



# FREE PUERTO RICO!

Newsletter of the Free Puerto Rico Committee,  
North Americans in Solidarity with Puerto Rican Independence

March/April 1989

## SPECIAL INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY ISSUE



Puerto Rican women demonstrate at US Naval Base in Puerto Rico.

## Puerto Rican Women Organize to Improve Their Lives

There is no better way to get a sense of the issues facing Puerto Rican women in Puerto Rico today than by looking at the program and goals of the **Organization of Puerto Rican Working Women (OPRWW)**. The organization was founded in 1982 with three objectives: to create consciousness in Puerto Rican women about their problems; to make them aware of the roots of their problems; and, as Director Josie Pantojas says, "to let them know that the best solution is to organize themselves."

Domestic violence is a primary area of work for OPRWW. There are only three shelters for battered women on the island. "It's a shame," Pantojas says, "we read in the paper last week of three women being murdered by their husbands. The best thing you can do for a woman who is battered by a man is to get her to a shelter, and these shelters are always full." The OPRWW works with other organizations to lobby for more money for shelters. They also do workshops in the unions about violence against women and sexual harassment.

OPRWW also works with the unions around the issue of "Double Time." This is the problem of women working all day and then coming home and doing all the housework and childcare themselves. OPRWW is educating unions with the goal of getting the issue of "Double Time" incorporated into their collective bargaining agreements. The Union of Legal Services now assigns \$500 a year to subsidize day care for each of its workers.

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## Pressure to Resolve Colonial Status Resurfaces

*"I have longed believed that the people of Puerto Rico should have the right to determine their own political future. Personally, I favor statehood. But I ask the Congress to take the necessary steps to let the people decide in a referendum. Certain problems, the result of decades of unwise practices, threaten the health and security of our people. Left unattended, they will only get worse, but we can act now to put them behind."* — President Bush, February 9, 1989 before a joint session of the US Congress.

Bush's statement is the latest in a series of events indicating the desire of the US to redefine its relationship with Puerto Rico, one of the last colonies in the world. Several weeks earlier, Puerto Rico's newly re-elected Governor Hernández Colón, president of the Pro-Commonwealth Party (PPD), declared that it was time to resolve the debate over the island's status in his inaugural address before the Puerto Rican Congress and he called for a referendum.

Two hours before delivering his address, Hernández Colón met with a Bush Administration official, who made him change his speech to incorporate this new position on Puerto Rican status. Prior to this meeting, the Governor had been unaware of the changes that Washington was proposing and had even declared in his election campaign that status should not be an issue at this time.

Following Hernández Colón's surprise announcement, the top leadership of the country's three main political parties — the New Progressive Party (PNP-statehood advocates), the Popular Democratic Party (PPD-advocates of the present Free Associated State) and the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) — met and issued a joint statement to seek ... "as soon as possible, a solution to the problem of the political condition of the Puerto Rican people." In a letter to President Bush, the presidents of the three parties declared, "since Puerto Rico came under the sovereignty of the United States of America through the Treaty of Paris in 1898, the People of Puerto Rico have not been formally consulted by the United States of America as to their choice of their ultimate political status." Governor Hernández Colón himself agreed to issue an Executive Order to constitute a Committee for Dialogue and Consultation on the Political Status. This body is to be

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# Puerto Rican Prisoner of War



*The following is an interview with Puerto Rican Prisoner of War Alicia Rodríguez. Alicia was captured on April 4, 1980 along with her sister Ida Luz and other comrades. She is currently serving a 30-year state charge and also has a 55-year federal sentence on charges of seditious conspiracy.*

**FPR! What oppression do you experience as a Puerto Rican Prisoner of War in a US prison?**

**Alicia:** The kind of oppression I experience extends over a total of nine years of incarceration. That means nine years in which our position as POW's has been completely ignored. We've not been recognized as POW's — instead it's been nine years in which the prison administration has continued to treat us as common criminals. So that oppression is an extension of everything that the POW status represents.

Throughout these nine years, another form of oppression is having to deal with the reality that there is repression inside jails. For example, the control units with Oscar Lopéz in Marion, and Alejandrina Torres in the Lexington Women's Control Unit. But this repression also exists to the extent that other comrades have been charged and sentenced.

There is a sense of indignation in seeing so many inside prisons, because they represent the potential that could definitely be put to work outside.

You're in a daily struggle against the administration when you're behind bars. One struggles against the monotony and drudgery to reaffirm your political identity because for most of us who do not have fellow comrades with us we lack someone to serve as a mirror of ourselves. It's a political tool and a way to measure and to be able to self-criticize or to have a dialogue, to discuss and dissect issues. I'm saying that from experience because for four years, I had comrades incarcerated in the same jail with me. For the past five years, I've been alone.

It's an uphill battle. It's an unpredictable battle. There are periods when there is no confrontation with the prison administration. The prison bureaucracy probably feels that

it has successfully mellowed you out until a prison guard gives a direct order or the administration does something that you know violates your principles and you respond. For example, strip searching is a common experience for each and every one of us. But, since it is done randomly, it can be done out of vengeance. Procedures for strip searching can be arbitrary, depending on the mood of that particular guard. Because of the arbitrary moves, it is a reminder that we must be on guard.

Recently, during a strip search two female prison guards demanded that I do something that was totally outside prison regulations. After my refusal, they both began to threaten to take action. This action entailed calling the guards and dragging me off to segregation. Such threats are nothing new nor do they serve to intimidate me. After a heated argument, one of the guards stepped out to confer with the supervisors. That particular guard was well aware of my position — that if they continued to try to carry out such a humiliating order, I would be searched only in the presence of a nurse. After a period of 15 minutes, the officer came back and shut the door without saying a word. I questioned; none of my questions were answered. She just maintained a stern and foreboding stare. The next knock was from the nurse. The strip search was carried out, but it was not done under the threats and humiliations that were originally attempted by the guards. By forcing them to call the nurse, their unjustifiable harassment was revealed.

I'm the longest held prisoner with guard-escort status at Dwight. Simply put, guard-escort entails having each and every movement continuously monitored by a prison guard. Each and every time I am transported from one unit to the next, I have first to wait an indefinite amount of time, sometimes a few minutes or as long as an hour. Besides what that implies, being a guard-escorted prisoner is a psychological tool utilized by the bureaucracy to make the guards think that no matter what I'm doing they have to be constantly watching me.

The prison also plays around with my correspondence. They will deny any correspondence between me and my comrades. But, they will send me approved notices to correspond with other male prisoners who don't write to engage in political dialogue, but rather penitentiary romance.

And the bottom line, what is really oppressive is not being able to contribute to the needed development of clandestine work. That's the hardest. That's the hardest separation.

This may not be the place to develop politically, but nine years have proven that it is neither a setback nor a total loss.

**FPR! Could you talk some about women's oppression in prison?**

**Alicia:** Until colonialism is dismantled, issues such as women's liberation cannot fully mature. But in the mean-

# Alicia Rodríguez Speaks ...

time, I see the need for revolutionary work to develop among women.

In each different culture there are women and it is an enriching experience to be able to learn from each culture and its unique problems. It is also enriching to learn about the differences and how one has gone about struggling against sexual discrimination.

An example would be the recent MLN trip to Japan and how the women's movement in Japan felt a solidarity with the Puerto Rican POW's because our oppression was an oppression they could easily identify. This commonality has resulted in a recent dialogue. In the US there are many issues which the women's movement has become involved with such as the abortion issue, the nuclear arms issue, sexual discrimination, pornography and violence against women — all issues that must be publicized and need our support. Even behind prison bars we are still subjected to sexual discrimination. We don't take this lightly. One thing I've noticed here at Dwight is that the male guards and staff will try to find out how long the women have been here. They think that the longer a woman has been here, the more likely she will be willing to be "turned on" by them. Whether it be by the looks, the jokes, the innuendos, and touching, these "pea-brain" guards think we're just physical objects, sex objects. They honestly believe we have the "hots" for them.

