

REPORT ON MPI PRESS TOUR AND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, APRIL 21-28,
by Judy W. and Syd S., May 24, 1968

The Movimiento Pro Independencia de Puerto Rico invited 200 representatives of the left wing press in the U.S. to tour the island and, as fraternal delegates, to cover the 7th National Assembly of MPI. The general purpose of the invitations was to begin building an active base of support for the independence struggle within the United States.

Only about eleven groups accepted, including representatives from the Worker, National Guardian, the Militant, the Young Socialist, NBAWADU, Student Mobilization Committee, and Liberation. We were told that Stokely Carmichael had been invited to speak, but because MPI had invited him personally (instead of requesting a SNCC delegate through the SNCC Central Committee) SNCC sent no one.

The Press Tour

The tour of the island lasted four days. The general emphasis was on the U.S. robbing of the best land for military installations, on the unbelievable general poverty (the average income is \$1,000 per year), on seeing the MPI in action, and on meeting members from the different regions. We participated in an antidraft demonstration at La Princesa, the infamous jail in San Juan, in response to the arrest of an MPI member for draft resistance. One hundred people participated in the protest, although it had been called less than an hour before. In Ponce, in the south, we participated in a press conference with radio and newspaper reporters. The press conference was called primarily to attack the Puerto Rican police and press for harassment of the MPI, to protest the threats against the 7th National Assembly, and to announce that the Assembly would go on in spite of the attacks.

Also in Ponce we saw how the MPI organizes street rallies using portable displays and movies on Cuba and Vietnam. During the day they go out to an area with a sound truck and announce that the film will be shown, and that information on the draft will be available. The meeting we attended was large -- between 150 and 200 people -- and the reception to the MPI and the films was excellent. At one point, when Fidel appeared on the screen, the crowd started cheering.

On Thursday, April 25 we attended a much larger press conference at which the main leaders of the MPI discussed the Assembly. In addition to reaffirming their plans for activity around a 1968 electoral boycott, the press release pledged an increase in the campaign of solidarity with Vietnam and of opposition and organized resistance to the draft. The most controversial issue was the declaration of the right of the Puerto Rican people to take up arms in the pursuit of independence. (The MPI leadership has carefully explained that the assertion of this right does not change the character of the MPI as a popular organization, aimed at winning a majority of the Puerto Rican people to an active

struggle for independence.) The press, largely reactionary, tried to link the MPI with the terrorist activities against U.S. owned businesses taking place in San Juan, but Juan Mari Bras was careful to separate the MPI from the actions, while declaring that the MPI was "not opposed" to them if they were carried out in the name of liberation. By citing bombing attacks on left wing lectures at the University of Puerto Rico the MPI was able to put the onus on the U.S. government for attempting to stifle freedom of speech and for endangering the Puerto Rican people. The press conference as a whole was an excellent example of the art of the defensive formulation. Many of the national leaders of the MPI are lawyers, and their consciousness on the questions of "legality" serves as a good example for the rest of the radical movement -- in the U.S. as well as in Latin America.

History and Organization

The MPI was founded in 1959 under the strong influence of the Cuban Revolution. It was formed as a reaction to the existing political parties, including the so-called Pro-Independence Party. While they endorse "Marxism-Leninism" as a critical and valuable tool for any revolutionary movement, they reject the bureaucratic and sectarian policies of the world's Communist Parties, and support the Cuban leadership. At present the membership attributed to MPI by the bourgeois press is 15,000.

Three major organizational concepts have been developed by the MPI both in the recent history of the organization and at the National Assembly. First is the question of making the organization more of a disciplined vanguard party. To this end the MPI has recently created the status of sympathizer for those who cannot take on an active role in the organization, established a pledge system, etc. Second, the MPI has been working very hard at developing the concept of a collective leadership, through education, discussion and cooperation on the fundamental tasks of the organization. Thirdly, in sharpening the political program of the organization, great care has been taken to develop democratic procedures, starting with the various local missions (corresponding to our locals, but functioning somewhat more as regional centers).

