

Puerto Rico: The Fight for Freedom



San Juan, Puerto Rico — shanties in the shadows of the banks and corporate office buildings.

The PRSC Holds National Convention

by Clay Newlin

The Puerto Rico Solidarity Committee (PRSC) took an important step forward at its third national convention. The convention, held in New York City on the 27-29th of July, accomplished two important goals. It served to solidify the gains made by the PRSC in the two years and several months since its second convention, and it provided a firm foundation for building a broader and stronger basis for solidarity with Puerto Rico in the coming period.

Convention discussion was organized around three major documents: a political report, an organization report, and a two-year plan of work. The crisis of Puerto Rico's colonial status and the response of various political parties on the island to that crisis, the moves by US ruling circles to further their domination over Puerto Rico, the new opportunities open to our people to build opposition to US domination — all were analyzed in the political report.

The organization report summed up the strengths and weaknesses of the PRSC organizationally and set forth proposals designed to strengthen its effectiveness. The workplan outlined a program of activity for the PRSC in four main areas: 1) transfer powers to the people of Puerto Rico, 2) US Navy out of Vieques, 3) freedom for the Four Nationalists and 4) defend the Puerto Rican labor movement.

STATEHOOD DANGER DEBATE

The sharpest debate developed during the discussion of the political report and was concentrated on the danger posed by statehood. The 70 or so convention delegates were just about evenly divided between the position advanced by a bare majority of the PRSC's national leadership and that of its minority. The majority position was that statehood is "the most serious danger facing self-determination and independence for Puerto Rico at this time." The minority argued that there was not sufficient evidence to identify any main danger.

The minority won a close vote in favor of its position (36-29-3). Two of its arguments were particularly persuasive to the swing delegates. Short of a "definitive expression of US foreign policy," they argued, it is incorrect to identify any status option as the main danger. A premature identification of the main danger

would tend to strip the PRSC of the flexibility necessary to oppose any imperialist maneuver.

In addition, several minority supporters asserted that a position on the main danger would be unprincipled. Since some sections of the independence movement disagree that statehood poses

the gravest threat, taking a stand would violate the PRSC's tradition of being in solidarity with the independence forces as a whole rather than just a section of them.

While the PRSC's failure to face squarely the danger of statehood will weaken its ability to respond to the US ruling class in the coming years, most of the delegates did endorse substantial parts of the majority's point of view. The minority's view of the status options was amended in three key areas.

First, a statement was incorporated identifying the statehood movement as clearly on the offensive in Puerto Rico and recognizing that "statehood is the culmination of colonialism deepening US domination to the fullest degree possible and threatening the Puerto Rican nation with extinction." Thus the serious and rising threat posed by statehood was explicitly highlighted.

Second, the delegates added a strong expression of support for the 1978 UN resolution on Puerto Rico. Expressly endorsed was the resolution's call for "a transfer of powers to the Puerto Rican people as the basis for genuine self-determination." The particular significance of this amendment stems from the fact that the "transfer of powers" clause cuts most sharply against the statehooders.

Finally, a neo-colonial solution to Puerto Rico's status (granting formal independence) was specifically determined to be less a danger in the present period than either statehood or a continuation of the present commonwealth. Given that some PRSC members have tended to view neo-colonialism as an equal or greater danger than statehood, this addition was also important.

Only a narrow section of the PRSC delegates expressed any opposition to these three essential amendments. The opposition came from forces with strong Trotskyist leanings and unfortunately from leading representatives of the National Network of Marxist-Leninist Clubs and El Comité-MINP as well.

On the organization report there was more unity. All were in agreement that there had been significant strengthening of the PRSC organizationally — particularly at the leadership level. All united that there had been real advances in the ability of the organization to translate its political perspective into effective plans of activity.

NEED FOR AN ACTIVIST NATIONAL BOARD

There was also unity that the PRSC had still not effectively consolidated an activist National Board. Composed of both chapter coordinators and at-large members representing important political or mass organizations, the Board has proven unable to successfully integrate the at-large members into its ongoing

activities. Few of the at-large members devoted substantial energy to building the PRSC and fewer still, to developing active solidarity with Puerto Rico in their own constituencies.

Debate focused on how to solve this problem. The PRSC leadership suggested that the solution lay in regular review of at-large board member activities coupled with the power to remove inactive members. The New York City chapter proposed that almost all at-large members be drawn from within the PRSC, and be individuals who have already "demonstrated commitment" to the PRSC and its work.

The New York proposal was rejected. Most delegates recognized the value of maintaining the united front character of the National Board. The at-large positions have allowed the PRSC to draw a few important organizations into active solidarity with Puerto Rico. The problem has not been with the concept of at-large positions itself but with the failure of the PRSC to use these positions effectively.

A second point of contention was over the PRSC leadership's proposal to develop a two-tier membership. Here again the New York chapter was the main antagonist. They argued that dual-level membership would only create additional barriers to recruitment.

But the leadership proposal was adopted. The bulk of the delegates supported its perspective that a "supporting" member would allow the PRSC to broaden, better define itself, and stabilize its periphery.

The workplan discussion evoked little controversy. There was broad unity that the four targeted areas (transfer of powers, Vieques, the Four Nationalists, the labor movement) were the appropriate focal points for the PRSC in the coming period. This was the case despite the fact that the incorporation of activity around transfer of powers represented a real step forward for the organization.

When the UN resolution was passed in September of 1978, the PRSC proved unable to take it before the US people. Within the organization's leadership there was much resistance to actively promoting the resolution's call for a transfer of powers for fear it might be used by the Commonwealthers to advance their "new" version of "free association".

As a result of the conference preparation process as well as the discussion of the political report at the conference itself, this fear was overcome. The delegates were won to the view that while the PRSC opposes anything short of genuine independence for Puerto Rico, our primary duty as North Americans is to fight for the right of self-determination. And no one but US imperialism (and the statehooders!) disputes that a transfer of powers must precede any genuine exercise of the right.

PLAN OF WORK

Having put aside its apprehension, the PRSC did adopt a multi-faceted plan of action on the UN resolution. In addition to broadly popularizing the UN decision, it was agreed to organize a mass campaign calling on Congress to implement the resolution generally and particularly its transfer of powers clause. A perspective of building active support for the upcoming Second International Conference in Solidarity with Puerto Rico, of which implementation of the UN resolution will be an important theme, was also adopted.

Concerning Vieques, the conference agreed to continue the PRSC's effort to get the US Navy off the island. In addition to continued pressure on Congress directly organized in its own behalf, the organization decided to attempt to initiate a broad network of anti-military, peace, anti-nuke, human rights, church and environmental organizations coordinating activities and cooperating in initiatives designed to support the Vieques fishermen.

The conference also declared that the freedom of the Four Nationalist prisoners was within reach. It decided that closer cooperation with interested church and Congresspeople and with such important organizations as the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression could provide the necessary pressure to force the unconditional release of these, the longest-held political prisoners in the western hemisphere.

New assaults against the Puerto Rican labor movement were anticipated, assaults which would call for clear PRSC opposition. The delegates also agreed that it was of critical importance to mobilize opposition to the use of Taft-Hartley and the NLRB to tie the hands of Puerto Rican workers.

The final working session of the conference was the election of a new National Board. Although marred by some unfortunate redbaiting from the "left" during nominations, the elections did yield a strong new Board for the PRSC. Particular advances were made in incorporating academic, church, and Black liberation movement representatives.

The closing session of the conference was an open one. Attended by many interested observers and friends of the PRSC, it featured speeches by a representative of the Vieques fishermen; Luis Lausell, President of the UTIER; Eneida Vazquez, President of the Puerto Rican Peace Council; and Lally Lopez, Executive Secretary of the PRSC.

Spirited, strongly committed to Puerto Rico's self-determination and independence, and confident that the US people are prepared to move more decisively in Puerto Rico's behalf — it was a fitting conclusion to the PRSC's third national convention.