change, and I began to try to act on that. By that time in the late ’60s, my thinking was beginning to change. I was in school with people who had gone south on freedom rides, but I wasn’t part of that movement. I was part of the hang-out in the cafeteria and party movement ...; that’s where I got my first exposure to Black History. There was no such thing as Puerto Rican history being taught in the public schools.

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As I got out of school and realized all the things I hadn’t learned, I was angry. I was teaching and saw that the schools routinely categorized young people as troublemakers and problem kids. I started to recognize what I understand now as institutional racism. But at that time I didn’t have a voice; I didn’t have words to describe it. I began to see the difference between myself, my commitment, and the other teachers. I always believed you can’t teach if you don’t love the students and teach them as if they’re your family. I sat in a teachers’ cafeteria with teachers who used to make jokes about “the savages.” I reached the point where I was so angry that I couldn’t speak; I was inarticulate. I was just totally pissed off all the time, and I stopped eating in the teachers’

cafeteria. I started eating in the students' cafeteria. I was beginning to look to other places for solutions, and I was very much interested in the formation of the Black Panther Party. I had been doing a lot of reading about Malcolm X. I was beginning to find words to describe things that I'm experiencing.

I was the faculty advisor for one of the first high school groups of students, which was called the Black and Puerto Rican Student Forum. We would talk about issues, about civil rights, and the Vietnam War. During that time the schools were cooperating with the selective service and turning over lists of graduating seniors. I was opposed to the war and felt that it was wrong for the school to cooperate and send the kids off to be used as cannon fodder. I began, and the students also began, making the connections that Martin Luther King was making with civil rights at home, the struggle against racism here and oppression abroad, the issue of racial justice and economic justice. It was very exciting times in terms of opening up your mind and challenging orthodoxies and looking at new things; it was also a time of cultural change where people were changing the way they wore their hair, which was very important as a political act. People can look back on it and diminish the importance of it, but it was very important when people began wearing their hair natural and struggling against the European standards of beauty. It was part of a move to get to the roots of who we were.

The leading force that spurred a lot of this thinking was the Black Panther Party, which began to come forth with a program and a value system that said that the most important thing was to serve the people, that individual progress was less important than group progress, and that none of us would be free until all of us were free. The Panthers were telling people that drugs are a continuation of the slave master's attempts to keep you on the plantation, and I was very excited about that message, and so were the students. One time we attempted to bring the Panthers to speak at an assembly that was going to be held around drugs. The school said no, and the students had a walkout, and we had Panthers speaking outside the school. We found that as you politicized people, drugs were no longer cool. If you had anger, there was another way you could deal with it. So I was always saying, "Man, I wish there was a Puerto Rican Panthers." That's what I wished, although I did not know very much Puerto Rican history. Most of the textbooks were written in Spanish, and I was not proficient in Spanish. I read some of the stuff that was in English, and I was hungry, and so whatever I could find, I would read. But I really didn't have a context to understand a lot of it either.

**IM:** How and when did you first hear about the Young Lords?

**RP:** I heard about this group in East Harlem that had taken over a church in 1969. I was at a party with a friend, and we got into a struggle about justice in the school system. I was talking to these two women, and they said, "Well, if that's what you believe, you should be in the church with those crazy Young Lords." I went back to partying, but it stayed in my mind, and I pulled my friend over and said, "You know, bro, they're right; you know, this is hypocrisy. If we believe this, we should be in the church." So we went home; changed our clothes and went to the church. We got there about two o'clock in the morning and knocked on the door. Of course they thought we were policemen; two light-skinned Puerto Ricans wearing short leather jackets, and pleated pants, but they let us in.

We were allowed to enter the church, and we stayed the night. The next day, there were activities at the church; people came; there were speakers; there were reverends. I mean, I had never seen anything like this, and it just blew my mind, and I felt like, I said, "This is it, this is what I've been looking for," and I listened very carefully to what everyone was saying and went home, caucused with my crowd of friends,

and they said, “You’re crazy, you’re crazy; you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.” I said, “No, you have to be there; you have to see this.”