The National Assembly, to be held every two years, is the highest body of MPI. It is made up of elected delegates, and discusses, modifies and approves the various political and organizational resolutions that are brought before it. It also elects the majority of the National Mission (which corresponds to our National Committee except that a section of it consists of locally elected representatives of local missions). The National Mission in turn elects the Political Commission (which roughly corresponds to our NEC), and two other commissions on organization and finance.

The missions function in much the same way as our locals. There is a central mission in each area which is a central meeting place, a source of literature, sends a fund quota to the National Mission, and is responsible for establishing local missions in nearby towns. Six people, at a minimum, can constitute a mission.

In addition to the membership classifications of "militant" (full member) and sympathizer, there is a third classification, largely secret because of government harassment, which consists of government employees and others whose identity has to be kept confidential. This grouping, referred to as the "second level," serves as a valuable source of information for the MPI in regard to government deals with U.S. corporations, such as the one recently exposed which would entirely strip Puerto Rico of its valuable copper resources within twenty or thirty years -- at no additional cost to the U.S. companies.

The leadership of the MPI is a somewhat unstable amalgam at present. Most of the leadership, however, consider themselves to be Fidelistas, and the Communist Party of Puerto Rico and the Maoists play little or no role in the MPI. Present in the national leadership are non-practicing Catholics (such as Juan Mari Bras), members of the old Nationalist Party of Pedro Albizu Campos, ex-CPers, and an important layer of young party leaders who consider themselves internationalists, revolutionaries and socialists. Norman Pietri, one of the leading members of the Political Commission, falls into this last category, as does Ramón Arbona, editor of Claridad, and most of the leaders of the Federacion Universitario Pro Independencia (FUPI).

National Assembly

The National Assembly held during our visit there was the first held in seven years. It partially marked a culmination of the changes in the character of MPI, and partially represented an intensification of that as yet unfinished process. A new political thesis, or resolution, was presented to the Assembly, as well as a new organizational resolution. The thesis of 1962 was the product of several tendencies -- former members of the Pro-Independence Party, former members of the Nationalist Party, and the new radicals. The changes in MPI since those first documents have been profound.

As articulated by Juan Mari Bras in the full Assembly session, the MPI sees its role as that of a patriotic vanguard party. Mari Bras carefully explained that they did not see themselves as creating a crisis of world imperialism, but as being an essential (subjective) factor in the development of the Puerto Rican revolution once that crisis overtook American imperialism. He went further to explain that the role of the MPI was not, therefore, to be interpreted as sitting on their hands until the arrival of such a crisis, but to weld the Puerto Rican people into a conscious and disciplined group capable of

acting on whatever opportunities might present themselves. This was a carefully developed concept, involving the ties between the Puerto Rican and American economies, and the fact that Puerto Rico is a military center for U.S. operations in the Caribbean, as well as the tremendous oppression of the Puerto Rican working class. They seem to have a better understanding of the U.S. movement than any other non-Trotskyist Latin American party.

A change in the composition and outlook of the MPI is indicated in the fact that this Assembly adopted the first resolution on workers' struggles ever presented to the MPI. Ceaser Andres Ingles (the educational secretary) pointed out that the future of the independence movement lies with the working class, and that no hope could be placed in the totally Americanized national bourgeoisie. This is in sharp distinction to the Pro-Independence Party, which still has the orientation of convincing Washington to grant independence to the island.

The leadership of MPI is conscious of the necessity to expand its role in working class organizations, and is pushing it. An ultra-left resolution calling for working only with non-U.S. based unions was defeated, and a resolution was passed calling for trying to reach workers wherever they are. The MPI does not see itself as a "class party," but in effect it is already representing the interests of the Puerto Rican workers against the vast majority of the national bourgeoisie. MPI also tends to be weak on the question of the special oppression of black Puerto Ricans.