**FPR!** At this point, could you tell us about the impact that prison has had on you.

**Alicia:** It's taught me that I cannot divorce the past. That the past is ever so present. I agree with what has been said: if I were here for any other charge, it would be a very frightening experience. Nine years confirms the ability to politically analyze one's experience and one's purposes. One's future goals should derive not from selfish interests but from unselfish love. It's not an easy task, in fact, it's a daily struggle to shed selfish, individualistic tendencies. It stems from the fact that we're human. A lot of these needs get suppressed either consciously or unconsciously. The way I deal with it only reaffirms that I'm just like everybody else — I'm not separate from the human race. You learn to keep yourself in focus and to develop priorities. Most of the time this allows you to be patient. You're not here because you wish to be here, it has been imposed on you because of your beliefs and political aspirations.

People ask me, "what do you do all day?" I'm so busy. In reality, I don't have enough time. After four and a half years of struggle, I've finally managed to engage in vocational and academic programs. After four and a half years of janitorial duties (not to belittle janitorial work, because my father was a janitor who took pride in his work and from his salary supported five children), I managed to find a loophole within the bureaucracy to engage in intellectually stimulating

courses. In the beginning, it was overwhelming because I spent most of my time in those four and one half years in a cell and in an unstructured environment. So, finding myself in a classroom with responsibilities outside of political ones, it took time to get used to it. At first, I felt that it was incorrect to deviate from my political tasks. But, after several discussions with comrades, I realized that I was wrong. Regardless of the situation, if the opportunity arises to learn one should not close doors. Since then, I've managed to develop a passion for photography. Photography helped me open up a new perspective towards life. Behind a viewfinder, one develops a keen eye toward details which can easily cross over to everyday life. It was also an opportunity to realize how important it is for a prisoner to find an outlet in which to nurture creativities.

The monotony of prison life can sometimes make you stir crazy. It can also numb the brain. Therefore, one has to develop a self-discipline to challenge oneself. It is easy to flow with the majority, which means sitting for hours in front of a TV watching soap operas and sit-coms, or engaging in several hours of card games, or hours of grooming and letting time pass with no demands on anyone. I find myself going against the grain. Out of a population of 700 women, there are only seven women that are engaged in academic courses in a four-year academic program. Even though we have no choice over the courses that will be offered, and are uncertain our studies will lead towards a specific degree, I view this as a challenge. A challenge because I am forced to study an area that I may never have found myself taking classes in if I were on the outside. In other words, we make the most of what's available. After each and every quarter, I may feel mental fatigue, but I also feel a sense of accomplishment that is necessary in this environment.

In looking back on these nine years, I feel that instead of developing any symptoms of depression, of cynicism or tiredness, I feel, instead, that I've developed more patience, more self-assurance and a positive outlook. I must admit that this fountain of dynamic energy that I draw strength from comes from within the other prisons that hold captive my comrades, and from the unselfish work on the outside. I'm aware that we still have a long way to go, but the small and major victories keep us surefooted and confident of the future

*Please write to Alicia at the address below:*

**Alicia Rodríguez #NO7157**

**P.O. Box 5007**

**Dwight, Illinois 60420**

*The Free Puerto Rico Committee and the National Committee to Free Puerto Rican Prisoners of War are working with Freedom Now! National Campaign for Amnesty and Human Rights for Political Prisoners to obtain Alicia's release, as well as the 17 other Puerto Rican Prisoners of War and Political Prisoners held in US prisons.*

## Puerto Rican Women ...

Pantojas reports that workshops, which often have both men and women in them, can be difficult. "Sometimes the men laugh and make offensive jokes." She said that they have seen change in men's attitudes in the last decade, but feminist awareness is still uncommon. Men in the independence movement have a better attitude than other men. They may take care of children or wash dishes, this is not complete collaboration, but at least it's a start."

The third major area of work for OPRWW is work-place conditions. Here Pantojas explains, "we are working with women in the unions, but not telling them what to do. We are trying to support them in their struggles. Women in Puerto Rico have traditionally provided the majority of the labor for the textile, chemical and pharmaceutical plants on the island. The factories employ women because they can be paid less than men and because women are considered to have better manual dexterity. Companies in Puerto Rico operate with many fewer safety regulations than they would in the US.

In addition to these main areas of work, OPRWW was also a member of the coalition to get Alejandrina Torres removed from the Lexington Women's Control Unit. "Women recognize Alejandrina Torres because she has been tortured, not only as an independentista, but as a woman. She receives support even from women who are not independentistas."

When she was asked whether OPRWW was an independentista organization, Ms. Pantojas explained that the leaders are, but that the group is not exclusively independentista. "We believe that if the colonial structure of Puerto Rico—the economic and political situation—does not change, there will be no real change for women. We are not saying that revolutionary change will have no problems for women, but that it will help if the system changes." The organizers feel that as women organize around their short-term issues, they will come to understand the need for a long-term, radical solution. They try to educate in that direction. OPRWW considers itself a feminist organization. "Feminism is very necessary for the general struggle of the people because revolution does not change the position of women overnight."

When asked if she had any special message for women in the US, Ms. Pantojas responded, "the struggle of women in Puerto Rico is much like women all over the world, in the US it is no exception. It is very important to maintain solidarity and communication."

## Colonial Status ...

made up of the presidents of the three major parties.

Bush's address calling for a referendum on Puerto Rican status responds to the Puerto Rican political leader's definition of the colonial status. The Bush Administration has proposed that a "referendum," a non-binding vote expressing preference for a certain policy, be taken on the status issue instead of a plebiscite.

The US government opposes the use of a plebiscite because a plebiscite is required by international law to transfer power to the colonized nation through a neutral party such as the UN; to withdraw military forces; to remove all colonial institutions, including courts and police; to grant freedom to political prisoners and Prisoners of War; and to make economic reparations. The US does not want to abide by these conditions.

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*"since ... 1898 the People of Puerto Rico have not been formally consulted by the United States of America as to their choice of their ultimate political status."*

—Open letter to President Bush from the presidents of the three major political parties in Puerto Rico

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In a recent turn of events, US Senator Jay Bennett Johnston from Louisiana has proposed a three-part vote to resolve the status issue between 1990 and 1995. The first vote, to take place in 1990 will permit Puerto Ricans to choose between the three political formulas—the Freely Associated State, statehood or independence. If none of the three formulas wins a majority, a second vote will be conducted. The second vote will be between the two formulas that receive the most votes. The terms of the two winning formulas would then be defined and negotiated with the US Congress and presented to the Puerto Rican people for a final vote.

The independence movement—both in Puerto Rico and in the US—is planning to develop a response which will focus on independence as the only solution to colonialism. The **Free Puerto Rico Committee** is planning ongoing work to support true independence for Puerto Rico. In the next issue of **FPR!** — Why the US government is pushing to resolve Puerto Rico's status now.

**Free Puerto Rico Committee** is a national organization that works to develop understanding and support for the struggle of the Puerto Rican people—invaded and seized by the US military in 1898—to liberate their nation and to establish an independent socialist society. As North Americans, we in **FPRC** work under the leadership of the **Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Puertorriqueño**, a US-based organization of Puerto Rican patriots. We have written material, slide and film programs on such topics as the 2020 Plan, the history of Puerto Rico and the independence movement. Please write or call the chapter nearest you to obtain a brochure, or to set up an audio-visual program and discussion.

**San Francisco**—3543 18th St. #17, S.F., CA 94110 (415)561-9055  
**New York**—POB 022512, Cadman Plaza, Brooklyn, NY 11202-0052 (212)243-0202  
**Chicago**—Box 295, 2520 N. Lincoln, Chicago, IL 60614 (312) 278-6706

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