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March 5, 1975

TO ALL ORGANIZERS AND NATIONAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

Attached is an edited version of the presentation on the Puerto Rican struggle in the U.S. given to the 14th YSA National Convention. The general line of this presentation was approved by the National Executive Committee, but the presentation was not voted on by the convention.

Organizers may find it useful to circulate this report to comrades actively participating in Puerto Rican struggles. It can also be used in conjunction with the article by Doug Jenness in the December 1974 International Socialist Review in preparing classes on the Puerto Rican struggle.

Comradely,

Olga Rodríguez

Olga Rodriguez
YSA National Office

PRESENTATION ON THE PUERTO RICAN STRUGGLE IN THE U.S.

by Jose G. Perez

The purpose of this presentation is to begin a discussion within the Young Socialist Alliance nationally on the struggle of Puerto Ricans in the United States. In this way it is different from the line reports that have been presented to the convention. Because of this, there will be no plenary discussion or vote. However, at the workshop on the Puerto Rican struggle comrades will have an opportunity to discuss this presentation and how we can most effectively participate in the Puerto Rican movement in the U.S.

Since the last national gathering of our movement in August, four significant actions have occurred in relation to Puerto Ricans in the United States.

The first was the protest in Newark against the savage police attack on the annual Hispanic Festival which takes place in that city at the beginning of September. There were several protest rallies and demonstrations, some of which were also attacked by rioting police leading to the murder of two Puerto Ricans. A coalition formed in response to the government's savagery demanded that the Puerto Ricans who had been arrested be released, that an independent investigation of the police brutality take place, and that the cops who brutalized the community be brought to justice.

The second event was the suspension of Luis Fuentes, school superintendent in New York City's District One. This was an important development in the continuing fight in District 1, where the predominantly Puerto Rican community of the Lower East Side of Manhattan has been waging a fight for several years for community control of the schools. At the beginning of this fall's school term, the racist Shankerite majority of the local school board also removed principals who had been appointed by previous, pro-community-control school superintendent, Luis Fuentes. This sparked a response that included many protests of several hundreds, school boycotts, and sit-ins at some of the schools.

The third action was the Oct. 27 rally of 15-20,000 at Madison Square Garden for "Independence for Puerto Rico." This was not only the largest pro-independence demonstration ever held in the United States, but also the largest organized protest of Puerto Ricans in this country.

The fourth was the struggle at Brooklyn College for Puerto Rican control over the appointment of an administrator for the Puerto Rican studies department. This was one of the largest student struggles to take place anywhere in the U.S. this fall, reaching its high point with a one-day student strike and rally of 2,000.

These are just four of the more prominent fights that Puerto Ricans have been involved in in the last four months. These four struggles --

against police brutality, for community control of schools, for independence for Puerto Rico, and for student-faculty control of Puerto Rican studies departments -- express the diversified scope and massive character of the response by Puerto Ricans to their oppression. By themselves, they would indicate to the YSA the importance of this especially oppressed sector of America's working people. But to fully understand the significance of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. it is useful to look at the development of this oppressed national minority.

The development of a large Puerto Rican population in the United States, which today numbers 2 million people, is a very recent one. When the U.S. took control of the island by force in 1898, there were only a few hundred Puerto Ricans in this country. Although there was some immigration during the first half of this century, the great migration started after World War II.

Since that time, the U.S. government has promoted a conscious policy of forcing Puerto Ricans to leave their homeland and come to the United States. Due to imperialist control of the island's economy, unemployment there has been at least 30 percent since the 1930s. Wages have been much lower than those in the U.S., but prices have been just as high or higher. To facilitate the pushing out of Puerto Ricans from their island, the federal government has set air fares between the U.S. and the island at a relatively low rate. It is a lower per-mile fare than the fares charged for flights of similar length in the United States.

At first this pushed-out population was concentrated primarily in New York, but over time it has spread, to the point where only about half of this population lives in New York. The rest are primarily concentrated along the eastern seaboard, but there are also large Puerto Rican communities in Chicago and one recent study indicated that there may be as many as 100,000 in California.

The migration is not all a one-way thing, and there are many who return to Puerto Rico each year. Nevertheless, a substantial permanent population seems to be developing. One indication is that 40 percent of the Puerto Rican people in the U.S. were born here. The major portion of that 40 percent is very young; the overwhelming majority of adults were born on the island. If present trends continue, the next decade or two will see U.S.-born Puerto Ricans playing a larger and larger role in the Puerto Rican communities. Already differences between U.S.-born Puerto Ricans and the generation of their parents in culture, attitudes, and ties to the island are discernible. How these will further evolve remains to be seen.