When asked if there is a direct call for socialist solutions to the problems of Puerto Rico, Mari Bras responded that the solution envisioned is "non-capitalist." Mari Bras described the question of socialism as "too abstract" and chose to present MPI's view more in terms of political and economic "national liberation." In fact, the vast majority of MPI members, supporters and leaders recognize that no such national liberation could occur without nationalization of all foreign capital as well as the nationalization of native capital and agricultural land. The idea of nationalization, while not explicitly stated, is accepted by everyone as part of the program of MPI.

From the character of Puerto Rico as a classical colony, the leadership of MPI has drawn another conclusion in relation to the 1968 elections, in which Puerto Ricans may vote. They are calling for a "Huelga Electoral," a boycott of the "imperialist elections," based on a major educational campaign that will reach most potential voters in the island. For that reason -- in part -- members of MPI were unwilling to endorse our campaign, but a great interest was shown in the campaign, and for the first time the National Assembly left open the question of what Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. should do in relation to the elections.

The National Assembly began on Friday, April 26 with an international report (resolution) given by Norman Pietri to a preliminary assembly of the delegates. The report, symbolically enough, followed a major demonstration organized by FUPI and the MPI at the University of Puerto Rico as part of the International Student Strike. The report presented the Puerto Rican struggle for independence in an entirely internationalist light, closely linked to the struggle of the Vietnamese, and under the political leadership of the Cubans. The Cuban revolution was portrayed as the single most important event in the history of the Western Hemisphere. Support for the black struggle and antiwar movement in the U.S. was also a central part of the international report. The question of the Soviet Union was not touched upon, although in a "workshop" the next day a motion to censure the USSR for trading with Colombia was defeated on "tactical" grounds.

On Saturday, April 27 three delegated meetings were held to discuss and modify, if necessary, the political and organizational resolutions from the Political Commission and to formulate resolutions on various other questions facing the MPI. The outcome of these discussions has already been generally presented in the report.

The full National Assembly itself, held on Sunday, April 28, represented a little of the influence of the MPI in Puerto Rican life in general. Four thousand observers and delegates attended the session (the population of the whole island is two million). The composition of the gathering was, on the whole, quite young, and the percentage of workers was fairly high -- perhaps up to 40%.

Mari Bras outlined the political resolution in a stirring speech, and resounding ovations followed his comments on Cuba, Vietnam, Che Guevara, and the right to armed struggle. The Assembly -- which was in reality a kind of mass meeting -- was an enormous success, and concluded with a delegation of the striking telephone workers marching in to explain that they were not responsible for the foul-up of the lines to a radio station that was to have broadcasted Mari Bras' speech.

The visit of the American journalists was given a central role in the Assembly, and a number of discussions were held with the leadership of MPI. The MPI leaders viewed the journalists more as a link with the American left than as reporters, and put forward a series of proposals. The first was a proposal for, in essence, an American-Puerto Rican day of solidarity on September 23, the hundredth anniversary of the Lares independence revolts in Cuba and Puerto Rico. A series of major demonstrations is being planned for Puerto Rico, the Cubans will almost certainly participate, and the participation of the American left is to be organized through a preliminary united front type meeting in New York some time this month. More information on the "Grito de Lares" actions will follow these meetings.

A very important possibility that was not fully recognized by the MPI leadership is the potential for defense work organized around the September 23 actions. Twenty-five of the leaders of FUPI were indicted during our stay there for their participation in a massive pro-independence demonstration in September of 1967 that was brutally attacked by Puerto Rican police. The twenty-five were released on \$1,500 bail each, and face up to fifteen years in prison on trumped-up charges. An upcoming issue of the Young Socialist will carry an article on the case, and the defense work can provide an important opportunity for the YSA to deepen its contacts with the MPI.

The MPI requested as well that organizations that had a potential for raising funds to try to aid in the purchase of a \$10,000 printing press which the organization badly needs to expand its publications.

Comrades wishing to receive publications of the MPI can send their names to: MPI
1122 Ponce de Leon
Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico

Telegrams, petitions, etc., in support of the FUPI leaders can be sent to: Federacion Universitario Pro Independencia
Box 21873
U.P.R. Station
Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico