

An Independence Leader Explains

How Puerto Rico Is a Victim of Imperialism

By George Lavan

Juan Mari Bras, who granted *The Militant* the following interview, is the secretary-general of the *Movimiento pro Independencia Puerto Rico* (Independence Movement of Puerto Rico).

Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Mr. Mari Bras is 35 years old. He became active in the independence movement while a student at the University of Puerto Rico from which he was expelled in 1948 for a demonstration involving raising the Puerto Rican flag. He then came to the United States and studied at the American University and George Washington University in the District of Columbia. He received degrees in political science and in law. Though Mr. Mari Bras still practices law in Puerto Rico, his time is mainly occupied with the work of the independence movement.

Q. What is Puerto Rico's precise status today?

A. It is called Commonwealth in English. In Spanish it is called "Free Associated State." But it is just a farce. We are just the same kind of a colony that we always have been since 1898. Most of the governmental powers in the country are directly exercised by the government of the United States and without any approval or participation of the people of Puerto Rico. Juridically, politically and economically we are just a plain colony for investment of American capital. "Paradise of Investment," they advertise it.

Militarily, we are a base of the United States. We have there about ten bases, naval, air and military. Some of those bases include guided missiles installations, and some have atomic weapons. They are using Puerto Rico as the headquarters of both the Army and the Navy in the Caribbean. And that means 13 per cent of the arable land of Puerto Rico is dedicated to U.S. military installations.

Q. Could you describe in general the living conditions of the population? How big a population is it?

A. It is two and one half million population. But that doesn't give a complete view of the population of Puerto Rico. We have more than a million and a quarter living in the United States that have migrated here, in addition to the two and a half million living on the island. Two and a half million living in 9,000 square kilometers which are roughly 3,500 square miles.

Q. What state in the union would that be comparable to in size?

A. Delaware. Our living conditions — these figures can give you an idea. Our governor said in the last message to the legislature our average income per family is \$3,000 per year. But these figures are not explained. He didn't break them down. The fact is that half the families of Puerto Rico have an income of less than \$1,000 a year. And the average family has more than six persons per family.

Q. How does the population break down by those who live in the country; farm workers as opposed to city workers?

A. There has been a great movement of population during the last 20 years. In 1940 about 70 per cent of the population of the island was rural. Today it is about half and half. Half of the population lives in the country and half in the cities and most of this rural population is composed of seasonal workers of the sugar industry that work three or four months a year in the sugar harvest.

And they come to the United States to the fields of the Middle

West with contracts that are slave-labor contracts. They come and stay there for two, three and four months and come back to Puerto Rico, sometimes with no money at all because everything they have earned has been taken for the air trip and their room and board they give them in those encampments.

Q. Are there many small independent farmers in Puerto Rico?

A. There were but not today. When the Americans invaded the island in 1898 Puerto Rico was, I would say, the country in America with the greatest distribution of land. There was no such thing as great land tenures on the island. (There were many thousands of small peasants owning small farms.) But after the sugar monopolies came to the island and



Juan Mari Bras

took over all those farms they took them from the peasants and consolidated those great sugar enterprises. They control most of the main land of the island.

Q. And what about industrial and commercial enterprises? Are those owned by Puerto Rican capitalists and small capitalists or are they mostly foreign-owned interests?

A. Industrial enterprises are mostly owned by United States interests. Even those industries that were a few years ago in the hands of Puerto Rican capitalists have been transferred to American capitalists. Like the rum industry for instance. One of the most profitable industries in Puerto Rico since the war has been the rum. Well, in the last few years, Seagrams Corporation took control of the major rum factories of Puerto Rico.

Q. Could you give me an outline of the history of the Movimiento Pro Independencia — when it was founded, what it stands for?

A. Our organization was founded in 1959, the eleventh of January, ten days after Fidel Castro formed the government of Cuba.

Q. Was this a coincidence?

A. In a way it was a coincidence but the development of the independence movement has been greatly influenced by the fact of the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. We have been a force associated with the 26th of July Movement since Fidel was in the Sierra Maestra. We were part of the independence movement of Puerto Rico, we were part of the Puerto Ricans committee that was raising funds for the 26th of July Movement in Puerto Rico and giving support to that.

So the eleventh of January we organized in a small convention, the organizing committee for the establishment of a nonpartisan patriotic front of all independents of Puerto Rico. Because there existed a great number of small groups organized with different tendencies and different sorts of organi-

zations. And we started this organizing committee and spent all the year organizing throughout the island.

In November of that year we had our convention, in the city of Ponce with about 1,500 delegates representing the units already formed all throughout the island.