I made the decision to be arrested there. Right after we got out, I went to the office to join and met Denise, whom I had gone to college with, and Denise vouched for me and said, “Yeah, I know him. He’s not a cop; I went to college with him. He was one of the hangout crew in college.” I began working with Denise putting out the newspaper, putting out *PALANTE* and selling newspapers because at that time you had to take part in something like an apprenticeship, you had to sell a lot of papers. But it was a test about people who were serious about doing things more than just promoting themselves and actually serving the community and giving something of yourself to the community. I used to like selling papers because you got a chance to talk to everyone, and I got very good at explaining what we believed in.

## BUT SOME OF THE THINGS PEOPLE DON'T REMEMBER WAS THAT WE SAID WE WERE REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISTS AND OPPOSED RACISM AND THAT WE OPPOSED MALE CHAUVINISM.

Some of the things we were saying, nobody was saying, and they were unheard of in the radical movement; they were definitely unheard of in the Puerto Rican movement. People remember armed struggle and armed self-defense, and the call for a socialist society. But some of the things people don't remember was that we said we were revolutionary nationalists and opposed racism and that we opposed male chauvinism. We were talking about internal issues in our community that people didn't want to talk about. We wanted to talk about anti-Black prejudices inside the Latino community that no one wanted to talk about. We wanted to talk about male supremacy that was interwoven in our culture that no one wanted to talk about. And not only did we want to raise these issues for discussion, we made personal commitments to deal with them and confront them, and so it was, and we lived the belief that you can't change society unless you change yourself and are willing to change yourself. I believe that, I still believe that, and that was, I think, one of the most driving forces. There's no way that we can change the larger society without simultaneously rooting out from ourselves the things that society has ingrained in us like racism and sexism and adultism and a distrust of young people and all of those things that prevent us from building a real new society. I was very excited about being in the Young Lords. I thought it was the best thing that I ever could have done.

**IM:** How did your life and political work change after you joined the Young Lords?

**RP:** I left teaching and took a leave of absence with the money that I had saved was able to live for a while and eventually lived in a collective apartment of Young Lords. We're in the middle of the Bronx, and we're trying to figure out how we can change our personal lives, intermingle our beliefs with our political lives, and be

consistent and be effective. We would get up early in the morning, go to the office, do the breakfast program, do tenant organizing, and respond to requests by parents to intervene in schools.

Building a relationship in the community takes a long time for people to trust you. Our community has been lied to by all kinds of leadership. I remember my father telling me, “You believe in all these people; a lot of them are full of crap, and you’re going to throw your whole life away, and how many of them will still be struggling five years from now?” But if you were alive in 1969, you saw that there were mass movements in America that even the government was beginning to recognize and talk openly about. There was the danger of armed insurrection in America; there was a possibility. When you saw White people, Blacks, Native Americans, and Latinos, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans moving and you got to meet folks who believed the same thing you did, you could believe and fashion your life around that belief. We would tell people, “We have the ability to change America.” Our belief was that America would never change without fighting, without violence, that it was founded on violence, the forceful incorporation of slaves, Mexican people’s land, extermination of Native Americans, the forceful colonization of Puerto Rico. We used to raise all these things because America refused to teach them. The idea that the founding fathers were slave owners, the knowledge that the Native peoples experienced genocide, that the incorporation of the Southwest was accomplished by stealing the land of the Mexican people and exterminating them and that every point in American society people of color have been targeted for extermination, including the slave trade.

**IM:** The Young Lords developed an analysis about Puerto Ricans in the United States. Can you outline the organization’s view?

**RP:** One of the significant things about the Young Lords—we were second-generation Puerto Ricans, and most of our experience was shaped by the urban ghetto; it wasn’t shaped by the island. We knew the inner city and that’s where our culture came from—where the pace of life, our language, our rhythm, and our style came from. We were most influenced by the African-American people and their resistance.