In the United States Puerto Ricans are subjected to economic super-exploitation, national oppression and racial discrimination. It is very hard to obtain accurate figures on the extent of this oppression and its developments over the last 25 years, but the general patterns are clear. Puerto Ricans are among the last hired and first fired. They

have the worst, most dangerous, and lowest paying jobs. For example, the unemployment rate for Puerto Ricans is at least twice that for whites, and Lucille Rose, the Commissioner of Employment for New York City estimated that the real unemployment rate among Puerto Ricans in that city is 25 percent. In New Jersey, a state that has a quarter of a million Puerto Ricans, the income of Puerto Ricans is 44 percent less than that for whites, and 17 percent less than that for Blacks.

Puerto Ricans are forced to live in some of the worst urban slums in the nation. Possibly the worst is South Bronx, where a quarter of a million Puerto Ricans live. Of these, the government estimates that 10-15,000 are addicts. Sixty of the eighty thousand housing units are "substandard, dilapidated and in violation of the city code," according to New York City officials. The cops in South Bronx are so conscious of their role as an alien occupation army that they call their 41st precinct headquarters, "Fort Apache."

Herman Badillo, a Democratic Party politico not renowned for denunciations of the evils of the capitalist system described South Bronx this way: "Bad as the conditions were in Puerto Rico in the late 1930s when there was a depression in Puerto Rico that made our depression here look like prosperity, the conditions in South Bronx today are infinitely worse."

Housing, jobs, education--in every sphere of American society, capitalism treats Puerto Ricans as inferior beings. But Puerto Ricans, inspired by the struggles of Blacks and other national liberation movements have begun to organize and fight back against this oppression within the borders of the United States.

The first signs of this awakening movement coincided with, and were inspired by, the massive ghetto rebellions of the Black communities that occurred in the mid and late 1960s. In 1966, there was a revolt against police brutality by Puerto Ricans on Chicago's northwest side. In 1967, it was a long, hot summer in East Harlem and other barrios in New York City. And there have been other rebellions in many cities in New Jersey, in Boston, and many places where Puerto Ricans live in large concentrations.

In the late 1960s a Puerto Rican student movement developed. Within a couple of years Puerto Rican student organizations spread from one campus to another. Students demanded Puerto Rican studies departments, bilingual and bicultural education, and more Puerto Rican professors.

One of the most significant struggles of this time was a fight for open admissions at the city colleges of New York, the CUNY system. Many rallies and protests involving Puerto Ricans, together with Black students, were held. Despite government repression, major concessions were won, and the number of Puerto Rican students in CUNY schools quadrupled between 1967 and 1972.

Puerto Ricans have been involved in many other struggles. Some that are associated primarily with the Black liberation movement also included Puerto Ricans, for example, the 1971 Attica rebellion. If you look at the list of inmates murdered by Rockefeller you'll find several were Puerto Ricans. The prisoners' demands included a Spanish-language library and Spanish-speaking medical personnel.

A sector of the Puerto Rican population that is particularly oppressed are Puerto Rican farmworkers. Sixty thousand travel from Puerto Rico each year to be used as seasonal labor in U.S. fields. One fourth of these are covered by contracts negotiated between the Puerto Rican government and the growers. Under these agreements the farmworkers are supposed to get at least minimum wage. The other three fourths don't even get that,

In Connecticut, migrant tobacco workers have organized the Asociacion de Trabajadores Agricolas (Association of Agricultural Workers). This association seeks to replace the Puerto Rican government as bargaining agent and wants to obtain a \$3-an-hour pay scale.

Puerto Ricans have been involved in movements against poor housing, for control of their institutions in their communities, for the right to use Spanish in voting, in school and on the job. They have been involved in fights against the discriminatory hiring policies in many industries, like the construction industry in New York, and have demanded preferential hiring and upgrading of Puerto Ricans.

An important aspect of the struggles of Puerto Ricans has been solidarity with the pro-independence and workers' movement on the island. A thousand strings tie Puerto Ricans in the U.S. to relatives and friends in Puerto Rico, including language, culture, the continuing migration, reverse migration, and vacation visits. Moreover, the existence of the Puerto Rican national minority in the U.S. is a direct product of the imperialist domination of the country and the policies that Washington has chosen to implement, which have forced hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans to come to the U.S. As Puerto Ricans here rebel against their oppression, it is easy for them to see how this oppression is intricately connected with the island's colonial status.

Actions expressing solidarity with the struggle against colonial domination have not only occurred around general pro-independence slogans, but also around specific issues. For example, a few months ago there were protests at the United Nations against U.S. plans to set up a huge superport and refinery complex to process Mideast oil for U.S. mainland use. About a month ago, there was a rally in New York in solidarity with an important strike by government employees in Puerto Rico.

This multi-faceted movement by Puerto Ricans in the U.S. is clearly a nationalist movement. This nationalism is a growing consciousness among masses of Puerto Ricans that they are oppressed because of their nationality, that, as a people, they are under attack. The central thrust

of the movement is to take control over the lives of Puerto Ricans away from the racist rulers of this country and place it in the hands of the Puerto Rican people themselves.

The YSA completely supports the nationalist movement of Puerto Ricans; we identify wholeheartedly with the nationalist sentiment of the Puerto Rican masses; and we champion the demands of Puerto Ricans against their oppression.

We understand that the nationalism of the oppressed is totally different from the nationalism of the oppressor. The racist call for "white power"--as the events in Boston show--leads those white workers who identify with it to ally with the rulers of this country against the most oppressed sectors of the working class.

The nationalist call for "Puerto Rican Power" leads Puerto Ricans who identify with it to fight against the rulers of this country. Moreover, because of the overwhelmingly working-class composition of the Puerto Rican population, many demands that are raised are directed not only against national oppression but also against class exploitation. Puerto Rican nationalism therefore also represents a step towards class consciousness by an especially oppressed sector of the working class.

Two programmatic concepts that have emerged in the nationalist movement are very important for the YSA. The first is the demand for Puerto Rican control over the institutions of the Puerto Rican communities, for Puerto Rican control over their own lives.

This demand -- community control -- has been at the heart of the struggle in New York's School District 1, the most prominent Puerto Rican struggle in the U.S. The battle in that community has been raging for several years, and through ups and downs, partial victories and defeats, the desire of the community to control the schools has mobilized repeatedly hundreds and sometimes thousands of working people.

A second is the demand for independence for Puerto Rico. The Madison Square Garden rally showed the great potential to organize and mobilize tens of thousands of people around this demand. The YSA supports this demand. We believe that Puerto Ricans have the right to self-determination, and that a substantial number favor independence over statehood or commonwealth status. Furthermore, our support for self-determination is unconditional. For example, as Marxists we recognize that full national liberation for Puerto Rico is not possible without a socialist revolution there, and we support the struggle for a socialist Puerto Rico. However, we don't make support for a socialist Puerto Rico a pre-condition for participating in a struggle to demand that the U.S. government get out and let the Puerto Rican people themselves run their own affairs.

Both the District 1 protests and the Oct. 27 pro-independence demonstration embody a very important strategic concept. This concept is the strategy of the independent mobilization of working people in mass actions around demands directed against the capitalist class and its representatives in the government. The strategy of massive independent action is very important. Through such actions, the working class and its allies learn to rely on their own strength and to fight for their rights against the government.

This strategy is totally different from and in contradiction to both reformist and ultraleft strategies for social change.

The reformist strategy consists of relying on liberal politicians to solve the problems of the masses. This strategy is based on the idea that the evils of the capitalist system can be reformed without abolishing the system altogether, and that there is a so-called "progressive" wing of the capitalist class which is both willing and able to carry out these reforms.

This is the concept which lay behind the Unidad Popular strategy in Chile. There the leaders of the workers movement, especially those of the Stalinist Communist Party, told the masses to rely on the "good" military and the "good" capitalists. When the coup occurred, the masses were not prepared to defeat the savage attack unleashed by the capitalist and their army.

The ultraleft strategy substitutes the actions of a small group of revolutionaries for the independent action of the masses. The bombings of some U.S. companies' offices in New York shortly before the Oct. 27 rally is an example of this strategy. The ruling class uses and sometimes even promotes these kind of actions to isolate revolutionaries from the masses of people, thereby making it easier to victimize leftists. The many unsuccessful attempts to carry out a revolution by small bands of armed guerillas isolated from the masses that have occurred in Latin America in the last fifteen years show conclusively that this strategy doesn't work.

Among the most persistent exponents of the reformist strategy in the Puerto Rican movement are the Moscow Stalinists of the Communist Party and Young Workers Liberation League. For example, when Herman Badillo ran for mayor of New York in the Democratic Party primaries, the Communist Party's paper, the Daily World, joined ruling-class mouthpieces like the New York Times in backing his campaign. But even Badillo himself admitted the total bankruptcy of his strategy when he told the New York Times that "It's going to take two, three or even more generations to start solving the problems" of the Puerto Ricans living in South Bronx. That's the real meaning of Democratic Party politics -- wait forever before even beginning to solve the problems!