And in that convention we organized the movement. Since then we have developed great campaigns of organization. Last year was dedicated to organization. It was called the Year of Organization. In the last year we achieved the goal of multiplying by ten the number of activists in the movement, card-holding members, and we finished organizing in all the municipalities of the island. We now have sections of the movement organized in every municipality of Puerto Rico, and also in New York and Chicago. And to a great extent we have realized the unity of the independents of Puerto Rico although there are some five or six smaller groups.

Q. What are the principal planks in the platform of your movement?

A. We stand for complete national liberation of the Puerto Rican people. That means the obtaining of the sovereignty first and independence, of course, and not only that but the development of an economic program that will liberate our people from foreign domination. A return to the Puerto Ricans of all the wealth of our country that is now in the hands of foreign interests. We have already approved a thesis that contains the basis of a liberation program including agrarian reform, industrial development and a very concrete program in which these things are discussed at length.

Q. I understand the M.P.I. plans to abstain from electoral activities. What sort of activities does it carry on..

A. The main purpose of our organization is to mobilize the mass of the people for militant action to win independence. We have pickets, demonstrations and put pressure in every way we can on the United States government like the one we're exercising by our international activities. We are winning the solidarity of most of the countries of the world for the cause of Puerto Rican independence, denouncing the colonial situation in Puerto Rico in the United Nations and every other forum that we find outside of Puerto Rico.

Q. Is your movement able to carry on all this activity without any interference, do you have complete civil liberties?

A. No, we are very greatly interfered with. There is great persecution by the FBI and by the police. Before the meeting place there is always a member of the police checking everyone who enters. Several acts of persecution have taken place. We have denounced them publicly several times.

Q. The attitude of many Americans, I would say — that is, average Americans is that if Puerto Ricans want their independence they should have it. A lot of Americans assume because they haven't got it they don't want it. Would you say that the majority of Puerto Ricans do want independence?

A. Yes. Once they are confronted with the reality that the only alternative is independence or the colonial regime, the people of Puerto Rico will decide overwhelmingly for independence.

The colonial forces have created illusions in the people of Puerto Rico that makes some people, great sectors of the masses of the people, believe that it is possible to reach a state of equitable as-



WITCH-HUNTERS GO HOME! Puerto Ricans in San Juan demonstrate against presence of HUAC probers who came there in 1960 to seek "subversion" in the independence movement.

sociation with the people of the United States without losing their national autonomy. An equal association. They say that Puerto Rico could reach a situation similar to the colonies of England today that are members of the so-called British commonwealth of nations.

We are trying to bring to the people of Puerto Rico the reality that that is not legally possible within the framework of the constitutional system of the United States. It is only a trick to keep the people from supporting the only right that we have. That is the right to independence.

But now the whole thing is coming to a climax because Congress will have to say now it is willing to offer this kind of association to Puerto Rico. I am sure that Congress will not offer that and the people of Puerto Rico will then be convinced that the only alternative to colonial status is independence.

Q. Do you think this projected plebiscite will be the issue around which Congress will show its true attitude and the people of Puerto Rico will see?

A. That's right. Congress has been asked by a resolution of the legislature of Puerto Rico to state what kind of an association they are willing to offer as an alternative to independence.

And they have been asked also to state whether they are willing to grant statehood in the event that the Puerto Rican people select statehood in the plebiscite. I am sure that the association that they will offer is just the same colonial thing that we have today. Of course they will count on the complicity of Governor Muñoz Marin for that.

But when this legislation comes we will ask the people to refrain from voting because the plebiscite will be a choice between this farce and the alternative of statehood which is not feasible either.

Q. While your movement is specifically a Puerto Rican movement and the history of Puerto Rico and the United States is a very specific one, would you say that your movement is also a part of the broader movement of Latin America like the movement in Cuba and the anti-imperialist movement on the continent of South America?

A. We stated in the thesis that the movement for national liberation in Puerto Rico is and should always be in alliance with all the forces of Latin America.

And as a matter of fact we have been in contact with the liberation forces of Venezuela, with Cuba of course, and with the Dominican Republic. With Chile and Mexico we have participated in several continental meetings, like the one held in Mexico in 1961 under the leadership of Lazaro Cardenas for national sovereignty and we continue with all this alliance with all the forces of liberation in Latin America.

Q. My final question is what can Americans who are sympathetic to the idea of self-determination of the Puerto Rican people do to help your movement and generally the Puerto Rican people?

A. All that we would ask of our friends in the United States is to make clear the fact of Puerto Rico's struggle for independence to the people of the United States. We know that the man in the street in the United States, is not interested in maintaining an empire for this country. There are only a minority of very powerful forces that are interested in maintaining this colonial situation. But the great mass of the people in the United States as soon as they realize that the situation is that of a colony and that we are being exploited as all the colonies of the world have been and that we have been prevented from exercising our sovereign right they will immediately sympathize with our cause. And that is what we need of the progressive forces of the United States — to make our case clear to the public and to have the moral support of all the American people.

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