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We’re a multiracial people, and in America most people only understand race as Black and White, but we’re neither Black or White. Once we started to understand that—why we had so many different colors in our families, facial characteristics, hair textures—and came to peace with ourselves, and said, “Yo, that’s who we are, we’re a multi-racial

people. So in your family you got some Indians, you got some Africans, you got some that look like Spaniards, you got blue eyes, you got all hair textures, you got India, you got Chino, you got the works. It kind of made us whole so that we didn't have to interpret ourselves in the American racial structure. This is who we are, and we're proud of it, and if you don't like it, we'll kick your ass, so either you respect us, or we'll deal with you.

People started wearing Puerto Rican flags on everything, on their shoes. Then we found out that capitalism would market back to us our heritage; they're going to sell it to us. Now you have them selling us watches that have Puerto Rican flags on them and combs with Puerto Rican flags and sneakers with the Puerto Rican flag so that we understand that culture and nationalism in and of itself can be co-opted and has got to be more than that. We used to say, "We're revolutionary nationalists," because our nationalism has something more to it than just a picture of a flag or conga. It's got to go beyond that to political self-determination and freedom. We begin learning the history of Puerto Rico and how American imperialism replaces Spanish colonialism. The United States takes the island as a prize of war, and then moves to transform the economy of the island in favor of the American corporations who want to use the land; in order to use the land, they've got to rip it off from the Puerto Rican people who live on the land as subsistence farmers. They rip off the land with the help of the puppet government they set up, so our people now are peasants, *campesinos*, without land. At the same time, the United States begins to project Puerto Rico as a model experiment in the Caribbean because it has international implications aside from the value as a military base. The United States is using our island as a place to show the rest of Latin America. Americans said, "Look, we'll industrialize you," never telling people what the price is they're going to pay, that they're going to give up the right of self-determination. I mean determining what you want to use your land for, what industries you want, how you going to use your labor force, who are you going to trade with, what are you going to exchange; all of that is given up. Then comes World War II, and the United States begins to encourage the migration of Puerto Ricans—first because they need cheap labor to fill the labor shortages in the United States caused by the war; and, second, as a safety valve for the explosive situation that's going on the island with people out of work. They created the conditions where our people had to migrate or else die; if we stayed, we would have starved to death, so I don't consider that voluntary.

Interestingly, before we got here, the American people were already primed to view us as inferior because the colonization of the island by the United States was accompanied by tremendous propaganda about why the United States could not give freedom and independence to its newly acquired possessions after the Spanish American War. They're having debates about what to do with us and saying that Puerto Ricans are not ready for self-government, that we're not capable of self-government, that essentially we're inferior people. Many of the stereotypes that existed prior to our coming in mass numbers, stereotypes about Blacks, Native peoples, about Mexicans, those stereotypes were easily shifted onto us because we are Black, Latin, Native. So all the existing stereotypes, they just put them right on to us, and then add those that they had especially constructed to justify the colonization of the island. We get here in large numbers to work in America's factories in the World War II era. We smack into this wall of hatred and hostility against us that exists still to this day that American people don't know who we are.

**IM:** The Young Lords believed in the Independence of Puerto Rico. How did the organization advance this idea in the community?

**RP:** One of the things that distinguished us from other groups of Puerto Ricans was our constant insistence that the independence of Puerto Rico was a primary concern of

Puerto Ricans in this country. Our button said, “Tengo Puerto Rico en mi Corazon.” We always talked about independence; our role models and people we saw as our leaders were the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico and the Nationalists who had done the armed attacks in Washington. We always tried to raise the issue of independence. For example in 1970, we had a conference at Columbia University, the first Puerto Rican student conference. We pulled about 1,000 Puerto Rican students; that could not have been done had there not already existed a network of Puerto Rican clubs on campus—the Puerto Rican Student Union. Without that group, we couldn’t have done this. There were Puerto Rican clubs in almost every college. Out of that conference, we set up “Liberate Puerto Rico Now” committees. It showed the scope and breath of the student movement, and the high level of political activism in that movement. It showed that the Young Lords were providing leadership to a student movement that was directing its attention to the independence of Puerto Rico so that the issue got taken to every campus and spread throughout the country. Not only were we raising the issue of independence in the universities, but also in the high schools; moreover, we were trying to develop organizational forms, which were a little different. In some cases, we did organize Puerto Rican clubs in the high schools, but in most of the cases, we had third world clubs, Black and Puerto Rican students together. We organized something in the Bronx called Wantu Gente (Wantu in Swahili means people, and Gente in Spanish means people) a club made up of Black and Puerto Rican students. We then built a network for all these student groups; it was called the Third World Student League to link all of them in New York City and eventually in other cities. We got a sense of how strong the potential of our organization was when we had a demonstration at the United Nations calling for the independence of Puerto Rico, freedom of the Puerto Rican nationalists, and an end of police brutality in our communities, and we pulled out 10,000 people. The majority were young people who were coming together in a tremendous march and show of dynamism and energy. I mean the streets were vibrating. No one ever expected to see that kind of outpouring. It far exceeded our expectations. The pictures of those young people marching are some of the most inspirational and beautiful ones that anyone can ever see.

## OUR BUTTON SAID, “TENGO PUERTO RICO EN MI CORAZON.”

**IM:** The Young Lords Organization became the Young Lords Party in 1970 and eventually made the independence of Puerto Rico its political priority. How did this impact the members in the U.S?

**RP:** Puerto Rican independence was at the heart of everything that we were doing. Eventually the question came to a crossroads. We asked ourselves, Why aren’t you in Puerto Rico? Within the organization, there was tremendous debate about this. We voted that our primary focus was going to be the independence of Puerto Rico, and to operationalize we were going to open branches in Puerto Rico. For myself personally, I understood it intellectually, but in my heart, I’m from the Bronx. In my brain, I understood the issue of Puerto Rican independence, and I was willing to die for it. But I didn’t really want to go to Puerto Rico. I wanted to stay here; couldn’t I die for it here?

Now we’re talking about a group of young people primarily dealing with issues, we call them “the national question.” We’re trying to figure out, Are we part of the American working class? Are we Puerto Rican workers? There was a constant call, the divided

nation, that the nation is half over there, half over here. We're grappling with all this, without guidelines about what the answer is. We finally decided we're going; we have very few resources, and we decided we're going to open up two branches in Puerto Rico. The first group is sent down. I went later with a group to help with press and publicity stuff and for me it was a tremendous experience.

**IM:** In March 1971, the Young Lords Party launched "Ofensiva Rompe Cadenas" to open branches in Puerto Rico. How was the organization received on the Island?

**RP:** I remember all of the independence groups in Puerto Rico were totally pissed off with us except one, the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico. They were the only ones that embraced us. You have to imagine what we looked like. We're coming out of New York City in the early 1970s with Afros, wearing dashikis and army and navy fatigues, combat boots. I remember some of the press, some of the cartoons. One had a picture of a Fidel Castro caricature in fatigues with a big Afro saying that the army has landed from New York, and another showing us, the caricatures of us carrying bombs, and a guy waking up saying, "I had a nightmare; I thought we were invaded," and in his dream is a picture of the Young Lords.

I came back, but not before I had been able to participate in a march in Puerto Rico in commemoration of La Masacre de Ponce. We were used to marching in military formation. When people in Puerto Rico saw this, it had a tremendous impact. As we began to march, I remember looking back and seeing at least two hundred people fell in with us and were attempting to line themselves to march in formation and keep in cadence with us, and I thought the revolution was going to start then. Eventually the people of the island told us, "You got to make a choice. You can't be shuttle revolutionaries. You can't be back and forth from New York to the island."

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**IM:** Once the Young Lords Party had a presence in Puerto Rico, what happened to the debate about the role of Puerto Ricans in the United States?