One of the main exponents of the ultraleft strategy is the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO). PRRWO has been part of the effort by several Maoist organizations to get together to build

a new "Communist" party. Due to its history in the Puerto Rican student movement, PRRWO exercises some influence on a number of campuses in New York and is a serious opponent of the YSA.

PRRWO originally started out as the Young Lords Organization in New York City. Initiated by a number of college students, it quickly became the largest and best-known militant Puerto Rican nationalist organization. Among the most prominent leaders of the Young Lords at first were a number of Afro-Boricuas, Black Puerto Ricans, some of whom had participated in the Black liberation movement and who were influenced by the major currents in the Black movement.

At that time, the Young Lords participated in a number of militant actions that won it great prestige among young radicals. For example, they helped to initiate a struggle to make Lincoln Hospital, which "serves" the South Bronx community, responsive to the people's needs. Many of the Lords were prominent leaders of the Puerto Rican Student Union that had chapters on many New York campuses. The Lords were active around many issues, ranging from the city's failure to collect garbage in East Harlem to the war in Vietnam.

The Young Lords had a 13-point program that reflected the militant, nationalist character of the group. The first point was: "We want self-determination for Puerto Ricans, liberation on the island and inside the United States." Other points included demands for community control, for immediate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, for bilingual, bicultural education, for equality for women and for the right of Puerto Ricans to defend themselves against repression.

Despite many positive aspects of their program and activities, the Young Lords degenerated into a Maoist sect because of ultraleftism. As time went on, their rhetoric became increasingly violent, and their tactics more and more involved "militant" actions by isolated groups of Lords who could easily become victimized. Numerous accusations of different members and leaders being police agents were made, and large-scale purges took place, leading to a substantial shift in the composition of leadership.

The qualitative transformation from a militant, nationalist youth organization to a Maoist sect was completed by mid-1972, when the Lords changed their name to the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization. Since that time, they've continued as a Maoist sect, and have lost much, but not all, of the influence they originally had. Their political outlook is exemplified by their activities in the Brooklyn College upsurge this fall, where their ultraleft tactics contributed to the demobilization of the students and consequently a setback for the Puerto Rican student movement. Comrades Mark Friedman and Robb Wright have written a contribution printed in the YSDB Vol. XVIII, No. 6 that explains this struggle and the role of PRRWO in it.

The group that has replaced the Young Lords as the main expression of militant, left-wing Puerto Rican nationalist sentiment is the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP). The PSP which grew out of an organization called the Pro-Independence Movement is an extension of an island-based party.

In Puerto Rico itself, the PSP is the largest radical organization, and, from all we can tell, continues to grow. Just this November, for example, the PSP in Puerto Rico transformed its twice-weekly newspaper into a 24-page daily. PSP members are prominent leaders of a number of trade unions on the island, and its youth organization, the Pro-Independence University Federation, is the largest left-wing political organization on the country's campuses.

In the United States, the PSP has grown rapidly in the last couple of years, establishing a bilingual weekly edition of their paper, setting up many new branches, and recently initiating a campus-based youth organization associated with their party called the Puerto Rican Socialist University Federation (FUSP).

In New York at least they have open headquarters and a bookstore, and they were the main force initiating the Madison Square Garden Rally for Independence.

In the United States the main activity of the PSP has been focused around the independence issue and solidarity with struggles on the island. Hence, they have often not played a major role in struggles like that of District 1, limiting their participation to support through articles in their paper.

The party in the U.S. is a group with diverse origins. Some of the leaders received their first political training in the student movement on the island; others came out of the student movement in the U.S., including some who had been part of various socialist groups in the United States.

Moreover, the PSP is influenced by the different positions of various groups in the workers movement here and internationally. They are particularly influenced by the traditions of the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico, which in many cases engaged in small adventurist actions that, while they were very heroic, were ineffective in bringing an end to U.S. imperialist colonization. Also, they are influenced by groups like the MIR of Chile, and the ERP and left-wing Peronists in Argentina. And since their early days, the PSP leadership has maintained close ties with the leaders of the Cuban workers state. On international issues, the PSP frequently adopts Castro's point of view.

The political positions of the PSP reflect these diverse and clashing influences.

Some of their positions are good. For example, at the first convention of the U.S. section of their party in April 1973, a resolution was approved denying any support to capitalist politicians and specifically Herman Badillo who at the time was running for mayor of New York.

During Badillo's campaign they ran several articles explaining that he was a capitalist politician. Recently, they took a positive attitude toward the Dec. 14 antiracist mobilization in Boston, giving it prominent coverage in their newspaper and urging a big mobilization against the right-wing drive.

Other positions they have taken we disagree with. We think they often involve adaptations to either ultraleftism or Stalinism. One example is the position they took in relation to the expulsion of Solzhenitsyn, which simply repeated all the arguments of the Stalinists. Another was their response to the publication of Prairie Fire, a book recently put out by the Weather Underground. PSP leaders gave great praise in their newspaper to this ultraleft and pro-terrorist tract.

Some of our less significant self-proclaimed "Trotskyist" opponents are totally befuddled by the political positions of the PSP. The group that possibly takes the cake is the Workers League, which analyzes the PSP as one of the main parties of what they call the "Puerto Rican National Bourgeoisie." After the powerful Oct. 27 protest, for example, these muddleheads rushed to print a big attack on the PSP for initiating the action, calling it a "new stage in the bankruptcy of the PSP," and just a couple of weeks ago they ran another big attack on the PSP calling it "counter-revolutionary", "traitors," and charging that the PSP was consciously preparing a Chile-style defeat for the Puerto Rican masses.

The Workers League falls into these contemptible positions because they're sectarians. In the dream world of these people you're either 100 percent ultraradical communists or you're a conscious agent of the capitalist class. The sectarians feel compelled to put some kind of label on any political formation so that they can then look up the appropriate denunciation in their rule book.

Our attitude to the PSP has nothing in common with that of political infants like the Workers League. What is decisive for us in determining our attitude to the PSP is not this or that political position of that party, but the fact that today it is one of the main organized expressions of militant Puerto Rican nationalist sentiment in the U.S. This doesn't mean that we bend to mistaken political positions of the PSP. It means that we have to be very conscious of formulating our criticisms so that they can't possibly be misunderstood as sideline, carping, sectarian attacks, but are clearly oriented toward convincing people and winning them to our views. The fact that the PSP is not a hardened Stalinist or social-democrat organization, but a heterogeneous organization makes it easier to work with PSPers and discuss with them.

Finally, I want to outline some general tasks of the YSA in relation to the Puerto Rican struggle in the coming months.

The first is to continue educating the YSA membership and other young radicals on the colonial domination of Puerto Rico, the oppressor

of Puerto Ricans in the U.S., and why North American working people should support Puerto Rican liberation. In carrying out this work, distribution of The Militant and Young Socialist newspapers will play a major role. YSA members can also follow the Puerto Rican radical press, especially the PSP's paper, Claridad.

Second, the YSA will continue to support and give leadership to struggles of Puerto Ricans in the United States, advocating and implementing the mass-action strategy. In this respect, the participation of the YSA in the District 1 struggle has been exemplary.

Third, we want to build the Camejo-Reid campaign as one of our best vehicles both for publicizing Puerto Rican struggles and actions as well as for explaining our own strategy and tactics. The fact that Camejo is a latino will open many doors for building the campaign among Puerto Ricans, and we should be aggressive in utilizing all the opportunities that open up.

Fourth, we want to involve young Puerto Rican militants and Puerto Rican organizations in the on-going antiracist struggle focused around the Boston busing issue. As we've been discussing at this convention, the racist drive in Boston is not only an attack on Black people, but is part of an overall offensive against the oppressed minorities. This is applicable to Puerto Ricans in a very immediate sense, since 7 percent of the population of Boston is Puerto Rican and they are also affected by the racist hysteria being whipped up there. Also, the fact that Jean-Louis Yvon, who was almost lynched last October, was not an Afro-American but was a Black Haitian should demonstrate that the victim of a racist attack could just as easily be a Black Puerto Rican.

Fifth, and this is our central task, we want to win young Puerto Ricans to the ideas of Trotskyism and to the YSA. We understand that for an American socialist revolution to be possible, it will have to be led by a multinational revolutionary vanguard that includes the best militants from the various sectors of the working class in this country. The central task the YSA set itself at the time of its founding, and which remains our most important job today, is to help build that revolutionary leadership. Armed with our revolutionary Marxist program, and our understanding of the dynamics of the different struggle of the exploited and the oppressed, we can make significant strides towards our goal of becoming a mass revolutionary socialist youth organization.