**RP:** There was a debate as the strain of operating the branches in the island continued, a debate over the role of Puerto Ricans in the United States and our relationship to the American Revolution. Part of that process was having some members travel to other parts of the world and having people in China, for example, talk to us about our political views. They said, "The island of Puerto Rico is Puerto Rico, that's where the revolution will be for that island. The island of Puerto Rico has not been divided. The phenomena of imperialism going into a nation, forcing a section of its people to migrate out,



that's a universal phenomena; it's not unique to Puerto Rico. Other people have shared that. There are Algerians in Paris. There are Vietnamese in other countries. It's a result of imperialism's penetration and the impoverishment of the people. Those people who are outside its borders become national minorities inside their host country. You all got to grapple with that." The hierarchy of the organization, however, was not open to the discussion. They had invested a lot personally in the decision to open the branches.

## THE FINAL POINT WE COME TO IS THAT PUERTO RICANS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE PART OF THE AMERICAN MULTI-RACIAL, MULTI-ETHNIC WORKING CLASS.

**IM:** You're referring to Pablo "Yoruba" Guzman's trip to China in October 1971. When he returned, he initiated a "rectification movement" to rethink the move to Puerto Rico and redirect the organizing back to the United States. You and I joined this effort, but the Central Committee was divided. In your view, what happened next and its consequences?

**RP:** Some central committee members decided that we needed to do a rectification. The final point we come to is that Puerto Ricans in the United States are part of the American multi-racial, multi-ethnic working class. Yes, we felt that Puerto Ricans in America had a special responsibility and relationship to the island, but the dynamics of the Puerto Rican revolution for the island's independence would grow from the indigenous leadership, and our role in America was more of a supportive rather than a key role. That turned the whole world upside down for the organization. It was more than a rectification. I mean, for many, it was a personal flip-flopping of our whole view of how things needed to be done. At the same time, it did answer some questions. However, we were inside an organization that had a very tight bureaucratic structure.

When some of the leadership of the central committee came back to the United States to discuss this rectification movement that we had initiated, they were totally pissed off. It was a challenge, not only to their personal authority but also to a political position that they had invested in. However, they realized that we were correct politically, and so the position was allowed to stand. But those of us who took the position were punished. The result was some of the members were demoted; others were dispersed to different cities. Some of the leading people went to Philadelphia; some went to Boston. The result was that a leadership grouping inside the organization that could potentially have become another center of leadership was broken up and punished.

Temporarily the threat to the old central committee was placated. And I say this, not because I felt this at that time, I accepted the decision on the basis that the central committee is the highest-ranking body. Looking back on it, I realize that there was a lot more happening then just what was correct politically and what wasn't correct. We closed down the offices in Puerto Rico, but I think an irreversible conflict had been opened up in the organization. It had been there a long time, but I think the two positions had really been opened up, and we would see them again later on.

**IM:** With the rectification movement squashed, and the Puerto Rico branches closed, the Young Lords Party became the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers' Organization (PRRWO) in 1972. What happened next?

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**RP:** The focus shifted to the United States. We were doing a lot of studying; we were studying classic Marxist Leninist Mao Tse-tung materials, which talk primarily about the role of the industrial proletariat in leading the revolution, and we took that stuff right off the page. If the proletariat—the industrial workers—are the backbone of the revolution, we've got to go into the factories. There was a glorification of the American working class, this multinational working class. There was a denial of the racism that is deeply ingrained in the working class. There was not enough attention paid to the historical role of the labor unions in segregation and maintaining the subordination of workers of color, and we began to send people into factories. A lot of the best student organizers went into factories; a lot of the best intellectuals went into factories. If we could get people from the community to work in factories, we sent them in. In this, we were aided or hurt by our relationship with other groups, particularly the Revolutionary Union and the Black Workers' Congress, which also had a serious workers' line—that workers are everything. We're reading what Lenin experienced in Russia and beginning to adopt that 100 percent, without any kind of application to our conditions or the history of this country.

**IM:** What happened to community organizing and direct actions?

**RP:** Simultaneously as we're adopting this workers' line, we're placing much more emphasis on studying. The term we used was "the advanced element," so you could see that we were becoming more elitist in our focus. We're going into the factories, and we're going to find Lenin who wasn't a worker or Mao who wasn't a worker either. We're going to find them in that factory; and we're going to organize those people; and they will follow our leadership because implicit in what we're saying is our belief that we are correct, we got the answer. These advanced people will become the army; and we'll change society. Well, what really was happening is that we were rejecting the fundamental base of the organization and the perspective, which will serve the Puerto Rican people. We were moving away from that under a lot of different ideological disguises. The Puerto Rican people are working class people, but because of racism and exclusion, we're concentrated on the lowest strata of the working class and unemployed. We're not in the crucial industries that you need to paralyze a nation and then follow

the industrial model. We're taking a position ideologically that leads us to reject the organizing of the Puerto Rican masses and to reject our own people.

**IM:** By this time, most of the original central committee and early members had left the organization. What were you experiencing personally as you saw the changes taking place?

**RP:** There were things that I knew were wrong; they felt wrong inside. I could not tell you why according to Marx, Lenin, or Mao, but I knew that something was terribly wrong. We rejected brave men and women who were prepared to give their lives for our organization and vision. When the central committee made decisions, it was tremendously difficult for me to challenge the leadership. Even when I thought there was something wrong, I wouldn't discuss it. We allowed our world to become so narrow that the only people who had validity were the people in the organization; we no longer talked to other people or valued their opinions, and we became narrower and narrower.

I allowed actions to be taken against people that later were taken against me. I allowed the birth of the monster that eventually destroyed the organization—not so much personal cowardliness as a political cowardliness. I mean I would still go out and be willing to risk my life and challenge the system, but it was political cowardliness to be politically incorrect, to be ostracized, to be thrown out of the family. Never allow yourself to be in an organization that becomes so narrow that it doesn't speak to the larger society, that you don't listen to the people you claim you are serving, because it reached the point where we no longer used the term “serve and protect” the people. We started saying, “We want to lead the people.” We were deciding who was advanced and who was backward; we were labeling the people the same way imperialism labels us, and we began to recreate the hierarchy of structure that imperialism puts on our people.

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I still believe in building collectives, but people have to be free. There's got to be democratic life in the collectives, and whenever you're in a group that starts to tell you can't raise your opposition, then you can't be in the group. I also believe in centralism. I say raise your opposition, the group votes to do something, you got to go along with it or leave the group. I still believe that or else we'll never get anything done, we'll always be two hundred people with four hundred ideas.

**IM:** What was the organizing work that you were doing, and how were you able to function within the oppressive, nondemocratic structure of PRRWO?

**RP:** I believed that we could resist the move to divorce us from the community. Even as the organization began to divorce itself from the masses, I was still able personally to do what I had joined to do. I didn't come into the organization to be a theoretician, so even while I participated in the nightly training sessions, I was organizing at Brooklyn College for the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization; I went back in '73.

The first year, I was thrown into a situation on campus dominated by the Jewish Defense League (JDL), fascists operating in the name of Jewish people, who our community had fought in 1969 when I first got involved around community control of the schools, who we had fought in the struggle for open admissions. I was teaching Puerto Rican Studies and recruited some of the best young cadres off the Brooklyn College campus. We came into conflict with the JDL because every issue of greater participation and decision-making for Puerto Rican and Black people on that campus became a major issue because the fascists would not allow us to expand. We began to fight physically for our right to engage in any kind of political discussion we chose. PRRWO didn't repudiate this because we were getting good press; we were building a mass movement. We were recruiting a lot of people because the Brooklyn College struggle became a centerpiece for activists through the City and the tri-State area, and so it gave the organization credibility.

PRRWO began to discuss a merger with other organizations. All the groups were shutting down all the political work that was going on around the country. This was a national phenomenon, and how could such a phenomena have taken place without being coordinated someplace? I cooperated with the purges. We were purging people politically and defamed them afterward, saying they didn't have the interest of the working class at heart.

My partner, Diana, the woman I was married to then, was organizing on the Lower East Side, a continuation of the struggle for community control of schools. She too was making advances. In 1975, the only mass work left in New York was the work on the Lower East Side and at Brooklyn College, headed by a brother and a sister married to each other who had a following of people that were not yet in the organization. PRRWO leaders went into open criticism of our work, saying it was diverting the organization from building the party that would lead the revolution. For me, the idea of having built a student movement, and then just walking away was unacceptable, so we continued to struggle.

**IM:** Police infiltrators and opportunists joined forces to destroy the movement. When I resigned in 1975, I was attacked and saw that PRRWO leaders would continue to turn on members. How did your differences with PRRWO finally play out?

**RP:** One night there was a meeting of my wife's group, and she didn't come home. I started calling around the city. I'm picked up by people in the defense ministry to take me to the meeting place, which turns out to be an apartment that we've never used before. When I get there, it's mostly what's left of the central committee, defense cadres, and myself.

Now is my turn to experience the kind of interrogation that we've done with other people. But this time, it takes a twist that I was not prepared for—I'm accused of being a police agent. I'm being told that I got to confess, that if I don't cooperate, my wife will be killed. This begins a night of interrogation and physical beatings. Overpowering everyone there was pretty much out of the question; in addition, I still didn't know where my wife was. It was a very long night, and the beating was relatively severe. What was the most painful part was that some of the people who carried out the

beating I had recruited into the organization. That they could think that I could be a police agent was the most disorienting. That a brother who I had practically raised, took him into our collective home, could beat me and put a cigarette out on my hand, and look me in the eye, and say, “You’re an agent, and we want to know the network of agents that you still have in the organization.” That he could believe that was real hard for me. At one point, another member who had been a medic in Vietnam was brought in because I had bleeding in one of my eyes. I said, “Bro, how could you deal with this?” He said, “Listen, you’re a fucking agent, and you should just shut up, and maybe you’ll get out of here alive.” This was somebody who, when I joined the organization, was a political prisoner, and I fought for his release. It was apparent; there was nothing I could say.

## I’M BEING TOLD THAT I GOT TO CONFESS, THAT IF I DON’T COOPERATE, MY WIFE WILL BE KILLED. THIS BEGINS A NIGHT OF INTERROGATION AND PHYSICAL BEATINGS.

Eventually Diana was brought to the apartment on the second day. We got mostly beatings, no food, no water, and the promise that the beatings were going to continue. I was disoriented; I had broken ribs; I had a lot of face injuries. I had been knocked down twenty, thirty times, kicked and stomped on the floor and had cigarettes put out on me. How could these people who were my brothers and sisters, how could they do this? Finally, I guess the third night for Diana, people left. I learned later that they left to grab somebody else. I was in very bad shape, and Diana was too, but because of their own chauvinism, they didn’t suspect she would resist physically. They left us guarded by only one person, and we were told we couldn’t talk to each other. Now there’s only one person, the situation changes a little, and we signaled each other that we’re going to have to do it now because I really believed that we would be killed when they came back. So we just jumped him. Diana broke a bottle over his head, knocked him down. We subdued him, got out of the place, ran into the night, totally bugged out, not knowing what to do, not knowing who to trust.

One thing that I knew, even as the beatings were going on, it was flashing in my mind that this is what happened to the Panthers. This is the shootout. This is the setup. Someone in here is a cop. The Panthers were set up in the same way; accusations, someone blown away, and once the war started, there was no turning back. I knew that was at play, and once we escaped, we talked about it: now there was no one we could trust, there was no one we could trust—I mean, because we had been betrayed by people so close to us, we didn’t believe there was anyone in the political movement that we could trust.

Looking back on it and seeing when we had debates about the Divided Nation and who participated in the beatings and interrogation, the most enthusiastic participants, among our leadership was Gloria Fontanez Wright, who changed her name a number of

times; her cousin Carmen Cruz also participated very enthusiastically in the beating and in directing defense cadres. Other people participated. Some were dupes. Just as I was able to turn on friends and say they're enemies of the people and discredit them in the community, so I was betrayed myself. For the most part, people have made amends, but I have a special anger for those who orchestrated and led this. That's why I have to say Gloria—this person carried out the work of the government in our organization, set up a situation that brought us close to a shooting war. When I went back to Brooklyn College, we put out a statement denouncing the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization.

**IM:** Certainly COINTELPRO played a major role in destroying the social movement and in demoralizing activists. How did you personally return to political struggle?

THE GREATEST MOMENT FOR ME PERSONALLY WAS WHEN THE NATIONALISTS GOT OUT OF PRISON THE NEXT YEAR; WE WERE ABLE TO GIVE LOLITA LEBRÓN THE PUERTO RICAN FLAG THAT WE HUNG FROM THE STATUE OF LIBERTY.

**RP:** I was able to reconnect with folks from Lincoln Hospital, and we reformed the Committee to Free the Puerto Rican Nationalists. Well, they were already functioning as a committee to free the nationalists, and I joined and brought in some people from Brooklyn College, and all of us carried out the takeover of the Statue of Liberty in 1978 to dramatize the continued incarceration of the Puerto Rican nationalists and the lack of medical treatment and left behind what is a symbol of Puerto Rican militancy, the flag of Puerto Rico hanging from the Statue of Liberty. The greatest moment for me personally was when the Nationalists got out of prison the next year; we were able to give Lolita Lebrón the Puerto Rican flag that we hung from the Statue of Liberty.

Meanwhile at Brooklyn College, this was 1978; the country was moving more and more in a reactionary direction. The Bakke decision had been passed. Open admissions had been eliminated. In the first year, 51,000 students dropped out of CUNY; the enrollment of students of color dropped by almost half in a two-year period. We realized that the future was bleak for ethnic studies. We wanted to leave a legacy of struggle, and we began to battle against the Bakke decision. We organized an electoral alliance called the United Student League and took control of the student government. We fought it out on the campus, literally fought it out. We pulled six busloads of people to Washington to demonstrate against the Bakke decision. We took over numerous buildings; we fought the police in pitched battles where a lot of students were hurt; the school deputized members of the JDL. It was important for

us to stand up and say “Presente” even though we couldn’t reverse the reactionary tidal wave that was sweeping the nation.

I was thrown out of Brooklyn College; I was fired, of course. I was on trial for a couple of years because I was accused of conspiracy to incite a riot and assault on some JDL members. All those charges were defeated in court two years later. I was also tried by the CUNY system, and my jury was composed of the presidents of all the colleges. Since we knew we wouldn’t get a fair shake, we disrupted the trial and said it was a kangaroo court. I demanded a trial of my peers, and there wasn’t one Puerto Rican there. I said I wasn’t even going to explain myself to a bunch of white racists who were implementing a plan to close the doors of the universities in our faces. After that I couldn’t work anyplace. Some of the people who fired me died, and I outlived them, and then I started sneaking back into CUNY at night and teaching classes.

In the early 1980s, we built a movement to oppose the movie *Fort Apache* on the basis that it denigrated and demeaned Puerto Rican people, especially Puerto Rican and Black women and our young people, and we brought this successful nationwide movement against the film and soon after that we put all the groups that we had united in the Fort Apache movement into an organization that still exists today. It is called the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights. I’m proud to say that we’ve been very effective in combating racial violence and police brutality and that there are still many battles to be fought, that we have continued to be able to free people who have been treated unjustly, and most important, we hope to continue to raise to our young people that we’re proud Puerto Ricans, and if people don’t like it, we’ll kick them in the ass.

